

# SOPHIE KINSELLA

*writing as*

**MADELEINE WICKHAM**



*Cocktails*

Secrets, strangers,  
a splash of scandal...

*for Three*

## About the Book

Three great friends, smart and successful, meet for cocktails and gossip once a month.

**Roxanne:** glamorous, self-confident, with a secret lover - will he ever leave his wife and marry her?

**Maggie:** capable and high-achieving - will she take motherhood in her stride?

**Candice:** honest, decent, or so she believes - how will she cope when a ghost from her past turns up?

Then one night a conversation with the cocktail waitress sets in train an extraordinary chain of events which will affect all three women's lives. Will their friendship survive?

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## Chapter Twenty-One

About the Author

Also by Madeleine Wickham

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# COCKTAILS FOR THREE

**Madeleine Wickham**

I have written many novels over the last ten years and am probably best known for my comedies under the name Sophie Kinsella. However, long before I dreamed up the *Shopaholic* series I wrote seven books under the name Madeleine Wickham (my real name).

I'm often asked why I write under two names and the reason is that these books are in a different style from my Sophie Kinsella books.

Although I have not written as Madeleine Wickham for several years, I am immensely fond of these novels and hope you enjoy this one!

*Madeleine Wickham*

aka Sophie Kinsella

*Many thanks to my agent Araminta Whitley, to Linda Evans and Sally Gaminara and all at Transworld, for their constant enthusiasm and encouragement during the writing of this book. To my parents and sisters for their continual, cheerful support and to my friends Ana-Maria and George Mosley, for always being there with a cocktail shaker at the ready.*

*And finally to my husband Henry, without whom this book would have been impossible, and to whom it is dedicated.*

## Chapter One

Candice Brewin pushed open the heavy glass door of the Manhattan Bar and felt the familiar swell of warmth, noise, light and clatter rush over her. It was six o'clock on a Wednesday night and the bar was already almost full. Waiters in dark green bow ties were gliding over the pale polished floor, carrying cocktails to tables. Girls in slippy dresses were standing at the bar, glancing around with bright, hopeful eyes. In the corner, a pianist was thumping out Gershwin numbers, almost drowned by the hum of metropolitan chatter.

It was getting to be too busy here, thought Candice, slipping off her coat. When she, Roxanne and Maggie had first discovered the Manhattan Bar, it had been a small, quiet, almost secretive place to meet. They had stumbled on it almost by chance, desperate for somewhere to drink after a particularly fraught press day. It had then been a dark and old-fashioned-looking place, with tatty bar stools and a peeling mural of the New York skyline on one wall. The patrons had been few and silent - mostly tending towards elderly gentlemen with much younger female companions. Candice, Roxanne and Maggie had boldly ordered a round of cocktails and then several more - and by the end of the evening had decided, amid fits of giggles, that the place had a certain terrible charm and must be revisited. And so the monthly cocktail club had been born.

But now, newly extended, relaunched and written up in every glossy magazine, the bar was a different place. These days a young, attractive after-work crowd came flocking in every evening. Celebrities had been spotted at the bar. Even the waiters all looked like models. Really, thought

Candice, handing her coat to the coat-check woman and receiving an art deco silver button in return, they should find somewhere else. Somewhere less busy, less obvious.

At the same time, she knew they never would. They had been coming here too long; had shared too many secrets over those distinctive frosted martini glasses. Anywhere else would feel wrong. On the first of every month, it had to be the Manhattan Bar.

There was a mirror opposite, and she glanced at her reflection, checking that her short cropped hair was tidy and her make-up - what little there was of it - hadn't smudged. She was wearing a plain black trouser suit over a pale green T-shirt - not exactly the height of glamour, but good enough.

Quickly she scanned the faces at the tables, but couldn't see Roxanne or Maggie. Although they all worked at the same place - the editorial office of the *Londoner* - it was rare they made the walk to the bar together. For a start, Roxanne was a freelance, and at times only seemed to use the office to make long-distance calls, arranging the next of her foreign jaunts. And Maggie, as editor of the magazine, often had to stay for meetings later than the others.

Not today, though, thought Candice, glancing at her watch. Today, Maggie had every excuse to slip off as early as she liked.

She brushed down her suit, walked towards the tables and, spotting a couple getting up, walked quickly forward. The young man had barely made it out of his chair before she was sliding into it and smiling gratefully up at him. You couldn't hang about if you wanted a table at the Manhattan Bar. And the three of them always had a table. It was part of the tradition.

Maggie Phillips paused outside the doors of the Manhattan Bar, put down her bulky carrier bag full of bright, stuffed

toys, and pulled unceremoniously at the maternity tights wrinkling around her legs. Three more weeks, she thought, giving a final tug. Three more weeks of these bloody things. She took a deep breath, reached for her carrier bag again and pushed at the glass door.

As soon as she got inside, the noise and warmth of the place made her feel faint. She grasped for the wall, and stood quite still, trying not to lose her balance as she blinked away the dots in front of her eyes.

'Are you all right, my love?' enquired a voice to her left. Maggie swivelled her head and, as her vision cleared, made out the kindly face of the coat-check lady.

'I'm fine,' she said, flashing a tight smile.

'Are you sure? Would you like a nice drink of water?'

'No, really, I'm fine.' As if to emphasize the point she began to struggle out of her coat, self-consciously aware of the coat-check lady's appraising gaze on her figure. For pregnancy wear, her black Lycra trousers and tunic were about as flattering as you could get. But still there it was, right in front her, wherever she moved. A bump the size of a helium balloon. Maggie handed over her coat and met the coat lady's gaze head on.

If she asks me when it's due, she thought, I swear I'll smother her with Tinky Winky.

'When's it due?'

'The 25th of April,' said Maggie brightly. 'Three weeks to go.'

'Got your bag packed?' The woman twinkled at her. 'Don't want to leave it too late, do you?' Maggie's skin began to prickle. What bloody business was it of anyone's whether she'd packed her bag or not? Why did everyone keep *talking* to her about it? A complete stranger had come up to her in the pub at lunchtime, pointed to her wine glass and said, 'Naughty!' She'd nearly thrown it at him.

'Your first, is it,' the lady added, with no hint of interrogation in her voice.

So it's that obvious, thought Maggie. It's that clear to the rest of the world that I, Maggie Phillips - or Mrs Drakeford as I'm known at the clinic - have barely ever touched a baby. Let alone given birth to one.

'Yes, it's my first,' she said, and extended her palm, willing the lady to hand over her silver coat-check button and release her. But the woman was still gazing fondly at Maggie's protruding belly.

'I had four myself,' she said. 'Three girls and a boy. And each time, those first few weeks were the most magical time of all. You want to cherish those moments, love. Don't wish it all away.'

'I know,' Maggie heard herself saying, her mouth in a false beam.

*I don't know!* she yelled silently. I don't know anything about it. I know about page layout and editorial ratios and commissioning budgets. Oh God. What am I doing?

'Maggie!' A voice interrupted her and she wheeled round. Candice's round, cheerful face smiled back at her. 'I thought I saw you! I've nabbed a table.'

'Well done!' Maggie followed Candice through the throng, aware of the path her unwieldy bulk created; the curious glances following her. No-one else in the bar was pregnant. No-one was even fat. Everywhere she looked she could see girls with flat stomachs and stick legs and pert little breasts.

'OK?' Candice had reached the table and was carefully pulling out a chair for her. Biting back a retort that she wasn't ill, Maggie sat down.

'Shall we order?' said Candice. 'Or wait for Roxanne?'

'Oh, I dunno.' Maggie gave a grumpy shrug. 'Better wait, I suppose.'

'Are you OK?' asked Candice curiously. Maggie sighed.

'I'm fine. I'm just sick of being pregnant. Being prodded and patted and treated like a freak.'

'A freak?' said Candice in disbelief. 'Maggie, you look fantastic!'

'Fantastic for a fat woman.'

'Fantastic full stop,' said Candice firmly. 'Listen, Maggie - there's a girl across the road from me who's pregnant at the moment. I tell you, if she saw the way you look, she'd throw up in jealousy.'

Maggie laughed. 'Candice, I adore you. You always say the right things.'

'It's true!' Candice reached for the cocktail menu - tall green leather with a silver tassel. 'Come on, let's have a look, anyway. Roxanne won't be long.'

Roxanne Miller stood in the ladies' room of the Manhattan Bar, leaned forward and carefully outlined her lips in cinnamon-coloured pencil. She pressed them together, then stood back and studied her reflection critically, starting - as she always did - with her best features. Good cheekbones. Nothing could take away your cheekbones. Blue eyes a little bloodshot, skin tanned from three weeks in the Caribbean. Nose still long, still crooked. Bronzy-blond hair tumbling down from a beaded comb in her hair. Tumbling a little too wildly, perhaps. Roxanne reached into her bag for a hairbrush and began to smooth it down. She was dressed, as she so often was, in a white T-shirt. In her opinion, nothing in the world showed off a tan better than a plain white T-shirt. She put her hairbrush away and smiled, impressed by her own reflection in spite of herself.

Then, behind her, a lavatory flushed and a cubicle door opened. A girl of about nineteen wandered out and stood next to Roxanne to wash her hands. She had pale, smooth skin and dark sleepy eyes, and her hair fell straight to her shoulders like the fringe on a lampshade. A mouth like a plum. No make-up whatsoever. The girl met Roxanne's eyes and smiled, then moved away.

When the swing doors had shut behind her, Roxanne still stayed, staring at herself. She suddenly felt like a blowsy tart. A thirty-three-year-old woman, trying too hard. In an instant, all the animation disappeared from her face. Her mouth drooped downwards and the gleam vanished from her eyes. Dispassionately, her gaze sought out the tiny red veins marking the skin on her cheeks. Sun damage, they called it. Damaged goods.

Then there was a sound from the door and her head jerked round.

'Roxanne!' Maggie was coming towards her, a wide smile on her face, her nut-brown bob shining under the spotlights.

'Darling!' Roxanne beamed, and gaily thrust her make-up bag into a larger Prada tote. 'I was just beautifying.'

'You don't need it!' said Maggie. 'Look at that tan!'

'That's Caribbean sun for you,' said Roxanne cheerfully.

'Don't tell me,' said Maggie, putting her hands over her ears. 'I don't want to know. It's not even approaching fair. Why did I never do a single travel feature while I was editor? I must have been mad!' She jerked her head towards the door. 'Go and keep Candice company. I'll be out in a moment.'

As she entered the bar, Roxanne saw Candice sitting alone, reading the cocktail menu, and an involuntary smile came to her lips. Candice always looked the same, wherever she

was, whatever she was wearing. Her skin always looked well scrubbed and glowing, her hair was always cut in the same neat crop, she always dimpled in the same place when she smiled. And she always looked up with the same wide, trusting eyes. No wonder she was such a good interviewer, thought Roxanne fondly. People must just tumble into that friendly gaze.

‘Candice!’ she called, and waited for the pause, the lift of the head, the spark of recognition and wide smile.

It was a strange thing, thought Roxanne. She could walk past scores of adorable babies in pushchairs and never feel a tug on her maternal instinct. But sometimes, while looking at Candice, she would, with no warning, feel a pang in her heart. An obscure need to protect this girl, with her round face and innocent, childlike brow. But from what? From the world? From dark, malevolent strangers? It was ridiculous, really. After all, what was the difference between them in years? Four or five at most. Most of the time it seemed like nothing – yet sometimes Roxanne felt a generation older.

She strode up to the table and kissed Candice twice.

‘Have you ordered?’

‘I’m just looking,’ said Candice, gesturing to the menu. ‘I can’t decide between a Summer Sunset or an Urban Myth.’

‘Have the Urban Myth,’ said Roxanne. ‘A Summer Sunset is bright pink and comes with an umbrella.’

‘Does it?’ Candice wrinkled her brow. ‘Does that matter? What are you having?’

‘Margarita,’ said Roxanne. ‘Same as usual. I lived on Margaritas in Antigua.’ She reached for a cigarette, then remembered Maggie and stopped. ‘Margaritas and sunshine. That’s all you need.’

‘So – how was it?’ said Candice. She leaned forward, eyes sparkling. ‘Any toyboys this time?’

'Enough to keep me happy,' said Roxanne, grinning wickedly at her. 'One return visit in particular.'

'You're terrible!' said Candice.

'On the contrary,' said Roxanne, 'I'm very good. That's why they like me. That's why they come back for more.'

'What about your—' Candice broke off awkwardly.

'What about Mr Married with Kids?' said Roxanne lightly.

'Yes,' said Candice, colouring a little. 'Doesn't he mind when you ... ?'

'Mr Married with Kids is not allowed to mind,' said Roxanne. 'Mr Married with Kids has got his wife, after all. Fair's fair, don't you think?' Her eyes glinted at Candice as though to forbid any more questions, and Candice bit her lip. Roxanne always discouraged talk of her married man. She had been with him for all the time that Candice had known her - but she had resolutely refused to divulge his identity, or even any details about him. Candice and Maggie had jokingly speculated between themselves that he must be somebody famous - a politician, perhaps - and certainly rich, powerful and sexy. Roxanne would never throw herself away on someone mediocre. Whether she was really in love with him, they were less sure. She was always so flippant, almost callous-sounding about the affair - it was as though she were using him, rather than the other way around.

'Look, I'm sorry,' said Roxanne, reaching again for her cigarettes. 'Foetus or no foetus, I'm going to have to have a cigarette.'

'Oh, smoke away,' said Maggie, coming up behind her. 'I'm sure it can't be worse than pollution.' As she sat down, she beckoned to a cocktail waitress. 'Hi. Yes, we're ready to order.'

As the fair-haired girl in the green waistcoat came walking smartly over, Candice stared curiously at her. Something about her was familiar. Candice's eyes ran over the girl's wavy hair; her snub nose; her grey eyes, shadowed with tiredness. Even the way she shook her hair back off her shoulders seemed familiar. Where on earth had she seen her before?

'Is something wrong?' said the girl, politely, and Candice flushed.

'No. Of course not. Ahm ...' She opened the cocktail menu again and ran her eyes down the lists without taking them in. The Manhattan Bar served over a hundred cocktails; sometimes she found the choice almost too great. 'A Mexican Swing, please.'

'A Margarita for me,' said Roxanne.

'Oh God, I don't know what to have,' said Maggie. 'I had wine at lunchtime ...'

'A Virgin Mary?' suggested Candice.

'Definitely not.' Maggie pulled a face. 'Oh, sod it. A Shooting Star.'

'Good choice,' said Roxanne. 'Get the kid used to a bit of alcohol inside its system. And now ...' She reached inside her bag. 'It's present time!'

'For who?' said Maggie, looking up in surprise. 'Not for me. I've had *heaps* of presents today. Far too many. Plus about five thousand Mothercare vouchers ...'

'A Mothercare voucher?' said Roxanne disdainfully. 'That's not a present!' She produced a tiny blue box and put it on the table. 'This is a proper present.'

'Tiffany?' said Maggie incredulously. 'Really? Tiffany?' She opened the box with clumsy, swollen fingers and carefully took something silver from its tiny bag. 'I don't

believe it! It's a rattle!' She shook it, and they all smiled with childish delight.

'Let me have a go!' said Candice.

'You'll have the most stylish baby on the block,' said Roxanne, a pleased expression on her face. 'If it's a boy, I'll get him cufflinks to match.'

'It's wonderful,' said Candice, staring admiringly at it. 'It makes my present seem really ... Well, anyway.' She put the rattle down and started to rummage in her bag. 'It's here somewhere ...'

'Candice Brewin!' said Roxanne accusingly, peering over her shoulder. 'What's that in your bag?'

'What?' said Candice, looking up guiltily.

'More tea towels! And a sponge.' Roxanne hauled the offending items out of Candice's bag and held them aloft. There were two blue tea towels and a yellow sponge, each wrapped in cellophane and marked 'Young People's Cooperative'. 'How much did you pay for these?' demanded Roxanne.

'Not much,' said Candice, at once. 'Hardly anything. About ... five pounds.'

'Which means ten,' said Maggie, rolling her eyes at Roxanne. 'What are we going to do with her? Candice, you must have bought their whole bloody supply, by now!'

'Well, they're always useful, aren't they, tea towels?' said Candice, flushing. 'And I feel so bad, saying no.'

'Exactly,' said Maggie. 'You're not doing it because you think it's a good thing. You're doing it because if you don't, you'll feel bad.'

'Well, isn't that the same thing?' retorted Candice.

'No,' said Maggie. 'One's positive, and the other's negative. Or ... something.' She screwed up her face. 'Oh God, I'm confused now. I need a cocktail.'

'Who cares?' said Roxanne. 'The point is, no more tea towels.'

'OK, OK,' said Candice, hurriedly stuffing the packets back in her bag. 'No more tea towels. And here's my present.' She produced an envelope and handed it to Maggie. 'You can take it any time.'

There was silence around the table as Maggie opened it and took out a pale pink card.

'An aromatherapy massage,' she read out disbelievingly. 'You've bought me a massage.'

'I just thought you might like it,' said Candice. 'Before you have the baby, or after ... They come to your house, you don't have to go anywhere—' Maggie looked up, her eyes glistening slightly.

'You know, that's the only present anyone's bought for me. For *me*, as opposed to the baby.' She leaned across the table and gave Candice a hug. 'Thank you, my darling.'

'We'll really miss you,' said Candice. 'Don't stay away too long.'

'Well, you'll have to come and see me!' said Maggie. 'And the baby.'

'In your country manor,' said Roxanne sardonically. 'Mrs Drakeford At Home.' She grinned at Candice, who tried not to giggle.

When Maggie had announced, a year previously, that she and her husband Giles were moving to a cottage in the country, Candice had believed her. She had pictured a quaint little dwelling, with tiny crooked windows and a walled garden, somewhere in the middle of a village.

The truth had turned out to be rather different. Maggie's new house, The Pines, had turned out to be situated at the end of a long, tree-lined drive. It had turned out to have eight bedrooms and a billiards room and a swimming pool.

Maggie, it had turned out, was secretly married to a millionaire.

'You never told us!' Candice had said accusingly as they'd sat in the vast kitchen, drinking tea made on the equally vast Aga. 'You never told us you were rolling in it!'

'We're not rolling in it!' Maggie had retorted defensively, cradling her Emma Bridgewater mug. 'It just ... looks bigger because it's in the country.' This remark she had never been allowed to forget.

'It just looks bigger ...' Roxanne began now, snorting with laughter. 'It just *looks* bigger ...'

'Oh, shut up, y'all,' said Maggie good-naturedly. 'Look, here come the cocktails.'

The blond-haired girl was coming towards them, holding a silver tray on the flat of her hand. Three glasses were balanced on it. One a Margarita glass, frosted round the rim, one a highball decorated with a single fanned slice of lime, and one a champagne flute adorned with a strawberry.

'Very classy,' murmured Roxanne. 'Not a cherry in sight.'

The girl set the glasses down expertly on their paper coasters, added a silver dish of salted almonds, and discreetly placed the bill - hidden inside a green leather folder - to one side of the table. As she stood up, Candice looked again at her face, trying to jog her memory. She knew this girl from somewhere. She was sure of it. But from where?

'Thanks very much,' said Maggie.

'No problem,' said the girl, and smiled - and as she did so, Candice knew, in a flash, who she was.

'Heather Trelawney,' she said aloud, before she could stop herself. And then, as the girl's eyes slowly turned towards her, she wished with all her soul that she hadn't.

## Chapter Two

'I'm sorry,' began the girl puzzledly. 'Do I—' She stopped, took a step nearer and peered at Candice. Then suddenly her face lit up. 'Of course!' she said. 'It's Candice, isn't it? Candice ...' She wrinkled her brow. 'Sorry, I've forgotten your last name.'

'Brewin,' said Candice in a frozen voice, barely able to utter the syllables. Her name seemed to rest in the air like a physical presence; a target, inviting attack. *Brewin*. As she saw Heather frowning thoughtfully, Candice flinched, waiting for the jolt of recognition, the anger and recriminations. Why had she not just kept her stupid mouth shut? What hideous scene was going to ensue?

But as Heather's face cleared, it was obvious that she recognized Candice as nothing but an old school acquaintance. Didn't she know? thought Candice incredulously. *Didn't she know?*

'Candice Brewin!' said Heather. 'That's right! I should have recognized you straight away.'

'How funny!' said Maggie. 'How do you two know each other?'

'We were at school together,' said Heather brightly. 'It must be *years* since we've seen each other.' She looked again at Candice. 'You know, I thought there was something about you, when I took your order. But ... I don't know. You look different, somehow. I suppose we've all changed since then.'

'I suppose so,' said Candice. She picked up her glass and took a sip, trying to calm her beating heart.

'And I know this is going to sound bad,' said Heather, lowering her voice, 'but after you've been waitressing for a while, you stop looking at the customers' faces. Is that awful?'

'I don't blame you,' said Maggie. 'I wouldn't want to look at our faces either.'

'Speak for yourself,' retorted Roxanne at once, and grinned at Maggie.

'You know, I once took an order from Simon Le Bon,' said Heather. 'Not here, at my old place. I took the order, and I didn't even notice who he was. When I got back to the kitchen, everyone was going "what's he like?" and I didn't know what they were talking about.'

'Good for you,' said Roxanne. 'It does these people good not to be recognized.'

Maggie glanced at Candice. She was staring at Heather as though transfixed. What the hell was wrong with her?

'So, Heather,' she said quickly, 'have you been working here long?'

'Only a couple of weeks,' said Heather. 'It's a nice place, isn't it? But they keep us busy.' She glanced towards the bar. 'Speaking of which, I'd better get on. Good to see you, Candice.'

She began to move off, and Candice felt a jolt of alarm.

'Wait!' she said. 'We haven't caught up properly.' She swallowed. 'Why don't you ... sit down for a minute?'

'Well, OK,' said Heather after a pause. She glanced again at the bar. 'But I can't be long. We'll have to pretend I'm advising you on cocktails or something.'

'We don't need any advising,' said Roxanne. 'We *are* the cocktail queens.' Heather giggled.

'I'll just see if I can find a chair,' she said. 'Back in a tick.'

As soon as she had walked away, Maggie turned to Candice.

'What's wrong?' she hissed. 'Who is this girl? You're staring at her as though you've seen a bloody ghost!'

'Is it that obvious?' said Candice in dismay.

'Darling, you look as if you're practising to play Hamlet,' said Roxanne drily.

'Oh God,' said Candice. 'And I thought I was doing quite well.' She picked up her cocktail with a shaking hand and took a gulp. 'Cheers, everybody.'

'Never mind bloody cheers!' said Maggie. 'Who is she?'

'She's—' Candice rubbed her brow. 'I knew her years ago. We were at school together. She - she was a couple of years below me.'

'We know all that!' said Maggie impatiently. 'What else?'

'Hi!' Heather's bright voice interrupted them, and they all looked up guiltily. 'I found a chair at last.' She set it at the table and sat down. 'Are the cocktails good?'

'Wonderful!' said Maggie, taking a gulp of her Shooting Star. 'Just what the midwife ordered.'

'So - what are you up to now?' said Heather to Candice.

'I'm a journalist,' said Candice.

'Really?' Heather looked at her wistfully. 'I'd love to do something like that. Do you write for a newspaper?'

'A magazine. The *Londoner*.'

'I know the *Londoner*!' said Heather. 'I've probably even read articles you've written.' She looked around the table. 'Are you all journalists?'

'Yes,' said Maggie. 'We all work together.'

'God, that must be fun.'

'It has its moments,' said Maggie, grinning at Roxanne. 'Some better than others.'

There was brief silence, then Candice said, with a slight tremor in her voice, 'And what about you, Heather? What have you done since school?' She took another deep gulp of her cocktail.

'Oh well ...' Heather gave a quick little smile. 'It was all a bit grim, actually. I don't know if you know - but the reason I left Oxdowne was my father lost all his money.'

'How awful!' said Maggie. 'What - overnight?'

'Pretty much,' said Heather. Her grey eyes darkened slightly. 'Some investment went wrong. The stock markets or something - my dad never said exactly what. And that was it. They couldn't afford school fees any more. Or the house. It was all a bit horrendous. My dad got really depressed over it, and my mum blamed him ...' She broke off awkwardly. 'Well, anyway.' She picked up a paper coaster and began to fiddle with it. 'They split up in the end.'

Maggie glanced at Candice for a reaction, but her face was averted. She had a cocktail stirrer in her hand and was stirring her drink, round and round.

'And what about you?' said Maggie cautiously to Heather.

'I kind of lost it, too, for a bit.' Heather gave another quick little smile. 'You know, one minute I was at a nice fee-paying school with all my friends. The next, we'd moved to a town where I didn't know anyone, and my parents were arguing all the time, and I went to a school where they all gave me a hard time for talking posh.' She sighed, and let the coaster drop from her fingers. 'I mean, looking back, it was quite a good comprehensive. I should have just stuck it out and gone on to college ... but I didn't. I left as soon as I was sixteen.' She pushed back her thick, wavy hair. 'My dad was living in London by then so I moved in with him

and got a job in a wine bar. And that was it, really. I never did a degree, or anything.'

'What a shame,' said Maggie. 'What would you have done, if you'd stayed on?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Heather. She gave an embarrassed little laugh. 'Done something like you're doing, maybe. Become a journalist, or something. I started a creative writing course once, at Goldsmiths', but I had to give it up.' She looked around the bar and shrugged. 'I mean, I do like working here. But it's not really ... Anyway.' She stood up and tugged at her green waistcoat. 'I'd better get going, or André will kill me. See you later!'

As she walked away, the three of them sat in silence, watching her. Then Maggie turned to Candice, and said carefully,

'She seems nice.'

Candice didn't reply. Maggie looked questioningly at Roxanne, who raised her eyebrows.

'Candice, what's wrong?' said Maggie. 'Is there some history between you and Heather?'

'Darling, speak to us,' said Roxanne.

Candice said nothing, but continued stirring her cocktail, faster and faster and faster, until the liquid threatened to spill over the sides of the glass. Then she looked up at her friends.

'It wasn't the stock markets,' she said in a flat voice. 'It wasn't the stock markets that ruined Frank Trelawney. It was my father.'

Heather Trelawney stood at the corner of the bar, by the entrance to the kitchen, watching Candice Brewin's face through the crush of people. She couldn't take her eyes off the sight. Gordon Brewin's daughter, large as life, sitting at the table with her friends. With her nice haircut, and her

good job, and money for cocktails every night. Oblivious of what suffering her father had caused. Unaware of anything except herself.

Because she'd come out all right, hadn't she? Of course she had. Good-Time Gordon had been very clever like that. He'd never used his own money. He'd never put his own life on the line. Only other people's. Other poor saps, too greedy to say no. Like her poor reckless, stupid dad. At the thought, Heather's chin tightened, and her hands gripped her silver tray harder.

'Heather!' It was André, the head waiter, calling from the bar. 'What are you doing? Customers waiting!'

'Coming!' called back Heather. She put down her silver tray, shook out her hair and tied it back tightly with a rubber band. Then she picked up her tray and walked smartly to the bar, never once taking her eyes off Candice Brewin.

'They called him Good-Time Gordon,' said Candice in a trembling voice. 'He was there at every single party. Life and soul.' She took a gulp of her cocktail. 'And every school function. Every concert, every gym display. I used to think it was because - you know, he was proud of me. But all the time, he just wanted to pick up new contacts to do business with. Frank Trelawney wasn't the only one. He got to all our friends, all our neighbours ...' Her hand tightened around her glass. 'They all started popping up after the funeral. Some had invested money with him, some had lent him money and he'd never paid it back ...' She took a swig of her cocktail. 'It was horrendous. These people were our friends. And we'd had no idea.'

Roxanne and Maggie glanced at each other.

'So how do you know Heather's father was involved?' said Maggie.

'I found out when we went through the paperwork,' said Candice blankly. 'My mother and I had to go into his study and sort out the mess. It was ... just awful.'

'How did your mum take it?' asked Maggie curiously.

'Terribly,' said Candice. 'Well, you can imagine. He'd actually told some people he needed to borrow money from them because she was an alcoholic and he wanted to put her through rehab.'

Roxanne snorted with laughter, then said,

'Sorry.'

'I still can't talk to her about it,' said Candice. 'In fact, I think she's pretty much persuaded herself it never happened. If I even mention it, she gets all hysterical ...' She lifted a hand and began to massage her forehead.

'I had no idea about this,' said Maggie. 'You've never even mentioned any of this before.'

'Yes, well,' said Candice shortly. 'I'm not exactly proud of it. My father did a lot of damage.'

She closed her eyes as unwanted memories of that dreadful time after his death came flooding back into her mind. It had been at the funeral that she'd first noticed something wrong. Friends and relatives, clumped in little groups, had stopped talking as soon as she came near. Voices had been hushed and urgent; everyone had seemed to be in on one big secret. As she'd passed one group, she'd heard the words, '*How much?*'

Then the visitors had started arriving, ostensibly to pay their condolences. But sooner or later the conversation had always turned to money. To the five or ten thousand pounds that Gordon had borrowed. To the investments that had been made. No hurry, of course - they quite understood things were difficult ... Even Mrs Stephens, their cleaning lady, had awkwardly brought up the subject of a hundred pounds, loaned some months ago and never repaid.

At the memory of the woman's embarrassed face, Candice felt her stomach contract again with humiliation; with a hot, teenage guilt. She still felt as though she were somehow to blame. Even though she'd known nothing about it; even though there was nothing she could have done.

'And what about Frank Trelawney?' said Maggie. Candice opened her eyes dazedly, and picked up the cocktail stirrer again.

'He was on a list of names in the study,' she said. 'He'd invested two hundred thousand pounds in some venture capital project which folded after a few months.' She began to run the silver stirrer around the rim of her glass. 'At first I didn't know who Frank Trelawney was. It was just another name. But it seemed familiar ... And then I suddenly remembered Heather Trelawney leaving school with no warning. It all made sense.' She bit her lip. 'I think that was the worst moment of all. Knowing that Heather had lost her place at school because of my father.'

'You can't just blame your father,' said Maggie gently. 'This Mr Trelawney must have known what he was doing. He must have known there was a certain risk.'

'I always used to wonder what happened to Heather,' said Candice, as though she hadn't heard. 'And now I know. Another life ruined.'

'Candice, don't beat yourself up about this,' said Maggie. 'It's not your fault. You didn't do anything!'

'I know,' said Candice. 'Logically, you're right. But it's not that easy.'

'Have another drink,' advised Roxanne. 'That'll cheer you up.'

'Good idea,' said Maggie, and drained her glass. She lifted her hand and, on the other side of the room, Heather nodded.

Candice stared at Heather as she bent down to pick up some empty glasses from a table and wipe it over, unaware she was being watched. As she stood up again, Heather gave a sudden yawn and rubbed her face with tiredness, and Candice felt her heart contract with emotion. She had to do something for this girl, she thought suddenly. She had to absolve her guilt for at least one of her father's crimes.

'Listen,' she said quickly, as Heather began to approach the table. 'They haven't got a new editorial assistant for the *Londoner* yet, have they?'

'Not as far as I know,' said Maggie in surprise. 'Why?'

'Well, what about Heather?' said Candice. 'She'd be ideal. Wouldn't she?'

'Would she?' Maggie wrinkled her brow.

'She wants to be a journalist, she's done creative writing ... she'd be perfect! Oh, go on, Maggie!' Candice looked up, to see Heather approaching. 'Heather, listen!'

'Do you want some more drinks?' said Heather.

'Yes,' said Candice. 'But ... but not just that.' She looked at Maggie entreatingly. Maggie gave her a mock-glare, then grinned.

'We were wondering, Heather,' she said, 'if you'd be interested in a job on the *Londoner*. Editorial assistant. It's pretty low-ranking, and the money's not great, but it's a start in journalism.'

'Are you serious?' said Heather, looking from one to the other. 'I'd love it!'

'Good,' said Maggie, and took out a card from her bag. 'This is the address, but it won't be me processing the applications. The person you need to write to is Justin Vellis.' She wrote the name on the card and handed it to Heather. 'Just write a letter about yourself, and pop in a CV. OK?'

Candice stared at her in dismay.

'Great!' said Heather. 'And ... thanks.'

'And now I suppose we'd better choose some more cocktails,' said Maggie cheerfully. 'It's a tough old life.'

When Heather had departed with their order, Maggie grinned at Candice and leaned back in her chair.

'There you are,' she said. 'Feel better now?' She frowned at Candice's expression. 'Candice, are you OK?'

'To be honest, no!' said Candice, trying to stay calm. 'I'm not! Is that all you're going to do? Give her the address?'

'What do you mean?' said Maggie in surprise. 'Candice, what's wrong?'

'I thought you were going to give her the job!'

'What, on the spot?' said Maggie, beginning to laugh. 'Candice, you must be joking.'

'Or an interview ... or a personal recommendation, at least,' said Candice, flushing in distress. 'If she just sends in her CV like everyone else, there's no way Justin will give her the job! He'll appoint some awful Oxford graduate or something.'

'Like himself,' put in Roxanne with a grin. 'Some nice smarmy intellectual.'

'Exactly! Maggie, you know Heather hasn't got a chance unless you recommend her. Especially if he knows she's anything to do with me!' Candice flushed slightly as she said the words. It was only a few weeks since she had broken up with Justin, the features editor who was taking over from Maggie as acting editor. She still felt a little awkward, talking about him.

'But Candice, I can't recommend her,' said Maggie simply. 'I don't know anything about her. And neither, let's face it, do you. I mean, you haven't seen her for years, have you? She could be a criminal for all you know.'