

Chapter 1

THE LAST TIME Susan saw her daughter it didn't end well.

"I don't like American comedies," Mimi had announced outside the cinema in Leicester Square.

"Oh. Do you want to see something else?"

"Don't bother."

Then came Mimi's assessment of the "rip-off" blockbuster merchandising on the way in. That was followed by Oscar-worthy throat clearing and a phone call during the trailers which had the people behind "shushing" while Susan cringed.

"Well, that was side-splitting," Mimi said afterwards. "God, I hate the West End." It was pointless asking her if she wanted to go for a Chinese. Mimi was already heading towards her bus stop without saying goodbye, stranding Susan with her mouth open like a goldfish.

That was five months ago. But now Mimi had been persuaded to come round for dinner.

Susan rushed out of the tube to help Serge with the shopping. They hugged outside the supermarket but she was so anxious she could barely look at him. She couldn't express her misgivings – Serge had been the one to reach out to Mimi in the first place.

He tried to steer her towards the meat counter. She tugged his sleeve. "We don't want to provoke her unnecessarily. Not again. Just pretend you're a vegan for the night."

They stocked up on lettuce, carrots and beetroot. It would have to be salad. Serge was sent in search of chickpeas and returned with two sirloin steaks which he dropped into the trolley. "For tomorrow, *chérie*."

On the way past the dairy section, she paused in front of the ice cream freezers.

"Your empire," said Serge with pride, placing his arm round his wife's shoulder. She nodded towards the biscuits and cereals aisle.

"Not only mine, it's the DeKripps' empire." Even after a year as Marketing Director for the London branch of DeKripps Foods Inc., she still had to pinch herself.

It was dark and chilly. They adjusted their scarves and set off for home in Serge's car. He had some marking to do before Mimi arrived.

"What, on a Saturday?"

"Look who's talking, Madame workaholic."

The Christmas lights along Essex Road on their way back to Hackney reminded her that soon they'd be needing a tree. Serge loved the English rituals.

"Don't forget fire crackers for the table," he said.

"*Christmas* crackers." He banged his hand on the steering wheel in mock frustration. Despite more than a decade in London his attempts to master the English language never failed to amuse her.

Serge parked and went straight upstairs to his study, while she tidied the living room and banked up the fire. She lit a couple of nightlights on the coffee table.

Mimi had a key but refused to use it. When the doorbell rang, Susan started and glanced nervously at Serge, who dropped his half-smoked cigarette in the garden and closed the French windows.

"You're the one who invited her," she said.

"Seasoning of goodwill," he smiled. "Be nice. She's come all the way from Wandsworth."

Mimi had moved across town to be as far from her mother as possible, after dropping out of a media studies course.

"You know she's hated me and everything I stand for since I joined DeKripps," said Susan. "But she also forgets that Big Food is paying her rent on that flat. It wasn't all that long ago that she had the comfort of this four-bedroom home."

Serge's parted lips revealed his gap-toothed smile as he went to open the door. Mimi had always got on better with him than with her mother, even though he'd only come on the scene when she was a headstrong five year old. Mimi used to say she'd been "abandoned" to child minders while Susan was on the road organising focus groups.

She heard her hanging up her coat in the cloakroom and the clunk of vegan Doc Martens on the parquet floor.

Her daughter appeared in the kitchen, holding out a bottle of wine like a weapon.

"Hi Ma," she said. Susan examined her matted strawberry blonde hair, her elfin face upstaged by a metallic stud poking through her left nostril.

"I think I preferred it when you called me Mum," she said. They didn't kiss. Susan busied herself setting the kitchen table for supper, salad bowl at the centre.

They chewed in silence for a while. Serge opened the wine and began pouring, but Mimi stuck with tap water.

"How's work?"

She only knew that Mimi was an activist with a non-governmental organisation where she was supposed to be doing 'consciousness raising'.

"Fine." Mimi turned to Serge. "What about school? The youth of Camden enjoying their Molière?"

"Less and less. They prefer to do car maintenance at A level, not French. Soon, I will have no job." Mimi smiled at his joke. The two of them began discussing *L'Avare*, which had been one of her set texts at school. Susan noticed the eye contact, and felt an inexplicable stab of jealousy.

Serge ensured that conversational reefs were avoided for the rest of the meal. He announced that he'd agreed to sacrifice his usual cheese course. Susan got up and came back to the table with a packet of DeKripps biscuits.

"Biccy? They're new."

"Your mother invented the name," said Serge. "Crumblied."

"Congratulations." Mimi grabbed the packet and began to read the list of ingredients out loud, swinging back in her chair.

"Look at all the sugars. Are you trying to kill us all? I can't believe you're selling this junk."

"Not selling, Mimi. Marketing. Creative stuff. And excuse me" – she couldn't help herself – "people actually like the *junk* as you call it."

"You've sold out to Big Food, that's what you've done," said Mimi, her face reddening.

Serge stretched out his hand as though to quieten her, but she flicked it away, glowering at Susan from across the pine table.

A moment later she looked at the enormous watch on her delicate wrist, and stood up.

"Better go," she said, and disappeared down the hall without a backward glance. A ladder snaked up the back of her black tights.

Susan waited for the sound of the front door before throwing the biscuit packet at the kitchen wall. A stream of crumbs dropped to the floor.

"Why do we bother? Honestly, why do we bother? I've done my best for her and this is what I get in return!"

Serge embraced her in silence.

"It'll take time. She's changed. She's had a political awakening that's all. It happens to everyone," he said.

"Does it? I don't remember treating my mother like this for years on end. I'm sorry, but it just gets to me."

In bed, later that evening, Serge said: "It's painful for me too, you know."

She snuggled up to him. She would always be grateful to him for treating Mimi like his own. She thought of their first cramped flat in Kentish Town, and how he'd agreed to try teaching in London so they could be together.

The day they met, she was on a flight to Paris for a meeting with French dairy reps and found him sitting in her seat.

He stood up straight away, brushing his dark fringe from his eyes, and apologized in broken English. As he smiled, she noticed his slightly chipped front tooth, a childhood fall from a bicycle, she would discover.

She guessed he was a few years older, couldn't quite put her finger on why she found him so attractive. He wasn't handsome in the classical sense – was it the way he looked at her, his head tilted, his deep voice enveloping her like dark chocolate? They'd chatted about nothing in particular as the Airbus idled at the stand. There seemed to be some sort of problem and their flight was running late.

Then Serge turned to her and said in English, "I want damage!"

"What?"

He tapped his watch and said again, "I want damage."

"Oh, *damages*. Yes, from Air France."

She'd asked in schoolgirl French why he'd been in London. He'd been at an international conference on Albert Camus, the writer.

He was a French teacher in Paris, he said, though he was hoping for a transfer to his native Brittany.

Didn't Camus write *The Outsider*? That's right, he said. *L'Etranger*. Any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral will eventually be sentenced to death. Camus is saying that's what happens if you don't play the game. It's a little masterpiece. Written half a century ago and more relevant every day.

As the plane surged forward, engines screeching like missiles, Susan's heart raced. At that terrifying moment after takeoff when the plane dips slightly, she was convinced they were going to plunge back to earth.

Without asking, she'd grabbed Serge's hand. He'd held onto hers for the rest of the flight.

Susan slid away from Serge to look at his face. He was tense. "Don't let Mimi get to you too. I shouldn't have flown off the handle," she said, raising a hand to ruffle his hair. She pretended to do a double take.

"Is that a grey hair I see?"

"If you don't want to see it, you can switch out the light, *chérie*."

"Night." She turned over to switch off the bedside lamp, before giving him a kiss. He pulled her close. The next day, he was dead.

Chapter 2

"SERGE THAT'S THE door," she called out. He'd taken the car to pick up the Sunday paper while she lingered in bed with the radio, and she presumed he was lazing downstairs. Neither of them had slept well.

"Can you get that?" She shouted when the bell rang again. The house was silent. She grabbed her dressing gown and ran downstairs. Two policemen were at the door. She knew what they were going to say as soon as she saw the expression on their faces, but couldn't take it in.

They said he'd been driving on the wrong side of the road and had crashed head-on with a Subaru estate, whose driver was unhurt. But Serge was dead. There was an investigation to find out what had happened. The car may have skidded on black ice. Mortuary, post-mortem, coroner, would you like to sit down, Miss, it was all swirling around her head and making her dizzy. She was digging her fingernails into the door as she tried to steady herself.

They left after promising she could view the body later.

Her first reaction was to run back upstairs to the bedroom and burrow under the duvet where his smell lingered. When she eventually forced herself downstairs, still wearing her dressing gown, she half expected to see him unlacing his shoes and grumbling about the price of the newspaper. She wandered into the kitchen, her slippers knocking on the floorboards of the empty room. She breathed in the aroma of his morning coffee.

She stood at the sink, stirring tea with a trembling hand and staring out of the window. With a sigh, she switched on the tap and let swirls of cold water gurgle down the plug-hole. Holding the tap for support, she ran the other hand under until it began to ache and whiten and her freckles began to fade, just like she'd done as a child. Then she pressed it against her burning face.

She opened the fridge, where the two steaks mocked her solitude. She grabbed them and pushed them into the freezer, out of sight.

Walking into the living room, she collapsed onto the sofa with the phone.

She noticed the invitation cards to Christmas parties on the mantelpiece addressed to Serge and Susie, Susie and Serge. Another slap in the face.

She rang Mimi, who hung up immediately, and found herself howling into the empty phone. She dialled the number again. Engaged. She tried again. "Answer, will you?" she said. Her palm dampened on the receiver. Her next call was to her mother.

Pick up, pick up. "Oh, it's you, dear. I was half way through Your Money." What, she's spending my inheritance? Then she remembered her mother's obsession with the stock market since the big crash a couple of months earlier. She must be checking the paper. There was a long silence, then a sigh. She imagined her mother wiping away tears. Finally, she heard:

"Are you alright, darling?"

"Of course not." Her throat tightened and hot tears dripped onto her lap.

"I know what you're going through." Susan's own father had been killed in a motorway pileup only months after her parents divorced. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Then she had to find the strength to call Serge's younger brother in Brittany.

A frantic search produced Serge's address book on the phone table in the hall. He and Jean-Louis weren't close, particularly after his marriage to Marie-Christine, an upwardly mobile blonde with a taste for designer scarves.

She dreaded having to make the call in French, but mercifully, Jean-Louis, and not his wife, answered the phone. Speaking through a dense fog she heard herself agreeing to organise the transport of Serge's body to Brittany for the funeral.

After trying Mimi again, she rang her assistant, Martin, and summoned enough composure to tell him she wouldn't be back at work for a few days. "Take all the time you need," he said. "I'll let Frank know. That's such a shock, I can only imagine how you must feel. Let me know about the funeral arrangements, and if there's anything we can do."

She knew he was sincere. But how could he imagine how she felt? And how could she ask DeKripps for help, when she didn't know herself what she needed?

Her closest friend from university days, Lily, showed up within hours, carrying her battered flute case. She provided a comforting mix of compassion and firmness. She made sure Susan got up in the mornings, that she ate at mealtimes. And they talked, endlessly, about Serge.

Susan just wanted to know that he hadn't suffered. Her doctor went through the post-mortem results with her and reassured her that he'd been killed instantly.

"Look, here it says that there was no evidence that he braked" – she gasped inwardly – "and with those kinds of injuries death would have been instantaneous. The fact that he wasn't wearing a safety belt, I'm afraid, was a contributory factor to the gravity of the injuries."

"Oh God, not again," she said. He looked at her quizzically over his reading glasses but said nothing.

"So no black ice?"

"No black ice." With the timing of years of experience, he pushed a box of paper tissues across the desk just as she began to sob. He handed her a leaflet on bereavement as she left the surgery.

"What do you mean, he wasn't wearing a safety belt?" Lily said when she got home. The two friends were curled up on the sofa holding mugs of tea with the television on mute.

"He didn't like wearing them. It was part of his Gallic charm. He used to say rules are for fools. Stupid, stupid." Susan shook her head.

"But why was he on the wrong side of the road?"

"He did that sometimes. But usually in an unfamiliar place. He'd just set off on the right on auto pilot."

"So maybe he had something on his mind, and wasn't thinking properly."

Susan didn't dare mention the unspeakable: The row with Mimi the night before he died.

"But do you know the worst thing? I never said goodbye. I never told him I loved him. He just walked out of the house and never came back."

There was so much to do before the funeral. Lily offered help in notifying people as the condolences began dropping through the letterbox. One was from a colleague in Washington offering to help if she needed a change of scene.

"Thanks, but I'll do it," she said with a sigh. "I'm going to have to get used to it. From now on, I'm on my own."

Chapter 3

FRANK CALLED HER into his office on her first day back at work.

"Hey, Susie. How you doin'?" He'd insisted after the funeral that she shouldn't come back to work until well into the New Year.

"Sure you're okay?" He arranged his pudgy features into an expression of genuine concern. "Take more time if you need it."

"What else am I going to do? I can't stay cooped up in the house while his things are still there. I need something else to think about."

"How was the funeral?"

"Grim, of course. It didn't stop raining. And it was pretty hardcore. I'd forgotten how religious they are in Brittany."

"And how's Mimosa?"

"You know what Mimi's like. She went AWOL before the funeral. She took the phone off the hook for two days. And you should have seen her outfit. She described it as *distressed*. Why does she need so much attention?"

"What a girl," he said. "How old is she now?"

"Twenty." Frank couldn't conceal his surprise.

"I know. A bit old for that kind of statement. You can imagine how it went down in Dingy. They're very conventional over there." Serge's home village was called Dingé but Susan's family and friends called it Dingy.

"I know what you mean."

Did he? As far as she knew, all Frank knew of France was their frustrating resistance to all things DeKripps. At the moment he was battling with the company's Paris office which had given up trying to push a new flavoured yoghurt into French supermarkets.

"Too much sugar for the French palate," he'd complained. "Surrender monkeys, of course. Back in the States, we could sue them for insubordination. Raising the white flag before we get a chance to tailor the recipe."

Thanks to her contacts in the French dairy industry, not to mention unhelpful comments from Serge about the invasion of "American junk food", she knew there was little hope of changing their minds.

She'd worked for Frank in DeKripps' marketing department for years. They'd watched company profits soar the more added sugars went into their products. Her work with focus groups bore it out. In the '90s, the added sugars compensated for low fat, providing necessary bulk and taste, and now they were king. DeKripps just rode with the market, as did the rest of the industry. "Who are we to argue with our customers?" Frank would say. "If they didn't like it, they wouldn't buy it."

He wasn't known for holding his tongue, but that morning, she was grateful he kept his counsel about the French. Her colleagues offered condolences but Susan could see they didn't know how to deal with her new status as widow.

Was it embarrassment? Most of them seemed to think it best not to mention her loss, which suited her. It was so intensely private, and yet so public at the same time.

She kept forgetting what she was supposed to be doing at work, and covering up was stressful too. "I'm sorry, I've lost the plot," she finally confessed to Martin. He made an expression of shared suffering she'd seen him use when their secretary's cat passed away. "Don't worry. It's not a problem."

"It must be the lack of sleep."

She didn't mention she could barely wake up in the mornings after crying herself to sleep.

"You coming down the pub for a quick one?" Martin, who concealed his ambition under unthreatening cordiality, would always include her. A month ago, she would have joined her team willingly for a drink on the way home. But now, she looked up from her desk with a regretful smile.

"That's really sweet of you. But I can't tonight," she would say, gesturing to her computer. Then she'd kick herself for saying no. After all, she had nowhere else to go. She'd stopped accepting invitations altogether, particularly from couples.

But she wanted desperately to talk about Serge, so she sought solace with Lily. At least she could raise a laugh with her imitations of his mangled English, which Lily called "Serge-speak". And she took it in her stride when Susan burst into unprompted tears.

One morning, she was sitting at her computer holding her face in her hands, forcing herself to concentrate on a graph, when Frank walked in. He threw the wrapper from a bar of DeKripps chocolate into her waste paper, looking surprised at his own dexterity and licking the chocolate from his fingers.

"Good timing," she said. "Take a look at this spike."

Frank stood behind her, puffing out his cheeks, studying her screen as she turned her chair round to face him.

"It certainly confirms our hunch," Frank said. "Given what we know about HFCS in the US. This could be great news for DeKripps here."

The graph showed results from a focus group on Delight, DeKripps's vanilla ice cream sweetened with High Fructose Corn Syrup.

HFCS was the miracle ingredient, cheaper and sweeter than sugar, and revolutionising the industry. As far as they knew, there was only one similar ice cream product on the market, distributed by a competitor.

The group had been given a month's supply of Delight and another DeKripps ice cream containing sucrose. There was no room for doubt in the results.

"Irresistible" was scribbled over Delight's report cards. Given a list of words to choose from, the final study group had picked "more, please".

"I'll pass it to advertising," Susan said. "Look, this is interesting too."

She pointed again to the questions on her screen.

How important is it for you to know the ingredients of your ice cream? Very important.

Do you read the ingredients? No.

"That's lucky."

"Let's not get carried away," she said. "This could be group-think. They're unanimous, so could they have fallen behind a leader? I've seen people trying to outdo each other before. It's like they think the most fanatical will get a bonus payment."

"You're the focus guru," Frank said. "Who was the DeKripps rep in there?"

She skimmed through the report on her screen.

"Someone Martin sent along. I'll have a word with them. I'll also contact the researcher."

Frank stopped at the door. "You know, our people in the US are beginning to take the defensive about added sugars."

"I'm not surprised. Plenty of journals suggest a link to obesity. Mimi seems to think I'm to blame for diabetes."

Frank rolled his eyes and made off. She sat back. The industry research showed that while diabetes and obesity were on the rise, sugar consumption had actually gone down in the UK in recent years. So she was safe on that score. Correlation isn't cause, Frank would say. There's no proof of a connection between illness and added sugar.

Her mind wandered again. She picked up a biro and stuck the pointed end into the palm of her hand, which did the trick. For some reason, the letter of condolence she'd received from Ellen, the company Brand Manager in Washington, came into her mind. Maybe Ellen was right, maybe she did need a change of scene.

She got up to stretch and looked out onto the street below, office workers in their shirt sleeves heading for sandwich stores.

Her grumbling stomach told her it was time to do the same. But instead of going downstairs, she found herself following Frank along the corridor.

The words came tumbling out. Would he support her if she asked for a temporary transfer to Washington? He blinked warily at her. Why would anyone want to leave behind their family, friends and routine so soon after their husband had died?

He opened the top drawer of his desk, took out a large checked-cotton hanky, and swiveled away from her to blow his nose. He turned round and mopped his brow, then returned the hanky to his drawer. Placing his hands together as though in prayer, he spoke gently, like a hospital consultant to a patient, and asked her to take time and reconsider. He obviously felt she was acting irrationally and must be half-crazed with grief.

But she knew already that her mind was made up. It just feels like the right thing to do, she told him, before walking out in search of a salmon sandwich.

What Frank wants, Frank gets. Susan had sometimes felt her boss was coasting in London, but the speed with which he arranged her transfer was impressive.

First, he lined up a job for her in the marketing department, reporting in Washington to Barney McManus, described by Frank as “next to God” in the DeKripps company structure. Then he hired an immigration lawyer who secured a visa for her in a matter of weeks, despite it being subject to a quota system. By the end of August, she had rented her house through an estate agent, sold her car and was ready to go.

All that remained were goodbyes.

She took Mimi for a last supper at her favourite vegan place on the South Bank. She couldn't tell her how long she'd be in Washington because she didn't know.

“I hope you'll visit,” she said. “Obama's Washington. It should be interesting. Exciting. The hopey, changey thing, you know.”

Her voice trailed off as Mimi shrugged. Susan wasn't expecting promises, she knew her better than that.

“So maybe not this year, unless you want to come for Christmas. But think about coming for the cherry blossom in March?”

“Christmas?” Mimi usually found an excuse to avoid the call of ceremony. “I'll let you know. And you've got to settle in first.”

Susan looked at her. The nose stud was back in place, but she could tell from the way she flicked her head slightly too defiantly that the self-confidence was a veneer. “Look, you would tell me wouldn't you, if you need me to stay?”

The vulnerability was gone again. Her daughter met her gaze. “I'm fine.”

“You're sure? You only took a couple of days off work after...” She stopped to take a breath and Mimi interrupted: “Mum, I just told you. I'm fine.”

She spared her a lecture about how everyone at her little NGO was indispensable, compared to the cogs in the giant DeKripps machine.

Susan tried one last time. “Are you really sure you don't mind me going?”

But she knew the answer. Mimi had her own life, her own job and she'd be fine. She wanted to hug her tight, so tight, before leaving the restaurant, but she knew how Mimi would react. In the end, she was allowed to deposit a discreet peck on the cheek after paying the bill.

Susan's mother didn't throw up any obstacles either. Had she wanted her to? Living so far from home would be such a big change, and the consequences of her decision were only beginning to sink in. Her mother also refused to commit herself to a visit. “I'm very pleased for you, darling. I'm sure it'll do you the world of good to be in New York,” she told her on the phone.

She hardly paused for breath when Susan reminded her the destination was Washington. “Anyway. Do try to come down to Lymington whenever you can.”

Her mother had chosen the Dorset coast to recover from divorce with her third husband, a golf professional called John.

Susan had never understood her mother's taste in men. Although she could hardly remember her father who'd died when she was a toddler, her mother's relationships had always ended in disaster. Still, after each divorce she hit the jackpot. Over the years, she had collected property across the south of England as though skipping along a Monopoly board.

This time, Susan reflected, the housing crash had brought an end to her mother's dreams of a sea view near the Royal Lymington yacht club. She'd had to settle for a house up the hill but conveniently close to the shops.

Frank invited her for dinner on her last day in the office.

"Come as you are. We'll have a kitchen supper while the kids finish their homework."

She looked forward to the chance to quiz him about the way things worked in Washington. She also wanted to know their strategy for dealing with growing media criticism of the food giants.

She'd been aware of the company bosses starting to hit back, as she put the finishing touches to a DeKripps Buried Treasure ad before she left.

"You'll see, Barney spends half his life on the Hill lobbying for a bit of slack from our elected representatives," said Frank, his frame swaying as they headed for Waterloo to catch their train. "He'll be relying on you to keep things on track in the office. The big picture stuff."

Home for Frank and June was a thatched cottage only a short walk from the high street of Cobham, the picture-perfect Surrey village. The front door was framed by a rambling red rose, its outstretched branches always reminding Susan of the arms of a flamenco dancer, but that night she didn't linger, and followed Frank inside.

"What's cooking, honey?" he called into the low-ceilinged living room. It amused her that oversized Frank had picked such a twee little place for his wife and two children, who were nowhere to be seen. Muffled sounds could be heard from the floor above. June emerged from the kitchen in an apron and gave her a kiss.

"Hey, Susie. Good to see you."

"You too, June. You look great. Smells good."

"Oh, it's nothing special," June smiled. "How are you, anyway after everything that's happened?"

"Oh, you know, okay under the circs," Susan said, trying not to let her voice give her away. "Can I give you a hand?"

Susan knew that June, who'd never been known to taste the processed food available from her husband's company, would have spent considerable time rustling up the supper.

Frank wolfed his in a matter of minutes, and had seconds. He reached for a toothpick and cupped his hands over his

mouth, probing his molars with a frown. Susan and June lingered over their *vichyssoise*, monkfish à l'*armoricaine* and cheesecake. The children were upstairs with cheese on toast.

June made herself scarce after dinner, "filling the dishwasher", and Frank led Susan to the living room for a glass of claret.

"So you're sure you're ready for this?" He stretched out his legs and lit a cigar, his face slightly flushed.

"Actually, I'm looking forward to it. You know, new challenges, things like that."

"Great, Susie. It's just what we need right now." He relit his cigar. "You know better than I that things are going to get difficult from here on."

She nodded. They both knew that on each side of the Atlantic, the number of exposés and probes into the food giants and the so-called health dangers of HFCS were on the rise. She didn't mention her daughter and her NGO. Frank leaned back in his armchair and dispatched a pungent cloud of smoke in her direction.

"You know this could be our 9/11," he said. "Of course we've done nothing *wrong*, we give the consumer what they want. But it could be our turn for a walloping. It's happening to the banks, telecoms have gone through it, newspapers have gone to the dogs. Look at Big Tobacco. Every industry has its turn and it may be ours next."

"Well in some cases, like the banks, it's completely justified," she said. "It surprised me that no-one went to jail over the toxic loans."

Frank lowered his voice a little. "The reason nobody's gone to jail is that they didn't break the law," he said.

"They were passing a parcel and the music stopped on someone else's turn."

"You mean it's only wrong if you get caught?"

"I mean everyone was doing it. You have to look at the context. There was a bubble and everybody benefitted. Nobody expected it to pop when it did."

He leaned back again as another cloud of smoke swirled around him. "Anyway, I just wanted to say, we've got your back."

"Do you mean watch my back?" she said.

"No. That's what we say in America when we mean we'll watch out for you." His white teeth glinted in the lamplight.

It was one of her last evenings in London. Lily had come to Hackney for a few days to help her clear up and they were tucking into a microwaved lasagne at the kitchen table. The French windows were thrown open onto the warm evening air, but Susan sighed at the view and pushed her plate away.

"Susie, you OK? I've got whatever you need in my bag, courtesy Doctor Handsome-but-Married."

She shook her head. "I've tried to avoid taking anything, even sleeping pills, actually." She added sharply, "What have you got there, anyway? Uppers or downers?"

"Both. Need to keep things under control. There's nothing worse than a tremolo when it's not in the score."

Lily had given up a promising career as a soloist after suffering from stage fright, which paralysed her at unpredictable moments. Now she eked out a modest living, performing with a woodwind ensemble and giving private flute lessons.

"You should be careful," Susan said, but Lily pretended she hadn't heard.

"Want to play Name that Tune?" Lily stretched a blue-veined alabaster hand across the table. They had their own version of the old TV show where one guessed the song being drummed silently on the other's arm. Amazingly, nine times out of ten, they would both recognise the mystery tune together, high-fiving their rhythmic brilliance.

Susan shook her head. "I was just thinking this is the second time I've lost someone. You know my father died after their divorce. Not to mention the break-ups, and the bastard who left me two months before Mimi was born. It's so bloody unfair."

"Yes, it is. But you know Rod was never really going to leave his wife. He wouldn't have been a good father for Mimi. Not like Serge." Lily let her fingers run along the table as though tapping on her flute. "Besides, you were probably too young to get married."

Susan had become pregnant in her final term at university and suffered morning sickness during exams. She knew with hindsight she'd been lucky not to get pregnant the previous year, when she'd just met Rod and was completely in love.

"I was wrong to try to trap him with a baby. I just thought he'd come round in the end. How wrong I was. Maybe I'm just a bad judge of people."

"No you're not. Look at Serge. And talking of inappropriate men, what about my track record?"

"Inappropriate maybe, but they were all dishy."

"Yours always had the best chat-up lines," said Lily. "I want *damage!*" she said, imitating Serge's accent. "Brilliant!"

They smiled at each other. Their differences were probably exactly what had glued them together for more than twenty years. They'd never been in competition, professionally or romantically, since the day they met at Sussex and became flatmates.

Lily tucked her empty plate beneath hers. It had always amazed Susan how she could eat as much as she liked without gaining an ounce.

"Right," Lily said, looking at her watch. "I'm going to bed. You okay?"

"Sure. I've got to finish packing before having a bath."

"Need any help?"

Susan shook her head.

She went upstairs to the bedroom, where three piles of clothes sat neatly folded on the floor. Yes, No and Maybe were ready for the suitcase, charity store or the loft.

She opened the wardrobe.

What could she do with all this stuff? It would have to wait until tomorrow. But she was running out of time. She walked up one more flight of stairs to Mimi's old room, under the gable, where she now slept in the single bed. It didn't help—she found herself reaching out for Serge's warmth automatically in the night, only to find him gone, peering into the darkness in shock.

She stretched out on the bed, making a mental note to pull down the giant poster of Siouxsie and the Banshees above her head. She'd have to get rid of the empty fishbowl on the chest of drawers. There were wonky nails in the door, and something else caught her notice: Was that Blu-Tack or discarded chewing gum on the wall?

She curled up and closed her eyes as she began to fret about the move to Washington. When the phone alarm sounded next morning, she sat up with a start. The Victorian lattice window cast a shadow over the bed. She'd forgotten to close the curtains.

She was fully clothed, with the imprint of a dangling earring on her left cheek, a knot in her stomach, and an uneasy feeling that she hadn't a clue where her passport was.

Ready or not, her new life was about to begin.