

Peanuts & Eggcups

by Sara Mendes da Costa

So, my story started nine months ago with an invitation which had the power to change my life... and not necessarily in a good way.

I was trying to ignore it but my best friend Catherine was having none of it.

'Open it Maggie! Or I'll email everyone at your work and tell them you snogged that guy in your office in the men's toilets at your Christmas party.'

'I didn't!'

'Yes you did, you told me. In fact, scrub that, I'll tell them you had sex.'

I ripped open the envelope, scowling. Best friend indeed.

*You have been cordially invited to get completely shedded
in the company of your old friends... and enemies!...
at the Tillmouth Academy school reunion.*

Ours wasn't a huge school so a leaving year had been named, and anyone from the fourth year (our year at the time), fifth and sixth years had been invited to come along for the night of a lifetime.

That was all well and good, in principle, but the fact that I was due to walk smack bang into Luke Henderson, love of my life since the age of ten, who had broken my heart (totally) and my hymen (just as effectively) on the same night over ten years previously, before bugging off to university without a word and then moving to Sweden, never to be seen again, had fuelled not only my hatred for him but also my, until then, unknown fear of school reunions.

However, you know, sometimes things happen for a reason.

If you'd have asked me nine months ago whether I believed in fate I'd have answered, only the village one where still, to this day, I clutch my sides giggling helplessly about a particularly hilarious incident involving my mother (not so hilarious for her, it has to be said), a pint of scrumpy and a large drunk dairy cow but, if you asked me now? Well, that might actually be a different matter.

CHAPTER 1

It was the morning after the night before and I woke up knowing that the semi- drunken state I was still in from the previous evening would grow into a monster hangover.

Self-loathing ensued. How could I have got so wrecked! (That's a rhetorical question by the way – I knew fine well how) The problem was, today of all days I needed a clear head. Midnight was the decision deadline and soon enough everyone would be on at me to make up my mind about the reunion.

My thoughts went to the previous evening and I groaned mournfully. I decided that in order to alleviate the guilt I would completely blame Pip for making me drink so much. OK, he hadn't forced it down my throat but he hadn't stopped me either; and he knew the pressure I was under! I also blamed the off-licence for being so conveniently on my way home from work to my Clapham flat. I know I could have avoided it but I'd had this overwhelming urge to just 'pop in'. Just to see. It had looked very warm and inviting, almost Christmassy with its fuzzy orange lighting; and the special offers in the window had seemed particularly special. Besides, I'd rationalised as I picked up a couple of 'Buy one get the second half price' bottles of red, I'd need something in the flat just in case anyone popped in unannounced (When does that ever happen, Maggie?). And a glass of red wine a day is supposed to be good for you isn't it? I mean *isn't* it?

I'd decided I could just sip a glass, slowly, with the healthy food I'd picked up from the deli for the first day of my detox. It was, in fact, the fourth 'first day' of my detox in the last fortnight and what with the red wine there might be more to come. But, I was going to do my best. I'd also bought some heavy duty ayurvedic tea which, and I had this on good authority, would strip the lining of even the most abused stomach.

Fair enough, the large chocolate bar hadn't been part of the plan but, it was *dark* chocolate and isn't dark chocolate meant to mirror the hormones released when you have sex? Seeing I was currently living in Sex-Drought-Central at number one No-Men-Parade, it was undoubtedly the right purchase to make.

Charlie, the slightly weird, overtly tattooed and alarmingly-pierced guy who ran the offie - sniggeringly labelled by my friends as 'The thinking woman's armpit' - had observed me with what looked like respect, even admiration as it was my fourth

visit in a week. He had his pinkie poking inside one of his tunnel earrings and was pulling thoughtfully on it – which made me feel a little queasy if truth be told - and his bloodshot eyes smiled knowingly, as if we were both members of the same clandestine alcoholic association. He actually looked like he might give me a congratulatory thwump on my back any minute.

At one thirty in the morning, I'd had to cover one eye to see my way to the bathroom.

The evening hadn't exactly gone according to plan.

Pip, my adorable, loveable, gay neighbour from the flat downstairs, had accidentally locked himself out of his flat. Not 'the most reliable gay in the village' at the best of times. When I'd walked up the stairs, Pip had been sitting on the floor in our shared hallway outside his front door, merrily eating a Twix and grinning at me in between mouthfuls.

Of course when Pip explained what had happened, it seemed only right that he should come up to my flat while he waited for his boyfriend Andrew, the sensible one, to return home and rescue him. And seeing as I had bought the wine, it seemed only polite to open it and share it with him; he was my neighbour and it was a neighbourly thing to do. And of course, I couldn't really ration Pip so, when we finished the first glass, I poured him another and then, understandably, as *he* drank a second one, it seemed only polite that *I* keep him company and anyway I was now sure it was two glasses, and not one, that the body needed. And then of course when the first bottle was gone it seemed only polite, once again, to open the second bottle. I didn't want him to think I was stingy after all. And besides, by that time, I had decided that it was actually two *bottles* of red that were good for you. Yes, *that* was it, I'd remembered at last. And when Andrew scurried in from his office job in the city to collect Pip, it was only right that Pip should pop down to the office to get another couple of bottles so that Andrew could catch up and we could carry on and I could achieve my red wine optimum daily dose. I would have gone myself, but even through my cloud of alcohol, I really didn't think I could face Charlie, his suggestive pinkie tunnel gestures and knowing looks again.

And then, for some unexplained reason, it had seemed like an excellent idea to play Twister and to drink Tequila shots - courtesy of Andrew - at the same time. Quite difficult when, in my case, my arms were either side of Pip's leg, my face was

practically up his bottom and one leg was suspended in mid air with a plastic daffodil in my sock. Andrew's idea not mine; pah, sensible indeed. Andrew on the other hand was prancing about the front room with a pair of my knickers on his head! My *knickers!!* And not even a good pair! (That might have made things marginally more acceptable) Goodness only knows where he had found them. I really, *really* hoped it hadn't been in the dirty washing pile on the floor of the kitchen.

So that's why I had a hangover. Red wine was bad enough on its own, but was seemingly lethal when mixed with tequila, and not very much food, on account of the fact that by the time we decided we were hungry the pizza place was shut so we only ate cold chicken and salad for one. Whose idea was it to detox anyway?

In the guilt-ridden warmth of my bed, I groaned again as the phone started ringing. I expected calls today but, still, it was very early. I slid out of bed and clutching my stomach I wobbled out of my room to the phone's unexplained position in the middle of the small landing floor. My head spun unhelpfully as I bent over and answered it. There was dark chocolate all over the mouthpiece and to top it all it was my mother calling. Great! Now don't get me wrong, I love my mother, but mixing her with a hangover is one hell of a major owoy!

Barbara Parsons: "Mum".

Mum is that nosy, but charming neighbour who always has her ear to other people's walls and her eye behind the twitching net curtains. A great believer in delivering cakes when new people move into the area, she has no scruples about inviting herself in to get their life story, before they've so much as unpacked a teapot.

'Do you know what day it is on Friday?' she began, without so much as a 'hello'.

'Er, Friday?'

'Don't be flippant, Maggie.'

'Mum, it's very early, is something wrong?'

'I'll tell you what's wrong shall I? Friday is your Uncle Henry's birthday.'

'And...?'

'And your father's only gone and invited the lazy so and so to stay for a long

weekend. As if I haven't got enough on my plate.'

'Like what?' I sighed, regretting picking up the phone.

'Like Bridge.'

'You don't play Bridge!'

'Yes but I'm thinking about learning. Anyway, there are my coffee mornings, I was contemplating holding one of them on Friday. Ooh... *and...*' she gushed proudly, 'the WI have asked me to do a talk on clothes and makeup for the over six...um fifties'

Oh Lord.

'When?'

'July,' she said defensively, '...but I'll need to prepare!'

'Mum, that's months away, surely you can cater for Uncle Henry for a couple of nights; he is Dad's brother.' I clutched myself protectively and sat down on the three stairs that led down to my little hallway.

'I've been frantically trying to get things moved out of the way so his big fat bottom doesn't knock them over when he walks past.'

'He's not that big, Mum. OK he is but it's not his fault; he's got a thyroid problem.'

'So he says,' she scoffed. 'He's bound to break the bed again. He did last time.'

'No, Mum, if I remember, you hadn't fixed the single beds together properly to make them into a double and Uncle Henry fell through the gap in the middle and on to the floor.'

Mum sniggered.

'He was like a beached whale caught in that sheet.'

'How did he get up?' I asked, a vague, fuzzy, memory forming.

'He didn't, not for ages anyway. We found him the next morning fast asleep on the floor between the two beds. We had to ask the man doing the double glazing to help him up. I gave him a bottle of your father's malt as a thank you and said I'd circulate his credentials to the Neighbourhood Watch.

'Anyway,' she went on, 'I don't know if I told you, but Mrs Banbury swore that their line was being tapped.'

'*What?*' My insides were groaning now.

'She said it was something to do with their oldest, Trevor. Nice boy, very tall, you'd like him.'

'Mum...' I threatened.

'Well anyway, he had one of these radio thingies, you know the ones they have on those big lorries to talk to each other about the latest Yorkie bars and the like.'

Why oh why had I answered the phone?

'Oh, what are they called again? People who use them call police cars cigarettes, and villains, band..., um, Band-Aids I think it is. There was a film about them: SD, SB...?'

'CB?' I offered.

'Yes! CB radio!' she cried.

Suddenly I clicked.

'Mum,' I managed a chuckle, 'you mean Smokey and the Bandit, not cigarettes and Band-Aids. Remember? That old seventies film you liked we used to do that dance to the theme tune when I was little. You fancied Bert Reynolds, him with the hair?'

'You told me it was a toupee!'

'That was the point, Mum. Look never mind what's all this got to do with Mrs Banbury's son Trevor?' I could feel my hangover from hell starting to kick in properly; any vestiges of 'I'm still a bit drunk from last night' were seeping away and leaving room for toxins, gremlins and anxious thoughts of self-loathing. I would never drink again.

'Well,' she lowered her voice conspiratorially and I inadvertently leant into the phone, 'Mrs Banbury swears that the police thought he was up to some illicit drug dealing or something because of him always being on the CB radio and talking in all this code business. Of course he wasn't, he's *such* a nice boy; very tall...'

'Yes, yes, I know that. You've said that already.'

'Have I really? Do you know what, I'm sure it's these hormone pills I've been taking. In fact, Mrs Bartholomew was saying...'

'MUM! For goodness sake, Mrs Banbury...?'

'Yes of course, sorry darling... anyway, she swears she saw the Smokey people watching their house in the middle of the night. And every time she picked up the phone, it made a funny clicking sound. So, that just goes to show, you never

can be too careful. Even this conversation could be being tapped.'

'Oh Mum', I managed an affectionate giggle, 'what are you like?'

'What do you mean?'

'Have you been doing any drugs recently?'

'Well, like I said there are these hormone...'

'No, not them, anything illegal?'

'Maggie! What do you take me for? I don't do anything like that!'

'And no one would think that you might?'

'Of course not! This is a very respectable neighbourhood!'

'Well, in that case, unless you've been stealing from the church fund or have accidentally stumbled across the latest FBI intelligence codes, I think the phone line is safe. Don't you?'

I heard her sigh.

'I suppose so but, still, you never know.' She sounded almost disappointed.

'Anyway,' I tried to seem gracious amidst a strange hot cold sweat thing which had just crawled across my skin in a toxic wave, 'it's lovely to hear from you but are you just calling to tell me about Uncle Henry and the perils of phone tapping?'

'No, I'm not.'

'Ri-i-ight.' I remained patient. 'So...?'

'This reunion of yours...'

Here we go.

'I assume you'll be dropping in to visit your parents? You remember us? The mother who gave birth to you without drugs and with hardly a murmur and a father who lovingly worked his whole life just so he could put you through a private education?'

One of the problems with going to the reunion was that it was in Tillmouth where my three closest friends and I grew up... and where Mum and Dad still live, still in our old house and I really didn't want to have to drop in the next day with a hangover – not that I'd decided to go you understand... or would ever drink again.

'OK Mum, I get the message but I don't even know if I'm going. Anyway, it hasn't been that long; I saw you a couple of weeks ago.'

'By accident!' she cried. 'Bumping into us in John Lewis certainly doesn't

count.'

She had a point.

'I'll make it up to you, Mum, promise.'

Glancing at the clock and realising I was now running late, I finally managed to end the call with promises to get in touch as soon as I'd made my decision; and if I did go but didn't have time for (couldn't face) dropping in, I'd see them at Mr Henderson's birthday party.

My hangover was throbbing with a vengeance now and my mind went, unhelpfully, to Luke. I thought about meeting him again after so long and a flash of panic shot through me. I remembered the day Catherine and I had checked the acceptance page on the school website. I'd scanned down the list of acceptees, unsure whether I wanted to see his name or not. I pretended to myself I didn't and also loudly to Catherine – 'God I really hope that arse Luke isn't going!' And then *bam* there it was. *Luke Henderson, sixth year* – accepted. Hell. Gorgeous godlike Luke: six foot of stunning, blue-eyed, long, lean, muscly, hunk. At least he had been when I'd last seen him over ten years previously. He'd been the love of my life and then totally *destroyed* my life.

Would he even recognise me? That's if I went of course.

I pulled a face in the bathroom mirror as I applied mascara with a shaky hand. My otherwise brown eyes were looking distinctly red and my hair was mimicking an overgrown bush. My dark curls had taken on an alarming life of their own and, despite copious amounts of hair serum, it was like I was trying to convince the world that bad 'perms' had come back into fashion.

As I walked along the road, my coat pulled around me against the chilly spring morning, my mobile rang from my bag and I raised my eyes to the sky. Which one would it be now? I fished the phone out and saw it was Catherine.

Picture a five foot four, somewhat dumpy, twenty-seven-year-old virgin, with little round specs, breasts the size of balloons, a heart of gold and the ability to get excited about the smallest things. That's my best mate Catherine.

If she had been a dog, she would have been a chubby little Golden Retriever puppy that strains at the lead and is prone to wetting itself when excited, a fact not that far from the truth actually. A lover and avid follower of anything 'alternative', I was surprised she'd stuck it out as an NHS nurse for so long. Besides that, I

couldn't believe they had actually found a uniform to span the circumference of her breasts!

'Morning! Guess what?' she bubbled, excitedly.

'Cat, I'm late for work and I've got the hangover from hell. I really can't talk now.'

'No but you have to listen. This is important,' she said.

This was her third attempt in two days to convince me to go to the school reunion.

'There's no getting out of it now.'

'Go on then.'

'It's fate,' she announced, proudly.

'What is?'

'The reunion, it's in the stars!' she enthused, as if it would cement all decisions on the spot. 'At the very time of the reunion, you're destined to meet a man! It must be a sign, Mags. We have to go or we could be tempting fate! Oh Mags, think of it. It could be him!'

'Him who?!'

I put my hand up to my clammy forehead to check for signs of a convenient temperature to give me a reason to turn back and avoid going to work. There were none.

"The one" of course! The man of your dreams, your destiny. And I'm going to meet someone special too unless I am already in a relationship, in which case it will get stronger around that time,' she quoted.

'Please can we talk about this later, Cat? My head's too woolly to concentrate and I'm going to be so late for work.'

'Promise me you'll decide at work then.'

'I'll try.'

'You can't try! You either do or you don't. There's no in-between, it's impossible,' she said, no doubt citing from her ultimate personal power trilogy *You CAN Build Rome in a Day*.

'OK, OK I'll decide at work. Ring me tonight. Just let me go before I throw up all over the phone!'

'Fab! You see, the thing is, Mercury, planet of communication, is...'

'Cat!'

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry, I’ll call you tonight.’

I wondered idly if Catherine had any weird and wonderful visualisations I could use to nuke my suffering, or one of her herbal tinctures that smelled like poo and tasted like rotten vegetables.

As I walked past the butchers, a rather hunky butcher’s lad came out of the doorway with a broom and started sweeping water out over the pavement and into the drain having washed the shop floor. I thought I recognised him from the previous Friday night down the pub but he’d not had a shirt on then, so it was difficult to tell. Also, I had an awful feeling he had been on the end of one of my loud drunken ‘BAAAAAs’ which tend to come out my mouth when I’m drunk (I’m rather proud of my sheep impression) so I hurried on quickly. He, however, gave me a whistle and when I eventually turned back to surreptitiously grin at him, allowing of course a suitable gap so as not to seem too vain, he’d called his mate out and for some reason they seemed to be laughing and pointing at me. Oh no! I’d been right. I would never ever drink again.

It was almost twenty past nine by the time I got to work. My boss, Justin, was going to murder me. I got the usual feeling of dread, as I leant on and pushed open one of the heavy glass doors with its big brass handle. I nodded a brief hello to Old Sam the doorman who was sitting reading the paper as usual and, as I whooshed past him, I tried not to breathe in and wondered whether I should mail an anonymous note about his BO.

I quickly climbed the wide spiralling stairs up to the second floor, following the signs saying ‘CapiTel’ (known to the staff as ‘CrapiTel’), London’s crème de la crème of telemarketing’.

Thankfully, I wasn’t one of those poor unfortunate people who spent all their time on the phone. I had been, when I first joined, but I was doomed from the start. On my first day, I had been close to tears by the time I went on my eleven o’clock break, having had the phone slammed down on me four times. I stuck with it as long as I could but after a while I applied for a job in the sales and marketing department as a trainee account executive; amazingly I got it and after a while made the grade to drop the ‘trainee’. It wasn’t a particularly challenging role. Lots of office based administration but a small amount of client-facing stuff, which I loved. It

may have been pretty boring work most of the time but, I had to admit, it was safe and, right now, safe was good.

I walked gingerly into the main, hi-tech, open-plan office and headed past the hive of activity; row after row of voices chattering and selling. It was like walking through a beehive and constantly being stung. I focussed intently on the floor as I passed through to the next glass-partitioned office, my office, which seemed miles away. I hoped that, by looking down, no one would really notice me. I had already had two doctor's appointments and a mysterious appointment at the hospital, which I 'couldn't really talk about', in the last three weeks.

No such luck.

'Parsons!' A voice boomed down from the second office up ahead, causing people all around me to stop what they were doing.

Justin. *Dracula's cousin*, according to Craig, one of the business development guys. Justin was a slimy snake. All snidey and slick and in true snakelike fashion, he was always happy to slither up the backsides of senior management at head office, when the need arose.

'This is the third bloody time in a month you have been late. Perhaps you'd like to share your excuse with the whole office.'

Arse.

Justin was about as cold and calculating as they come. There are no two ways about it. Tall and very slim, with dark slicked-back hair, a sleezy stance, and the most piercing steel grey eyes I had ever seen.

He leant against the doorway between the two offices, his chic grey Armani suit mocking my humble Top Shop bargain coat.

'Well?'

'Sorry, Justin, my um mother rang just as I was leaving; family crisis,' I lied, finally reaching him face to face.

'Your mother needs to get herself a bloody watch then doesn't she? Maybe then she'd know not to ring you when you are supposed to be in here at nine o'clock in the bloody morning!'

'Sorry, Justin, I'll tell her.' I squeezed past him, feeling both embarrassed and annoyed at him bringing my mum into things, even if I had started it.

'Make damned sure it doesn't happen again, Parsons, or you and I will be

having serious words.' I was aware of him disappearing into his office.

I could feel my face reddening and tears mounting, painfully aware of all the sets of eyes watching me.

Heading for my desk, feeling mortified, I passed Justin's PA Mandy, filing her long pink nails, and sitting on the edge of her desk outside his office, emanating smugness.

Her bleached blond and perfectly groomed puffed-up hair made mine look like it had been let loose on the moors all night. Her skirt was doing an impression of a belt and her boobs appeared to be battling for promotion to the neck area.

She stared at me as I went by, giving me one of her condescending 'I'm better than you, and Justin and I think you're so pathetic' looks, which I reciprocated with a 'yeah, well we all know why, cos you're shagging him' looks back.

Darling Mandy, once friend and confidant to the rest of us, had flipped sides when Justin had flipped her on her backside over the desk one evening. Craig had spied all when he had nipped back in to retrieve his forgotten jacket. From then on, it was 'us and them'. Mandy was consorting with the enemy.

Bill, the admin manager, and Craig were both in and sitting at their computers at our little island of four desks with just Maureen missing. She was probably doing the morning tea run. Her big flowery handbag and shawl were on her chair.

We were in the smaller of the two bright, modern, offices, along with the other admin, business development and marketing staff. It was much quieter than the main one, which was a godsend that morning.

The sun shone in through the large clear windows and on to my desk showing up a layer of dust on my computer screen. Like PC, like flat I thought ruefully.

Once I was settled in, I headed immediately to check my emails. I was in luck, one from Jenny.

Jenny Henderson, gang member number three and Luke's very beautiful, raven haired, younger sister, was my token petite friend. Not a habit I often make, choosing friends that make me feel like King Kong's sister by comparison. But Jenny was an exception seeing as we had grown up together and she was really very lovely. Actually that was a bit of a lie. She was a sharp-tongued, feisty little

hooligan the majority of the time but I still loved her.

She'd emailed a very funny story, currently redoing the rounds, which ended up with a positively obscene photo of a strapping, incredibly well-endowed, naked hunk, leaning against a tree. There was a naked woman sitting at his feet with a big contented cat smile on her face and his penis was level with her nose. I stared wide eyed at the Adonis. His penis was the size of my forearm! And it was flaccid! What would it be like erect?

Jenny had added her comments:

Have you met my new boyfriend, his name's Dick Long and I have fallen in love with him for his caring nature and love of animals. Oh, and his ability to lift me up in the air without using his hands!

Men suck, only not in the right way! What ya up to Magsie and when are you going to decide about the R? Need an answer asap lady, call me soonest. Think have got cystitis – shit, how??? Men are arseholes, women far better at PR. Email back. J X

I emailed back:

Does Dick Long have a brother?? If so, give him my number! Agree, men arseholes, especially bosses. Still not decided on R yet, need more time. Have a good day and drink plenty water and cranberry juice. No antibiotics, Catherine would do her nut! Mags xxx

Five minutes later the phone rang at my desk, catching me off guard.

'What do you mean "still not decided"?' Jenny barked. 'Err, hell-o-o... deadline tonight.'

'How's your cystitis?' I asked.

'Don't change the subject.'

'Like I said, I haven't made up my mind yet.'

'What's your bloody problem, girl? We'll all be there to hold your hand. I'm

gonna go dressed to the nines and show those halfwit blokes that women can wipe the floor with them in business.'

Jenny saw herself as a woman in a bastards' world and thought that by dressing tough and acting tough she'd show her superiority to the male population. I personally didn't think she needed to prove anything. By all accounts she was a first-class businesswoman; known worldwide, she was a PR whizz in the travel industry having worked herself to the bone up through the ranks to the top end of a well-known and well-respected public relations company. Jenny was likely to achieve more by her thirtieth birthday than I would in a lifetime. But she was still never completely sure of herself. Her mum, Amelia Henderson, had died in a car crash when she and her brothers had been very young and Jenny had always seemed to have a dreadful insecurity around being rejected and abandoned. I'd wondered many times if this was the root of her issues.

'Look, Jen, I know you mean well but just give me the rest of the day to decide, OK?'

She tutted. 'It had better be a yes. Oh and remember Dad's seventieth is coming up. You've got to come to that or he'll never forgive you.'

What she really meant was *she'd* never forgive me.

'That's a definite, I promise,' I said.

'Good,' she said.

'Good,' I said back.

'Good.' She seemed to want the driving seat.

'Bye then,' I said bravely ending the conversation.

'Bye, later right?' she said starting it up again.

'Later,' I replied, but she'd hung up.

I replaced the receiver once again taking in the alarming photo of the three-legged porn star on my screen. Unfortunately, Justin chose that moment to come up behind me, casting a snakelike shadow across my computer.

'If you're not careful, you and I are going to fall out big time, young lady. Now, you can stop emailing your boyfriend and get these files in order, then my office pronto. I'll give you fifteen minutes,' Justin said aggressively, throwing a load of files on my desk.

'OK. Sorry, Justin, no problem.' I tried desperately to close Jenny's email but

it seemed to have locked my computer up and my screensaver was now a twelve-inch penis.

Craig piped up beside me, singing tauntingly in his chirpy cockney accent. You know those annoying little dogs that follow you around sniffing you and then start humping your leg? Meet Craig. He had never, yet, tried to hump my leg, but after the drunken snog in the toilet cubicle at the Christmas party (yes that was him) he'd never stopped hinting at it, only not my leg of course. *I would never ever, ever, drink again.*

'Maggie's gonna get bollocked,' he sang. 'Flipping heck, you look rough.' He peered over the small partition between our desks.

'Shut up, Craig.'

'Emailing your boyfriend eh?'

Chance would be a fine thing!

'Shut up, Craig.'

He shrugged his shiny suited shoulders and carried on playing 'Patience' on his computer.

'I didn't know you had a boyfriend anyway,' he said, slightly sulkily.

Maureen, the wages clerk, arrived from the direction of the kitchen. Her chubby face was slightly sweaty from the hustle and bustle of the tea run. Maureen had a tendency to be a bit of a gossip; a big heart and an even bigger nose, metaphorically speaking.

Despite her being at least twenty years older than me, Maureen and I were close and I tended to confide in her, although sometimes I wasn't always entirely sure how secure my secrets were.

As sweet as she was, one of her unfortunate tendencies was that she collected fluffy creatures and stuck them onto her computer. Every office has a Maureen. They sat there along with two little furry toy kittens, given to her by her best friend Marjory, for being a 'good egg', and a photo of Marjory's son, Maureen's godson, Godfrey.

Maureen was currently going through a stage of having a strange affinity to anything Scottish. Scottish shortbread, men in kilts, haggis, re-runs of *Take The High Road*, even one of our Scottish clients. You name it she was into it. Even though the closest she had ever come to going there was a day trip to Gretna Green with a coach party the previous New Year. She and Marjory had come back

armed with Highland fudge (from Gretna Green?), Highland honey (hmmm...) and an array of fluffy creatures with tartan sashes to add to the collection.

'Morning, Maggie; thought you might fancy a cuppa.' Maureen beamed at me, passing me a strong tea with two sugars, my usual morning necessity. Then, after taking a good look at me, she surreptitiously passed me some aspirin from the depths of her handbag. I smiled gratefully.

'So, have you made your mind up yet?' she asked eagerly, settling herself down at her desk and taking her hairbrush out of her bag to brush her 'rather too long for her age' hair. I had confided in Maureen when the invitation had arrived.

I tutted. 'No, not yet.'

Taking a large mouthful of hot tea I swallowed painfully.

'I really don't know what to do for the best,' I admitted.

'Oh but you have to go, Maggie, I'm dying to know how it all turns out. You never know, your Luke could still be the man of your dreams and two childhood sweethearts could end up falling in love all over again; please go,' she pleaded.

'Maybe *he* won't go,' I suggested. 'Besides he's not *my* Luke.'

'I thought you saw his name on a list somewhere.'

'I did. It was on the website. But it could just be a ploy to get people to sign up, you know like they did for the first Band Aid concert.'

'Did they?' she asked, surprised.

'So I heard. Something to do with Bob Geldof convincing bands that other bands had already booked, when they hadn't. Just so the new bands he was pitching would book and then he could convince the original ones to book after all, if you see what I mean; something like that anyway.' My head began pounding.

Maureen looked very confused and I wondered if I'd got my facts right. Sir Bob had always been a bit of a hero of mine.

'Well I'm sure they wouldn't do that for something as important as your school reunion,' she said seriously. 'Anyway, why don't you ask your friend...Julie? Didn't you say they were related?'

'Jenny. She's his sister.'

'There you go then, a perfect spy.'

I shrugged, trying to appear busy hoping she'd change the subject.

'Oh Maggie, go on. Why not?' she asked.

'Why not what?'

'Ask her!'

'Maybe; I'll think about it. I've just got to get this stuff sorted for Justin.'

Craig, having obviously eavesdropped, stuck his head over the partition again.

'She's hiding something, Mo'.' He narrowed his eyes.

Suddenly Maureen, Craig and even Bill, were all staring at me. I blushed heavily.

'Go away all of you!' I shooed.

'Spill!' Craig fired a paper bullet at me through a makeshift peashooter.

'Ouch!'

I frowned and began foraging around for food in my desk drawer, finding a half-eaten donut from the previous morning.

'Look, I just don't feel comfy talking to Jenny about Luke, that's all.'

'Why?' They all chorused.

'Oh for goodness sake, she doesn't really know how things were back then, OK?'

I took a bite from the donut and jam oozed out, spilling onto my lap; typical. Craig looked like he'd just completed a Rubik's Cube.

'I get it! Your bezzy mate doesn't know you shagged her brother, right?'

'Be quiet, Craig.' Maureen passed me a tissue so I could wipe off the spilt jam. After a moment, she put her hand caringly on my arm.

'Is that it though?' she asked.

I tutted.

'Do you think she'd mind?' Bill sat opposite with his trademark green cardigan, and glasses halfway down his nose, sucking away on a Werther's Original from the customary packet on his desk.

I had asked myself the very same question time after time. I felt, at some stage, the whole Luke thing would have to come out and I would be forced to come clean with my petite friend. I didn't relish the idea of that at all. For someone so small, she had rather a large fiery temper.

'What gives with this Luke bloke anyway?' Craig asked dismissively. 'Bet I could show him a thing or two.'

'Craig, it's a girl thing.' Maureen explained. 'It's a very special bond between a girl and the boy she lost her virginity to.'

'Maureen!' I cried, swivelling around quickly to see who else might have heard.

'Ahhh lost your cherry to him did ya? No wonder you're in such a two and eight,' Craig said, knowingly.

Maureen misted over. 'Did you absolutely adore him, Maggie?'

'I guess.'

'What does he look like?'

'I don't know! I haven't seen him for ten years. He's been living in Sweden for the past eight.'

'So, what was he like back then?'

'Kind of a young Brad Pitt I suppose, only better; much better,' I said miserably.

I was immediately transported back to my youth and visions of the young Luke flooded my mind. I got quite breathless just thinking about him, but then reminded myself of how it had ended; bastard.

'Well if he was that scrummy, I don't think you have a choice,' Maureen said, 'and if you don't go, I will!'

'You never know, he might have lost his looks,' Bill suggested.

'Yes, or he might have got even more gorgeous and come along with some stunning girlfriend and then I'd feel sick all evening and not be able to enjoy myself,' I said anxiously.

A voice boomed behind me.

'Maggie! I'm waiting!'

Justin stood tapping his watch in my direction so I left my desk and followed him into his office.

At least we were back on first name terms.

Once inside, I closed the door quietly behind me and sat down ready for a bollocking. About how I'd been late three times, my work was suffering, I looked a mess and my taste in boyfriends was making all the men in the office feel inferior. But it wasn't that at all.

'I have some unfortunate news about Greenwich Finance,' he said curtly.

Greenwich were our main client at the time and to a certain extent my

responsibility.

'We won't be working with them anymore.'

'But why?' I was shocked.

'They've found a more suitable company elsewhere,' he spoke without meeting my eye.

'But that's ridiculous. We were doing so well for them and the sales manager said...'

'They're taking their business elsewhere and that's all you need to concern yourself with.'

'But we...'

He faced me. 'Leave it, Maggie!' he snapped then continued more calmly. 'Now, I would appreciate it if you would use your discretion when discussing the matter outside the company, understand?'

'Yes... OK,' I said quietly 'Well I'm very sorry to hear it.' And I was. I'd really enjoyed working with Greenwich. My contacts were a great laugh and I'd even got to take them out to lunch a few times. Justin dealt with the powers that be though, the two main partners. They were a husband and wife team, Alexander (the Scottish one who Maureen was currently into) and Sandra. They were always on the phone, especially Sandra who seemed to run the show. She was a bit aloof, but really professional and very together. I rather looked up to her if truth be known.

'What shall I do with all the outstanding stuff?' I asked.

'Just tidy up loose ends and don't make any contact with them. Come to me when you're done. If any of them ring, particularly... well any of them, put them through to me immediately OK? Close the door on your way out please, Maggie.'

And that was that, I had been dismissed. I stood up and started to walk to the door but Justin 'ahemmed' to get my attention.

'For goodness sake Maggie, sort yourself out before you do anything else!' He motioned his eyes downwards and I followed his gaze.

Oh noooo, how embarrassing. How utterly, *utterly* embarrassing! With a flash, I now realised why the lads at the butchers had been laughing and pointing at me! I had only gone and left yesterday's knickers inside my tights and there they were, halfway down my calf for the entire world to see. Great! Could the day get any worse?

Having come back from the toilets to extract my knickers my phone rang again. I turned to check if Justin was watching but, thankfully, his office was empty.

This time it was Pauline; final gang member.

Pauline: vegetarian goal defence and definite 'phone a friend'.

The only one of us married, she lived out in the country with her husband Terry. She'd probably have been up since the crack of dawn, walking the dog and feeding the horses. Pauline was an avid march goer and supporter of anything green. A staunch Green Party member and, whenever a motorway was being carved into a landscape, she'd be the naked one chained to the tree.

'I've had Jenny on the phone,' she said.

'So have I.'

'She's instructed me to convince you to go the reunion.'

'I only spoke to her a little while ago! I told her I'd let her know tonight.'

'I know but, you know Jenny, she wants it all sorted the way she wants it to happen. She doesn't take "nos" and "laters" very well.'

'I just need a bit more time. Besides, I'm far too hungover to think about drinking all night at the school reunion.'

'Want to talk about the real reasons you're not committing?'

Pauline had always been direct.

'Listen', she went on, 'I know you've got your stuff to deal with and, don't worry, I don't want all the gory details, but the past is the past and this is a good time to put it behind you once and for all. It's been much too long since we all got together. We used to be so close. It'll be a laugh and, besides, I for one need this. I haven't been out properly for ages. I always seem to be forced to stay in and look after the place while Terry's at work until all hours, so please say you'll think about it really hard, Maggie.'

I agreed, feeling a bit guilty as we said our goodbyes.

We used to call ourselves 'the gang', although, really, Catherine and I had been best friends and so had Jenny and Pauline. And we spent as much time in twos as we did in a four. It was true, we'd always been close especially at school, but these days I hardly saw Jenny and Pauline. Life had taken us all off in different directions, especially this last couple of years. Jenny spent most of her time globetrotting or, if not, working all the hours she could and as Pauline was married,

I didn't feel as comfortable just calling her up anymore. Besides, I dreaded talking to her husband Terry. I wasn't particularly fond of him and I always seemed to trip over my words whenever we spoke. It *had* been ages though. Perhaps Pauline was right. Maybe it was time to put things behind me; time to get the gang together, for old times' sake.

Despite my earlier resolve though, after work I trudged home with my indecision still intact. All day I'd been toying with the idea that Luke would be taller and broader and more gorgeous than ever and would turn up to the reunion arm in arm with Scarlett Johansson. I was attempting to give the lovely Scarlett acne but it simply wasn't working.

It had turned overcast and grey, and the rain was coming down gently. I felt strangely calm and cleansed walking along, despite my hair turning even more afro on contact with the first drop. It was as if the rain was finally beginning to wash away my hangover. It was a relief to get the day over; in fact, it was a relief to get most days over where work was concerned. I was in the wrong type of job really. Generally, I felt much better if I was on the move. I loved getting out and about and doing things, and quite frankly, working at a desk most days did my head in. It was only my workmates and the client-facing stuff that kept me going. I guess I stuck it out of comfort. All in all, my job was boring and unfulfilling and I really needed to change it, soon anyway. As soon as I had discovered a cure for slight laziness, apathy and perhaps mild alcoholism, which tended to promote the former two.

As I finally placed my key in my front door, I heard the phone start to ring. Honestly, I'd be glad when this day was over.

I took my time getting in thinking that if I went slowly enough, the call would go to answer phone. But it seemed I'd left it on 'answer only' so it didn't. Considering the amount of rings, I suspected it would be Catherine.

It was, again.

'So, how was your day?' she asked brightly down the receiver.

'You mean have I decided whether I'm coming or not?'

'Well, yes actually. Have you?'

'No,' I replied.

'Right, I'm coming over. I'll be there in twenty minutes.'

'But...'

'No buts, I'm on my way. I'm hanging up OK?'

There was a pause.

'I said I'm hanging up...'

The threat was a little empty but I conceded wearily.

'All right, but I've still got a bit of a hangover so don't give me a hard time.'

I began to tidy up the remains of the previous night. I spied the mournful pile of dirty laundry still in its position on the floor of the kitchen. I had placed it there the previous morning so I would have to wash it or keep tripping over it all night. That had really worked hadn't it.

And where had the knickers gone from last night's Twister experience? They weren't in the pile. They weren't down the sofa or anywhere in the lounge. They had disappeared! I tried hard to focus on the previous evening in the hope that I might suddenly remember but it wasn't to be. Perhaps it was best to not know? It was a bit worrying if I thought about it. I'd never been entirely convinced about Andrew. I knew he professed his allegiance to the gay community but I had my suspicions. He spoke with the vigour and insistence of someone who was hiding something. My knickers?

Having washed up, I was just about to start Hoovering when the doorbell conveniently interrupted.

I buzzed Catherine up and she arrived several minutes later, huffing and puffing her way into the room carrying a suspicious looking carrier bag.

'When are they going to fix the flipping lift?' she moaned, mopping her forehead and cleavage with a tissue and taking off her glasses to give them a wipe.

'How long is a piece of string?' I said noncommittally leading the way into the lounge.

'So, come on, where exactly are you on the reunion then?' she asked, plonking herself down in my armchair clutching the carrier bag which made a loud clinking sound as she did so.

'Ouch!'

She pulled out the corkscrew from beneath her backside and put it on the table.

'I guess you could say I'm going round and round on a rather bumpy playground roundabout, which is making me feel sick,' I replied, taking my usual place on the sofa and grabbing my Snoopy cushion for protection.

'Luke?'

'No.'

'Don't give me that. How long have I known you?' she asked.

'Too long,' I admitted.

'Exactly, so we need to sort this out once and for all and you need to put the past behind you.'

'You sound like Pauline.'

'Do I?' she answered innocently, looking more than a little guilty.

She put down the carrier bag, which clinked again. My suspicions were correct; two bottles of red wine and a large packet of jelly babies for good measure. And, despite my genuine protestations, she ordered me to fetch two glasses, opened one of the bottles with the handy corkscrew and poured me out a glass, which I drank obediently, feeling the vestiges of my hangover finally draining away.

They were both right of course; I knew they were. I had to put the past behind me, but it hurt – a lot. Going back into the past where Luke was concerned was very, very, painful.

Luke was Jenny's older brother. She had two brothers, Luke, and then Tony, who was a year younger than us. Luke had been my one and only true love. He had, quite literally, taken my breath away. I'd utterly worshipped the ground he walked on, and I'd been absolutely blown away when he'd finally asked me out. I'd just finished my fifth year at Tillmouth Academy, and he'd returned from his first year at a university in London. It had been a year where I'd pined for him having secretly been in love with him since I was ten. And now, it was really happening. I was finally going out with Luke Henderson.

It had been the summer holidays and Jenny and Pauline had been away at some summer camp on the Isle of Wight. We had weeks of long, dry, sunny days; blisteringly hot and dusty. But all I had really noticed were my feelings; out of control feelings. Darting one way then the other; overtaking everything. Like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I couldn't eat or sleep or concentrate. Luke was on my mind all the time.

We were both quite shy together and our dates were full of surreptitious glances and grins. We didn't do much; nothing particularly adventurous, just the cinema, maybe the local cafe, or long, lazy walks together talking and laughing and

eventually kissing. We'd got on so well; it was like we'd known each other all our lives. I mean we practically had, but it felt so different now. We'd connected. It was like he was feeling and thinking what I was feeling and thinking and we'd end up saying the same things and finishing each other's sentences.

Then, after just three weeks and half a bottle of wine each, we lost our virginity to each other down by the river in Tillmouth; two kids, fumbling about on a picnic rug with a cheap bottle of wine and a condom. Hardly the perfect romantic picture but to me it was; I was in love.

We had lain there together under the stars and held each other. It was wonderful. I wanted to stay with Luke forever, just being together like that; no one else, just us.

But that didn't happen. Things changed. I had no idea why, but they did. One minute we were lying there happy and content and the next, well the next, it was like I was with a whole new person. I was the same but Luke was different.

I remember him sitting up and, quick as a flash, something wasn't right. I'd been lying there watching him and admiring his lovely smooth strong back when I felt the change. It was subtle, but definitely there. I saw his back tense and he looked at his watch, and then that was it. The moment was over, the magic was gone and my life had been altered, in that one brief switch. It was like... well, like he'd got what he wanted and that was enough. He made some excuse about having to get home. Sure he was polite; Luke was always polite. Friendly, polite, funny, intelligent, all of those things, but now he was just polite. I remember it like it was yesterday. He'd seemed in such a hurry to get home. He even started to pull the rug up while I was still lying on it. It was horrid. I thought I must have done something really wrong.

It had been one of the most important moments of my life and I could feel it slipping away from me. I could feel Luke slipping away from me. One minute I'd been a virgin and then, the next, I wasn't. I was a woman but I sure as hell hadn't felt like one.

Luke had been leaving to go back to London a couple of days later and although I didn't know it at the time, that evening would be the last time I'd see him. Certainly for the next ten years.

We'd said goodbye at my parents' gate but he was still acting very weirdly.

Things felt so strained. I'd started to say something but ended up getting my words all muddled up. I so wanted him to make firm arrangements to see me again but all he did was promise to write. I willed myself to believe things were OK and that he hadn't suddenly gone off me after having sex with me. I desperately wanted to believe that he loved me like I loved him.

And then he was gone and I was left at the gate. I crept quietly into the house and up to my room. Mum called out and asked if I was OK and if I wanted any supper but I shouted down that I was fine and was having an early night. I needed to be by myself. I felt very alone; more alone than I can ever remember. I had just gone through something that, right then, I didn't feel able to discuss with anyone. Not even Catherine. I'll never forget that feeling.

In the quiet seclusion of my room I was still tingling from the whole experience. I was probably a bit in shock. I had no idea if I'd been any good at sex. Whether Luke had really enjoyed it as he'd said he had. I had no benchmark after all. I wished fervently that we had ended with more of a definite plan to meet up again but, for some reason, it didn't seem that Luke was committing to anything definite. I felt sad at this. In fact, I felt sad overall.

After lying there in the dark for a few hours turning the events of the evening over in my head, I decided to sleep on it and to talk it all over with Catherine in the morning. I felt weird about telling her but I couldn't not. She'd known I was meeting Luke so would be dying to know how it had gone. I felt guiltily thankful that Jenny and Pauline were away. At least I wouldn't have to face them, particularly Jenny. I couldn't even tell her I'd been seeing her brother let alone share with her what had just happened. I just couldn't. It seemed wrong and I wasn't sure she would approve.

Still, if nothing else, I knew Catherine and I would munch our way through a couple of bars of Galaxy and find something to make things all right. Something to make me feel it had all been OK.

Catherine had been shocked, excited, jealous, intrigued, all sorts of things really. We'd done our usual dissection of events and I'd shared most of the experience with her. She'd oohed and ahed at the nice bits and we'd roared at the funny bits and, it being my first time, there were funny bits.

But there had been something in her expression as she'd listened to my story. Something in the way she'd watched me as I talked. Like she was worried

about how I really felt underneath.

I think she must have realised how shell-shocked I was because after a while she looked me straight in the eyes and then reached over and gave me a big hug.

Suddenly I began to cry. I cried and I cried until I was sobbing. It had hit me. Bang, all of a sudden. I was no longer a virgin. I no longer had the safety of innocence. The safety of not knowing, not needing to know what sex was all about. All I was left with was this feeling of incompleteness, and maybe some guilt although I didn't know why. I just wanted Luke. I thought about how lovely, how... *right*, it would have been if he had been there to share things with me. To talk to, to laugh with and to make plans with. But he wasn't. He had gone. He had left me.

Eventually, I'd stopped crying and we'd talked properly about how I really felt. Catherine advised me on how to play it cool and how quickly to respond when Luke wrote to me. She was being kind. I knew she was.

And for a few bearable weeks, I allowed myself to dream that I really was going to see Luke again and start up a relationship with him, travelling to meet him at university in London, and doing what couples do when they are in love. When they have made love together for the first time.

But as the weeks turned into months and the months grew in number, I knew that Luke had no intention of getting back in touch with me. Catherine was lovely about the whole thing and tried to make excuses for him and think of reasons for what had happened. Saying I wasn't to blame myself. I couldn't have known. He probably had too much studying to do. Or maybe he'd forgotten my address? But I knew, as you do when it happens to you, he wasn't going write or phone or come and see me or invite me over. Luke was living his life in the big city, with loads of other girls flocking round him, no doubt. I had obviously misread things. To Luke I was probably just an immature kid and he had simply been after one thing. Although I hoped he had liked me, even a little.

I let the dreaming continue for weeks, then months, and then even years, but he never got back in touch. He never came back from university, not even for the holidays, and I had left Tillmouth to work in London myself by the time he returned home to live there again. After a while, he moved to Sweden where he'd been ever since.

So, that was Luke. That was what happened and that was why things felt so

hard to deal with. It was painful, unfinished business.

Catherine and I sat in my lounge in near silence with our wine, twisting and turning our glasses, sipping quietly.

We'd talked about the past and she had tried her best to be supportive and encouraging but after a while she seemed to sense it was best to leave me with my thoughts.

I sat analysing how things had been then and how differently I felt about things now. It was a fine line. I got myself into such a state I felt a migraine coming on. It was probably just the hangover returning but I chose to label it a migraine.

Then, I felt empty. I had temporarily managed to clear my mind of analysis. Thinking had momentarily ceased and I was left in a void.

Suddenly, though, with a flash of decisiveness, I knew. The opportunity of seeing Luke again was simply too much of a pull to avoid. I had to find out why things had turned out like that. Why he had left me. What I'd done.

'OK I'll come,' I said, proudly, smiling at my best friend, knowing how she'd react.

'Yaaaaay! Oh brill! I knew you would, I just knew it. Well actually there was a point where I wondered, but only for a moment.' Catherine got up, unsteadily, from where we were now sitting on the floor and began to dance round the room spilling red wine as she twirled.

'Careful, that's a twenty pound Ikea rug,' I admonished, in mock crossness.

'Sorry!' she said grinning from ear to ear and not looking particularly sorry.

Later on, when Catherine had left and I was clearing up, my computer bleeped out an alert to me. I had a new email – from Jenny.

I imagined her still working away, dedicated as ever to proving her worth in the world.

The email didn't say much, just 'Maggie, see attached'.

I clicked on the attachment that simply read in big letters;

'WELL??????'

I emailed back.

'YES!!!!'

The wheels were in motion.

As if with a sixth sense, my mother phoned again the following morning.

'You're going then,' she blurted.

'How did you find out!?'

'I can't believe I had to hear it second hand.'

'I only decided last night Mum!'

It seemed my *friends* had been two steps ahead of me all the time.

'Never mind that,' she continued, 'it occurred to me, are you going *with* anyone?'

'Meaning?'

'You know, *with*, with. You see if you are, and if you *do* decide you can spare us a moment on the way back, I'd like to be prepared you know.'

'No, Mum, I'm not going *with*, with, anyone. And I really don't think I'll be popping in, not this time. Sorry.'

'You never know though; you might meet a nice young man at the reunion. Maybe someone special, even your future husband,' she suggested hopefully.

'Has Catherine been talking to you?'

'Horoscopes are not to be knocked you know, Maggie. Mrs Cook swears by them. She and her husband met at Bingo on a night where her horoscope had said she'd meet someone special. Of course it wasn't all plain sailing.'

'Oh?' I hated myself for being even the tiniest bit interested.

'Oh yes. They nearly came to blows on a bogus calling of 'house'. Not a pleasant sight by all accounts.'

'Who is Mrs Cook anyway?'

'Mrs Blatchington-Forster's daily, up at the big house. Lovely woman, so much to say about life.'

The goings on in the Blatchington-Forster's house, no doubt.

'It's worth considering, Maggie, that you might meet a nice rich man who's made his fortune in some wonderful company and who can look after you without you having to lift a finger.'

Mum's dream had always had a rather unhelpful habit of filtering into my life.

'Yes, Mum, you never know. I'll be sure to let you know when I do and, of

course, we'll name our first born daughter in your honour.'

'Ooh that would be ni.... Oh, you're doing that awful sarcasm thing again aren't you. Honestly, Maggie, you get more and more like your father every day.'