

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER



Nicci FRENCH

Killing ^{Me} Softly

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**'A chilling study of monstrous obsession . . .
whose outcome is uncertain until the nail-biting climax'**

Sunday Telegraph

PENGUIN BOOKS

Killing Me Softly

Nicci French is the pseudonym for the writing partnership of journalists Nicci Gerrard and Sean French. The couple are married and live in Suffolk. There are fourteen other bestselling novels by Nicci French, all published by Penguin. *Blue Monday* was the first thrilling story in the Frieda Klein series, followed by *Tuesday's Gone*, *Waiting for Wednesday*, *Thursday's Child*, *Friday on My Mind*, *Saturday Requiem* and *Sunday Morning Coming Down*.

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To Kersti and Philip

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Introduction

*By Peter Robinson, bestselling author of
Gallows View and the DCI Banks Series*

It is impossible to predict when or why a particular book will be suddenly more successful than any of the writer's previous works. The breakout book, the 'nirvana' for so many writers, doesn't come when one might expect it, if it comes at all. The writer can't really plan for a 'big book', no matter how much they study the bestseller lists or aim for a 'high-concept' approach. Even the publishers can't guarantee success, though obviously strong pre-publication word-of-mouth and a huge promotional budget help. The remainder shops are littered with failed attempts to replicate the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and publishers are often as surprised as the next reader when a book comes out of nowhere to top the best-seller charts.

Not that *Killing Me Softly* came out of nowhere. Published in 1999, it was the third novel by husband and wife writing team Nicci French (Nicci Gerrard and Sean French), following *The Memory Game* and *The Safe*

House. All we can say is that no matter how highly we regard the first two, *Killing Me Softly* was a bigger success and represented something of a breakthrough for its authors. It was their first book to crack the American market, for example. Why? Who knows? It was the sort of phenomenon that occurs every now and then, more recently with *Gone Girl*, say, or *The Girl on the Train*, both of which are indebted to Nicci French for the psychological insight into relationships and domestic thriller elements.

Nicci French has since gone on to write many more successful thrillers, including *Beneath the Skin*, *The Red Room* and *Until It's Over*. In 2011 they started a series featuring Dr Frieda Klein, a psychotherapist, with *Blue Monday*. Having gone through the week day by day, that series comes to a conclusion with *The Day of the Dead*.

There were writers who wrote psychological thrillers before Nicci French, writers who dealt with psychopaths and deviant psychology – Patricia Highsmith and Ruth Rendell come to mind – but *Killing Me Softly* was different; it expanded that segment of the thriller genre in which the darker elements of sexual obsession and murder intrude into the superficially complacent reality of domestic life. Many readers believe that there is no place in crime fiction for sex, but *Killing Me Softly* is an erotic thriller with plenty of steamy sex scenes. Previous crime writers also tended to have a recurring hero or heroine, usually a private detective, talented amateur sleuth or bona fide police detective, but *Killing Me Softly* has very little sleuth or police presence.

There are also writers such as Harlan Coben and Linwood Barclay, along with Gillian Flynn and Paula Hawkins, who to a large extent write about relationships and domestic situations going awry, just as we see happening in *Killing Me Softly*. The ordinary becomes extraordinary, and extremely dangerous. It is a world in which the unreliable narrator rules supreme.

While Alice Loudon, who tells the story, is not intentionally unreliable, or so she would have us believe, her perception and understanding of events is cast into doubt by the enormous gaps in her knowledge. She becomes unreliable by default.

After a gripping opening scene whose purpose only becomes clear later, we meet Alice, who seems happy enough with her ordinary life. She has a normal boyfriend, Jake, an active social life with a group of close and like-minded friends and a rewarding job as a scientific researcher working for a pharmaceutical company. Then she meets Adam Tallis, and her life goes haywire.

Perhaps ‘meets’ is too feeble a word to use in the case of Alice and Adam. They are both crossing the road in opposite directions when they stop and look at one another until the cars begin honking their horns at them. Alice tells us, ‘It felt like an age, but it was probably only a second.’ The effect is immediately physical for her – inability to breathe, trembling knees – and when they meet again, his first words to her are, ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’ Alice submits

immediately and willingly to his invitation, and in no time they are enjoying passionate sex back at his place.

Adam seems to be some kind of elemental masculine force, and Alice just can't resist. He turns out to be a famous mountain climber who also acts as a guide for climbing expeditions made up of amateurs. Brave to the point of foolhardiness, a known risk-taker and life-saver, Adam seems unwilling to talk to Alice about his past, neither the mountains he has conquered, nor the women. They rush into an intense physical relationship, involving elements of consensual S & M, which causes Alice to drift far away from her lover, friends and job. Adam and Alice create a world of their own. The reader knows it's too good to be true, and that anything this good cannot last. Deep down, Alice knows it too, but she ignores the feeling.

For a long time Alice doesn't question their strange circumscribed relationship, the sexual possessiveness, jealousy, secrets. She is in thrall to the sheer physicality of Adam's presence and the violence of his feelings towards her. But when Adam also shows an astonishing degree of excessive violence by viciously beating up a mugger who tries to snatch Alice's shoulder-bag, she starts to become wary.

By then it is too late; Alice really has no one else in the world to depend on except Adam. Then the ugly question of murder raises its head, along with the beginnings of suspicion and shame. But I will say no more of the plot because I don't want to spoil the thrill of the ride for any readers. Sufficient to say

that the pacing is spot on, and the tension keeps creeping up and up right to the explosive end.

Nicci French also creates in *Killing Me Softly* a cumulative claustrophobic sense of the narrow and intense private world Alice and Adam inhabit. As in the best Ruth Rendell thrillers, you want to intervene as a reader, tell the character not to open that door, not to turn that corner, not to go down those stairs. You want to jump into the book and lead Alice by the hand far away from Adam Tallis and the danger you sense is coming, but you know their magnetic attraction would be too strong for that. Also, the reader is drawn in by the erotic tension and intensity in a similar way to that by which Alfred Hitchcock makes the viewer a collaborator, a voyeur in *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and other masterpieces.

So settle down in your favourite chair, turn on the reading light, make yourself a cup of tea or whatever kind of drink you prefer, and start turning the pages. You probably won't stop until you have finished.

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He knew he was going to die. And he knew dimly, somewhere far inside himself, that he ought not to want to die. He should do something to save himself but he couldn't think what. Perhaps if he could make sense of what had happened. If only the wind and the snow would slacken. They had battered him for so long that he could hardly distinguish the sound from the cold and the stinging on his face. Always there was the struggle, the last struggle, really, to breathe oxygen from this air of eight thousand metres above sea-level, where humans weren't meant to live. His oxygen cylinders were long since empty, the valves frozen up, the mask nothing but an encumbrance.

It might be minutes, more likely hours. But he would be dead before the morning came. That was all right, though. He was drowsy and calm. Under his layers of windproof nylon, Gore-Tex, wool, polypropylene, he could feel his heart beating at twice its normal rate, a prisoner hammering frantically at his chest. Yet his brain was sluggish, dreamy. Which was a mistake, because they all needed to stay awake, keep moving, until they were rescued. He knew he should sit up, stand up, clap his hands together furiously, wake his companions. He was too comfortable. It was good to lie down and rest at last. He had been tired for such a long time.

He no longer felt cold, which was a relief. He looked down to where one of his hands, which had slipped from

its mitten, lay at a curious angle. It had been purple but now – he leaned forward curiously – it was a waxy white. Strange that he should be so thirsty. He had a bottle in his jacket, which was frozen and useless to him. He was surrounded by snow, which was equally useless. It was almost funny. Lucky he wasn't a doctor, like Françoise.

Where was she? When they had reached the end of the line, they should have been in the Camp Three col. She had gone ahead and they hadn't seen her again. The others had stayed together, blundered around, lost all sense of direction, any feeling about where on the mountain they were, and had nestled hopelessly into this excuse for a gully. And yet there was something he had to remember, an object lost in his mind, and not only did he not know where it was, he didn't know *what* it was.

He couldn't even see his feet. This morning, when they had set out, the mountains had shimmered in the thin air and they had inched their way up the tilted sea of ice towards the summit in fierce sunlight that had spilt over the rim of the mountains, and glinted off the blue-white, bullet-proof ice and pierced their aching heads. There had been only a few cumulus clouds drifting towards them and then suddenly this swirl of stony snow.

He felt a movement beside him. Someone else was conscious. He turned laboriously to the other side. Red jacket, so it must be Peter. His face was entirely obscured by a thick layer of grey ice. There was nothing he could do. They had been a sort of team but were all in their own separate worlds now.

He wondered who else was dying on the mountainside. It had all gone so wrong. Nothing to do, though. He had a syringe in a toothbrush holder inside his snowsuit, full of dexamethosone, but grasping a syringe was beyond his powers now. He couldn't even move his hands to unstrap

his backpack. What would he do, anyway? Where could he go from here? Better to wait. They'd find them. They knew where they were. Why hadn't they come yet?

The world beyond, the life before, these mountains, all that had now sunk beneath the surface of his sluggish consciousness, until only traces were left. He knew that every minute he lay up here, in the oxygen-deprived death zone, millions of his brain cells were being erased. A tiny part of his mind was watching himself die and was terrified, full of pity and horror. He wished it was over. He just wanted to sleep.

He knew the stages of death. He had watched almost with curiosity as his body protested against its environment here on the final ridges below the summit of Chungawat: the headaches, the diarrhoea, the gasping shortness of breath, the swollen hands and ankles. He knew he could no longer think clearly. Perhaps hallucinations would come to him before he died. He knew that frostbite had invaded his hands and feet. He couldn't feel any of his body, except for his charred lungs. It was as if his mind was the last thing that was left, still burning dimly inside his finished carcass. He was waiting for his mind to flicker and die out.

Pity he had never got to the summit. The snow felt like a pillow against his cheek. Tomas was warm. At peace. What had gone wrong? It should all have been so simple. There was something he had to remember, something wrong. There had been a wrong note. A piece of the puzzle didn't fit. He closed his eyes. The darkness felt healing. Life had been so busy. All that effort. For what? Nothing. He just had to remember. Once he had remembered, nothing else mattered. If only the howl of the wind would stop. If only he could think. Yes, that was it. It was so stupid, so simple, but he understood. He

smiled. He felt the cold spread through him, welcoming him into the darkness.

I sat very still in the hard-backed chair. My throat hurt. The strip-lighting flickered and made me feel dizzy. I put my hands on the desk between us, fingertips lightly together, and tried to breathe steadily. What a place for it all to end.

Phones were ringing around us and conversation hummed in the air, like static. There were people in the background, men and women in their uniforms passing busily by. Occasionally they would look towards us, but they didn't seem curious. Why should they be? They saw so many things in here, and I was just an ordinary woman, with a flush in her cheeks and a ladder running up her tights. Who could tell? My feet ached inside their ridiculous ankle boots. I didn't want to die.

Detective Inspector Byrne picked up a pen. I tried to smile at him with all of my last hope. He looked across at me patiently, eyebrows bunched, and I wanted to cry and ask him to save me, oh, please. It had been such a long time since I had cried properly. If I started now, then why should I ever stop?

'Where were we, do you remember?' he asked.

Oh, yes, I remembered. I remembered it all.

One

‘Alice! Alice! You’re late. Come on.’

I heard a soft resistant grunt and realized it was coming from me. Outside it was cold and dark. I wriggled deeper into the bunched-up duvet, closed my eyes in a squint against the dim glimmers of winter light.

‘Up, Alice.’

Jake smelt of shaving foam. A tie hung loose from his collar. Another day. It’s the little habits rather than the big decisions that make you into a real couple. You drift into routines, inhabit complementary domestic roles without deciding to. Jake and I were the world trivia experts on each other. I knew that he liked more milk in coffee than in tea, he knew that I liked just a drop of milk in tea and none at all in coffee. He could locate the hard knot that formed near my left shoulder-blade after hard days in the office. I didn’t put fruit in salads because of him and he didn’t put cheese in salads because of me. What more could you want from a relationship? We were shaking down into a couple.

I’d never lived with a man before – I mean, a man with whom I was in a relationship – and I found the experience of assuming household roles interesting. Jake was an engineer and was limitlessly capable with all the wires and pipes behind our walls and under our floors. I once said to him that the one thing he resented about our flat was that he hadn’t actually built it himself on a greenfield site,

and he didn't take it as an insult. My degree was in biochemistry, which meant that I changed the sheets on the bed and emptied the swing-bin in the kitchen. He fixed the vacuum cleaner but I used it. I washed the bath, except if he had shaved in it. I drew the line there.

The odd thing was that Jake did all the ironing. He said that people didn't know how to iron shirts any more. I thought that was deeply stupid and I would have got offended except that it's hard to stay offended as you lie watching TV with a drink while somebody else does the ironing. He bought the paper and I read it over his shoulder and he got irritated. We both shopped, although I always took a list and ticked everything off, and he was haphazard and far more extravagant than me. He defrosted the fridge. I watered the plants. And he brought me a cup of tea in bed every morning.

'You're late,' he said. 'Here's your tea and I'm leaving in exactly three minutes.'

'I hate January,' I said.

'You said that about December.'

'January's like December. But without Christmas.'

But he'd left the room. I showered hurriedly and put on an oatmeal-coloured trouser suit, with a jacket that came to my knees. I brushed my hair and coiled it into a loose bun.

'You look smart,' said Jake, as I came into the kitchen. 'Is that new?'

'I've had it for ages,' I lied, pouring myself another cup of tea, tepid this time.

We walked to the underground together, sharing an umbrella and dodging puddles. He kissed me at the turnstile, putting the umbrella under his arm and holding my shoulders firmly.

'Goodbye, darling,' he said, and I thought at that

moment, He wants to be married. He wants us to be a married couple. With my mind on that arresting idea, I forgot to say anything back. He didn't notice and stepped on to the escalator, joining the descending crowd of men in raincoats. He didn't look back. It was almost as if we were married already.

I didn't want to go to the meeting. I felt almost physically incapable of it. The previous evening, I'd been out late with Jake for a meal. We hadn't got in until after midnight and hadn't got to bed until one and then hadn't actually got to sleep until maybe two thirty. It had been an anniversary – our first. It wasn't much of an anniversary but Jake and I are short of them. Occasionally we've tried, but we've always been unable to remember our first meeting. We were around each other in the same environment for such a long time, like bees hovering around the same hive. We can't remember when we became friends. We were in a fluctuating group of people, and after a bit of time we had reached a stage where if somebody had asked me to write a list of my three or four, or four or five closest friends, Jake would have been on it. But nobody ever asked me. We knew all about each other's parents, school-days, love lives. Once we got horrendously drunk together when his girlfriend left him, sitting under a tree in Regent's Park and finishing off half a bottle of whisky between us, half weepy, half giggly, generally maudlin. I told him that she was the one who was losing out, and he hiccuped and stroked my cheek. We laughed at each other's jokes, danced with each other at parties, but not when the music was slow, cadged money and lifts and advice. We were mates.

We both remembered the first time we slept together. That was on 17 January last year. A Wednesday. A group of us were going to see a late-night movie, but various

people couldn't go and by the time we were at the cinema it was just Jake and me, and at one point during the film we looked at each other and smiled rather sheepishly and I guessed that we were both realizing that we were on a sort of date, and maybe we were both wondering if this was such a good idea.

Afterwards he asked me back to his flat for a drink. It was about one in the morning. He had a packet of smoked salmon in the fridge and – this was the bit that made me laugh – bread he had baked himself. At least, it made me laugh in retrospect, because he has never baked a loaf or anything else since. We are a takeaway-and-convenience-food couple. However, I did very nearly laugh then, at the moment when I first kissed him, because it seemed odd, almost incestuous, being such good ordinary friends already. I saw his face getting closer to mine, his familiar features blurring into strangeness, and I wanted to giggle or pull away, anything to break the sudden seriousness, the different kind of quietness between us. But it immediately felt right, like coming home. If there were times when I didn't want that sense of settledness (what about all my plans to work abroad, to have adventures, to be a different kind of person?), or worried that I was nearly thirty and was this, then, my life?, well, I shook them off.

I know that couples are meant to make a specific decision to live together. It's a stage in your life, like exchanging a ring or dying. We never did. I started staying over. Jake allocated me a drawer for knickers and tights. Then there was the odd dress. I started leaving conditioner and eyeliner pencils in the bathroom. After a few weeks of that I noticed one day that about half of the videos had my handwriting on the labels. It's just that if you don't write down programmes you've taped, even in very small

writing, then you can never find them when you want to watch them.

One day Jake asked me if there was any point in my paying rent for my room, since I was never there. I hemmed and hawed, worried, and didn't come to any firm decision. My cousin, Julie, came down for the summer to work before starting college and I suggested that she could park in my place. I had to move more of my stuff out to give her room. Then at the end of August – it was a hot early Sunday evening and we were at a pub looking over the river at St Paul's – Julie talked and talked and talked about looking for somewhere permanent, and I suggested she stay there permanently. So Jake and I were together and the only anniversary we had was the first sexual encounter.

But after the celebration, there was the reckoning. If you don't want to go to a meeting and you are worried about doing yourself justice or having injustice done to you, make sure that your outfit is ironed and get there on time. These are not exactly in the managerial ten commandments, but on that dark morning when I couldn't face anything but tea, they seemed like a survival strategy. I tried to collect my thoughts on the tube. I should have prepared myself better, made some notes or something. I remained standing in the hope that it would keep my new suit smooth. A couple of polite men offered me a seat and looked embarrassed when I refused. They probably thought it was ideological.

What were they all going to do, my fellow passengers? I bet myself silently that it wasn't as odd as what I was going to do. I was going to the office of a small division of a very large multinational drug company in order to have a meeting about a small plastic and copper object that looked like a New Age brooch but was in fact the unsatisfactory prototype of a new intrauterine device.

I had seen my boss, Mike, being successively baffled, furious, frustrated and confused by our lack of progress with the Drakloop IV, Drakon Pharmaceutical Company's IUD, which was going to revolutionize intrauterine contraceptives if it ever made it out of the laboratory. I had been recruited to the project six months ago, but had become gradually sucked into the bureaucratic quagmire of budget plans, marketing objectives, shortfalls, clinical trials, specifications, departmental meetings, regional meetings, meetings about meetings, and the whole impossible hierarchy of the decision-making process. I had almost forgotten that I was a scientist who had been working in a project on the fringes of female fertility. I had taken the job because the idea of creating a product and selling it had seemed like a holiday from the rest of my life.

This Thursday morning, Mike just seemed sullen, but I recognized the mood as dangerous. He was like a rusty old Second World War mine that had been washed up on a beach. It seemed harmless but the person who prodded it in the wrong place would get blown up. It wasn't going to be me, not today.

People filed into the conference room. I had already seated myself with my back to the door so that I could look out of the window. The office lay just south of the Thames in a maze of narrow streets named after spices and the distant lands where they had come from. At the rear of our offices, always on the verge of being acquired and redeveloped, was a recycling facility. A rubbish dump. In one corner there was a giant mountain of bottles. On sunny days it glittered magically but even on a horrid day like this there was a chance that I might get to see the digger come along and shovel the bottles into an even larger pile. That was more interesting than anything that

was likely to happen inside Conference Room C. I looked around. There were three slightly ill-at-ease men who had come down from the Northbridge lab just for this meeting and evidently resented the time away. There was Philip Ingalls from upstairs, my so-called assistant Claudia, and Mike's assistant Fiona. There were several people missing. Mike's frown deepened, and he pulled on his earlobes furiously. I looked out of the window. Good. The digger was approaching the bottle mountain. That made me feel better.

'Is Giovanna coming?' Mike asked.

'No,' said one of the researchers, Neil, I think he was called. 'She asked me to stand in for her.'

Mike shrugged in ominous acceptance. I sat up straighter, fixed an alert expression on my face and picked up my pen optimistically. The meeting began with references to the previous meeting and various droning routine matters. I doodled on my pad, then tried a sketch of Neil's face, which looked rather like a bloodhound's, with sad eyes. Then I tuned out and looked at the digger, which was now well at its work. Unfortunately the windows cut out the sound of the breaking glass but it was satisfying all the same. With an effort I tuned back into the meeting when Mike asked about plans for February. Neil started saying something about anovulatory bleeding and I suddenly and absurdly got irritated by the thought of a male scientist talking to a male manager about technology for the female anatomy. I took a deep breath to speak, changed my mind, and turned my attention back to the recycling centre. The digger was retreating now, its job done. I wondered how you could get a job driving something like that.

'And as for you . . .' I became aware of my surroundings, as if I had suddenly been disturbed from sleep. Mike

had directed his attention to me and everybody had turned to survey the imminent damage. ‘You’ve got to take this in hand, Alice. There’s a malaise in this department.’

Could I be bothered to argue? No.

‘Yes, Mike,’ I said sweetly. I winked at him, though, just to let him know I wasn’t letting myself be bullied, and saw his face redden.

‘And could someone get this fucking light fixed?’ he shouted.

I looked up. There was an almost subliminal flicker from one of the fluorescent light tubes. Once you became aware of it, it was like having somebody scratch inside your brain. Scratch, scratch, scratch.

‘I’ll do it,’ I said. ‘I mean, I’ll get someone to do it.’

I was drafting a report that Mike could send to Pittsburgh at the end of the month, which left plenty of time, so I was able to spend the rest of the day doing not very much. I spent an important half an hour going through two mail-order clothes catalogues I’d been sent. I turned the page back on a pair of neat ankle boots, a long velvet shirt, which was described as ‘essential’, and a short dove-grey satin skirt. It would put me £137 further into debt. After lunch with a press officer – a nice woman, whose small pale face was dominated by her narrow, rectangular, black-framed spectacles – I shut myself into my office and put on my headphones.

‘Je suis dans la salle de bains,’ said a voice, too brightly, into my ear.

‘Je suis dans la salle de bains,’ I repeated obediently.

‘Je suis en haut!’

What did ‘*en haut*’ mean? I couldn’t remember. ‘Je suis en haut,’ I said.

The phone rang, and I pulled off the headphones. I

was away from the world of sunshine and fields of lavender and outdoor cafés and back in dockland in January. It was Julie, with a problem about the flat. I suggested we meet for a drink after work. She was already seeing a couple of people so I rang Jake on his mobile and suggested he come to the Vine as well. No. He was out of town. He had gone to look at progress on a tunnel that was being dug through a site that was both beautiful and sacred to several religions. My day was nearly done.

Julie and Sylvie were there, at a corner table with Clive, when I arrived. Behind them were some wall plants. There was a vine motif in the Vine.

‘You look awful,’ Sylvie said sympathetically. ‘Hang-over?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, cautiously. ‘But I could do with a hangover cure anyway. I’ll get you one as well.’

Clive had been talking about a woman he had met at a party last night.

‘She’s a very interesting woman,’ Clive said. ‘She’s a physiotherapist. I told her about my bad elbow, you know . . .’

‘Yes, we know.’

‘And she took hold of it in this special grip, and it immediately felt better. Isn’t that amazing?’

‘What does she look like?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What does she look like?’ I insisted.

The drinks arrived. He took a sip. ‘She was quite tall,’ he said. ‘Taller than you. She has brown hair, about shoulder-length. She’s good-looking, tanned, she had these amazing blue eyes.’

‘No wonder your elbow felt better. Did you ask her out?’

Clive looked indignant but a bit shifty as well. He loosened his tie. ‘Of course I didn’t.’

‘You obviously wanted to.’

‘You can’t just ask a girl out like that.’

‘Yes, you can,’ Sylvie interrupted. ‘She touched your elbow.’

‘So? I don’t believe this. She touched my elbow as a physiotherapist, and that means she’s asking for it, does it?’

‘Not as such,’ said Sylvie primly. ‘But ask her. Ring her up. She sounds desirable to me.’

‘Obviously, she was . . . attractive, but there are two problems. One, as you know, I don’t feel that I’ve got over Christine properly. And secondly, I can’t do that sort of thing. I need an excuse.’

‘Do you know her name?’ I asked.

‘She’s called Gail. Gail Stevenson.’

I sipped my Bloody Mary reflectively.

‘Call her up.’

A look of alarm passed comically over Clive’s features. ‘What would I say?’

‘It doesn’t matter what you say. If she liked you, and the fact that she took hold of your elbow at the party means that she may have done, then she’ll go out with you almost whatever you say. If she didn’t, then she won’t go out with you whatever you say.’ Clive looked confused. ‘Just give her a ring,’ I said. ‘Say, “I’m the person who had the elbow that you manipulated at whatever it was party the other night, would you like to go out?” She might be charmed.’

Clive looked aghast. ‘Just like that?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘What should I ask her to?’

I laughed. 'What do you want me to do? Fix you up with a room as well?'

I got some more drinks. When I returned, Sylvie was both smoking and talking dramatically. I was tired and only half listening to her. Across the table, I wasn't sure because I only heard fragments, I think that Clive was telling Julie about the secret meanings hidden in the pattern on the Marlboro cigarette box. I wondered if he was drunk or mad. I lingered over the last of my drink, feeling fuzzy round the edges. This was part of the Crew, a group of people who, mostly, had met at college and stayed together, looking out for each other, spending time. They were more like my family than my family.

When I got back to the flat, Jake opened the door as I put my key in the lock. He was already changed into jeans and checked shirt.

'I thought you'd be late,' I said.

'The problem went away,' he said. 'I'm cooking you dinner.'

I looked on the table. There were packets. Spiced chicken. Taramasalata. Pitta bread. A miniature steamed pudding. A carton of cream. A bottle of wine. A video. I kissed him. 'A microwave, a TV set and you,' I said. 'Perfect.'

'And then I'm going to have sex with you for the entire night.'

'What, again? You tunneller, you.'

Two

The following morning, the underground was more than usually crowded. I felt hot inside all my layers of clothing, and I tried to distract myself by thinking about other things as I swayed against the bodies and the train clattered through the darkness. I thought about how my hair needed cutting. I could book it for lunch-time. I tried to remember if there was enough food in the house for tonight, or maybe we could get a takeaway. Or go dancing. I remembered I hadn't taken my pill this morning and must do it as soon as I got to work. The thought of the pill made me think of the IUD and yesterday's meeting, the memory of which had left me more unwilling than usual to get out of bed this morning.

A skinny young woman with a large, red-faced baby squeezed her way down the train. No one stood up for her, and she stood with her child on her angular hip, held in place by the bodies all round her. Only the baby's hot, cross face was exposed. Sure enough, it soon started yelling, hoarse, drawn-out wails that made its red cheeks purple, but the woman ignored it, as if she was beyond noticing. She had a glazed expression on her pallid face. Although her baby was dressed for an expedition to the South Pole, she wore just a thin dress and an unzipped anorak. I tested myself for maternal instinct. Negative. Then I looked round at all the men and women in suits. I leaned down to a man in a lovely cashmere coat, till I

was near enough to see his spots, then said softly into his ear: ‘Excuse me. Can you make room for this woman?’ He looked puzzled, resistant. ‘She needs a seat.’

He stood up and the mother shuffled over and wedged herself between two *Guardians*. The baby continued to wail, and she continued to stare ahead of her. The man could feel virtuous now.

I was glad to get out at my station, though I wasn’t looking forward to the day ahead. When I thought about work, a lethargy settled over me, as if all my limbs were heavy and the chambers of my brain musty. It was icy on the streets, and my breath curled into the air. I wrapped my scarf more firmly around my neck. I should have worn a hat. Maybe I could nip out in a coffee-break and buy some boots. All around me people were hurrying to their different offices, heads down. Jake and I should go away somewhere in February, somewhere hot and deserted. Anywhere that wasn’t London. I imagined a white beach and a blue sky and me slim and tanned in a bikini. I’d been seeing too many advertisements. I always wore a one-piece. Oh, well. Jake had been on at me about saving money.

I stopped at the zebra crossing. A lorry roared by. A pigeon and I scuttled back in unison. I glimpsed the driver, high up in his cab and blind to all the people below him trudging to work. The next car squeaked to a halt and I stepped out into the road.

A man was crossing from the other side. I noticed he was wearing black jeans and a black leather jacket, and then I looked up at his face. I don’t know if he stopped first or I did. We both stood in the road staring at each other. I think I heard a horn blare. I couldn’t move. It felt like an age, but it was probably only a second. There was an empty, hungry feeling in my stomach and I couldn’t

breathe in properly. A horn was sounded once more. Someone shouted something. His eyes were a startling blue. I started walking across the road again, and so did he, and we passed each other, inches away, our eyes locked. If he had reached out and touched me, I think I would have turned and followed him, but he didn't and I reached the pavement alone.

I walked towards the building that contained the Drakon offices, then stopped and looked back. He was still there, watching me. He didn't smile or make any gesture. It was an effort to turn away again, with his gaze on me as if it were pulling me back towards him. When I reached the revolving doors of the Drakon building and pushed through them, I took a last glance back. He was gone, the man with blue eyes. So that was that.

I went at once to the cloakroom, shut myself into a cubicle and leaned against the door. I felt dizzy, my knees trembled and there was a heavy feeling at the back of my eyes, like unshed tears. Maybe I was getting a cold. Maybe my period was about to start. I thought of the man and the way he had stared at me, and I closed my eyes as if that would somehow shut him out. Someone else came into the cloakroom, turned on a tap. I stood very still and quiet, and could hear my heart thudding beneath my blouse. I laid my hand against my burning cheek, put it on my breast.

After a few minutes I could breathe properly again. I splashed cold water on my face, combed my hair, and remembered to remove a tiny pill from its foil calendar and swallow it. The ache in my guts was fading, and now I just felt fragile, jittery. Thank God nobody had seen anything. I bought coffee from the machine on the second floor and a bar of chocolate, for I was suddenly ravenous, and made my way to my office. I picked the wrapper and

then the gold foil off the chocolate with shaky, incompetent fingers and ate it in large bites. The working day began. I read through my mail and tossed most of it into the bin, wrote a memo to Mike, then phoned Jake at work.

‘How’s your day going?’ I asked.

‘It’s only just started.’

I felt as if hours had passed since leaving home. If I leaned back and closed my eyes, I could sleep for hours.

‘Last night was nice,’ he said, in a low voice. Maybe there were other people around at his end.

‘Mmm. I felt a bit odd this morning, though, Jake.’

‘Are you all right now?’ He sounded concerned. I’m never ill.

‘Yes. Fine. Completely fine. Are you all right?’

I’d run out of things to say but I was reluctant to put the phone down. Jake suddenly sounded preoccupied. I heard him say something I couldn’t make out to someone else.

‘Yes, love. Look, I’d better go. ’Bye.’

The morning passed. I went to another meeting, this time with the marketing department, managed to spill a jug of water over the table and say nothing at all. I read through the research document Giovanna had e-mailed to me. She was coming to see me at three thirty. I phoned up the hairdresser’s and made an appointment for one o’clock. I drank lots of bitter, tepid coffee out of polystyrene cups. I watered the plants in my office. I learned to say ‘je voudrais quatre petits pains’ and ‘Ça fait combien?’

Just before one I picked up my coat, left a message for my assistant that I would be out for an hour or so, then clattered down the stairs and into the street. It was just beginning to drizzle, and I hadn’t got an umbrella. I looked up at the clouds, shrugged, and started to walk quickly

along Cardamom Street where I could pick up a taxi to the hairdresser's. I stopped dead in my tracks and the world blurred. My stomach gave a lurch. I felt as if I was about to double up.

He was there, a few feet from me. As if he hadn't moved since this morning. Still in his black jacket and jeans; still not smiling. Just standing and looking at me. I felt then as if no one had ever looked at me properly before and was suddenly and acutely conscious of myself – of the pounding of my heart, the rise and fall of my breath; of the surface of my body, which was prickling with a kind of panic and excitement.

He was my sort of age, early thirties. I suppose he was beautiful, with his pale blue eyes and his tumbled brown hair and his high, flat cheekbones. But then all I knew was that he was so focused on me that I felt I couldn't move out of his gaze. I heard my breath come in a little ragged gasp, but I didn't move and I couldn't turn away.

I don't know who made the first step. Perhaps I stumbled towards him, or perhaps I just waited for him, and when we stood opposite each other, not touching, hands by our sides, he said, in a low voice, 'I've been waiting for you.'

I should have laughed out loud. This wasn't me, this couldn't be happening to me. I was just Alice Loudon, on her way to have her hair cut on a damp day in January. But I couldn't laugh or smile. I could only go on looking at him, into his wide-set blue eyes, at his mouth, which was slightly parted, the tender lips. He had white, even teeth, except that the front one was chipped. His chin was stubbly. There was a scratch on his neck. His hair was quite long, and unbrushed. Oh, yes, he was beautiful. I wanted to reach up and touch his mouth, ever so gently, with one thumb. I wanted to feel the scratch of his stubble

in the hollow of my neck. I tried to say something, but all that came out of me was a strangled, prim ‘Oh.’

‘Please,’ he said then, still not taking his eyes off my face. ‘Will you come with me?’

He could have been a mugger, a rapist, a psychopath. I nodded dumbly at him and he stepped into the road, flagged down a taxi. He held open the door for me, but still didn’t touch me. Inside he gave an address to the driver then turned towards me. I saw that under his leather jacket he wore only a dark green T-shirt. There was a leather thong around his neck with a small silver spiral hung on it. His hands were bare. I looked at his long fingers, with their neat, clean nails. A white scar kinked down one thumb. They looked practical hands, strong, dangerous.

‘Tell me your name?’

‘Alice,’ I said. I didn’t recognize my own voice.

‘Alice,’ he repeated. ‘Alice.’ The word sounded unfamiliar when he said it like that. He lifted his hands and, very gently, careful not to make any contact with my skin, loosened my scarf. He smelt of soap and sweat.

The taxi stopped and, looking out, I saw that we were in Soho. There was a paper shop, a delicatessen, restaurants. I could smell coffee and garlic. He got out and once more held the door open for me. I could feel the blood pulsing in my body. He pushed at a shabby door by the side of a clothes shop and I followed him up a narrow flight of steps. He took a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked two locks. Inside, it wasn’t just a room but a small flat. I saw shelves, books, pictures, a rug. I hovered on the threshold. It was my last chance. The noise from the street outside filtered through the windows, the rise and fall of voices, the rumble of cars. He closed the door and bolted it from the inside.

I should have been scared, and I was, but not of him, this stranger. I was scared at myself. I didn't know myself any longer. I was dissolving with my desire, as if all the outlines of my body were becoming insubstantial. I started to take off my coat, hands clumsy on the velvet buttons, but he stopped me.

'Wait,' he said. 'Let me.'

First he removed my scarf and hung it carefully on the coat-stand. Next, my coat, taking his time. He knelt on the floor and slipped off my shoes. I put my hand on his shoulder to stop myself toppling. He stood again, and started to unbutton my cardigan, and I saw that his hands were trembling slightly. He undid my skirt and pulled it down over my hips; it rasped against my tights. He tugged off my tights, collecting them into a flimsy ball, which he put beside my shoes. Still, he had hardly made contact with my skin. He took off my camisole and slid down my knickers and I stood naked in that unfamiliar room, shivering slightly.

'Alice,' he said, in a kind of groan. Then, 'Oh, God, you're lovely, Alice.'

I took off his jacket. His arms were strong and brown, and there was another long, puckered scar running from the elbow to the wrist. I copied him and knelt at his feet to pull off his shoes and socks. On his right foot, he had only three toes, and I bent down and kissed the place where the other two had been. He sighed softly. I tugged his shirt free of his jeans and he raised his arms like a little boy while I pulled it over his head. He had a flat stomach with a line of hair running down it. I unzipped his jeans and eased them carefully down over his buttocks. His legs were knotty, quite tanned. I took off his underpants and dropped them on to the floor. Someone moaned, but I don't know if it was him or me. He lifted one hand and

tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, then traced my lips with a forefinger, very slowly. I closed my eyes.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Look at me.’

‘Please,’ I said. ‘Please.’

He unhooked my earrings and let them fall. I heard them clink on the wooden boards.

‘Kiss me, Alice,’ he said.

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. Sex had never been like this. There had been indifferent sex, embarrassing sex, nasty sex, good sex, great sex. This was more like obliterating sex. We crashed together, trying to get past the barrier of skin and flesh. We held each other as if we were drowning. We tasted each other as if we were starving. And all the time he looked at me. He looked at me as if I were the loveliest thing he had ever seen, and as I lay on the hard dusty floor I felt lovely, shameless, quite done for.

Afterwards, he lifted me to my feet and took me into the shower and washed me down. He soaped my breasts and between my legs. He washed my feet and thighs. He even washed my hair, expertly massaging shampoo into it, tilting my head back so soap wouldn’t run into my eyes. Then he dried me, making sure I was dry under my arms, between my toes, and as he dried me he examined me. I felt like a work of art, and like a prostitute.

‘I must go back to work,’ I said at last. He dressed me, picking up my clothes from the floor, threading my earrings through my lobes, brushing my wet hair back from my face.

‘When do you finish work?’ he asked. I thought of Jake waiting at home.

‘Six.’

‘I’ll be there,’ he said. I should have told him then that

I had a partner, a home, a whole other life. Instead I pulled his face towards mine and kissed his bruised lips. I could hardly bring myself to pull my body away from his.

In the taxi, alone, I pictured him, remembered his touch, his taste, his smell. I didn't know his name.