

To Catch A Creeper

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Chapter 1

‘It must have been *horrendously* frightening, Cathy,’ Holly Willoughby’s sparkling white teeth are shining directly into my eyes causing me to spontaneously blink, ‘finding yourself stalked and then almost strangled *to death*.’

‘Oh yes,’ I nod and refill my water glass. ‘Terrifying.’

Although, I squirm as three huge cameras circle closer like a cackle of hyenas moving in for the kill, nowhere near as terrifying as being on *live TV*. All through the interview I keep getting these uncanny impulses to indulge in a touch of Tourette’s, spouting obscenities while intermittently flashing a nipple.

‘And then not only did you capture the culprit but you managed to turn the situation round and through it launched the most talked about advertising campaign this decade.’

‘Not just me...’ I grin bashfully as Camera One’s red light gives a little wink in my direction.

‘So as a woman who’s spent the last eight years as a mother and housewife,’ Holly continues brightly, ‘how are you finding it being back out in the workplace?’

How am I finding it? Fantastic. Sodding-bloody-fantastic, I want to reply but for some reason, ever since the camera did that little wink, my throat simply refuses to co-operate.

‘It’s a...a...’ I cough and reach for the water, ‘case of...’

‘And balancing this brand new exciting career with taking care of two primary-school age children?’ prompts her co-presenter nicely. ‘You must be very organised...’

‘Well, Joseph... I mean Jason... I mean...’

And that’s it. My mouth freezes while I rifle through my memory bank trying to recall his name. Jason or Joseph... But no, it can’t be either. Joseph was the biblical character that this guy portrayed at a West End theatre and Jason...he was the *ex-Neighbours* actor who also played Joseph as well as dating Kylie Minogue and picking David Guest’s nose on some reality show. So this guy, the one sitting in front of me, all mike-ed up, awaiting an answer while millions look on... God, who is he? Sweat pools under the armpits of my new Vivienne Westwood polka-dot dress with the waist-cinching corset as I scan and rescan his grey speckled hair and cute baby face. ‘The thing is...’

A reassuring hand rests on my arm. For the fifth time this morning, Rosa steps in to save me.

‘Oh she is, Phillip,’ she laughs lightly. ‘Super-organised, that’s our Cath. Packed lunches prepared night before. Uniforms folded neatly on chairs. Dishwasher and washing machine fully loaded. Plants watered. Fish fed. Wonderwoman has nothing on her.’

She slaps me on the back, just as I take another gulp of water. Instead of drowning the giant South American toad now living in my larynx, a fountain shoots out from my mouth and nose.

Holly smiles once more as she smoothly links back to the weather, before the cameras wheel away, allowing her to dab at her water-spotted jacket and mercifully ending the second most scary moment of my entire life.

Five months later

‘...lady...told...that glitters...gold...’

‘Cathy, wake up. You’re singing Stairway to Heaven in your sleep again.’

‘Shh.’ I squeeze my eyes tighter, stick my nose deeper into the pillow and snuggle under my toasty warm duvet, dimly aware of my husband slipping out of bed.

Why so early?

Thank God I’ve a wee while before I need to spring into action. That’s the beauty of setting the alarm an hour ahead. Trick myself into thinking I’m having a lie-in.

I fumble to find my Smartphone and peer bleary-eyed at the display. Eight-thirty. Can’t be right, can it? Maybe it jumped or something, faulty electrics. The real time, it’s really... Wait here’s the radio announcing the news. The eight-thirty news!

‘Bugger!’ My scalp tingles as I kick off the covers, leap out of bed and race down the hallway to Josh and Sophie’s bedrooms, screaming as I shake their lifeless bodies and crank open their curtains. ‘Get up! Get up!’ I march to the bathroom. ‘Why didn’t you wake me? Declan!’ I bang on the door. ‘I need a shower!’

No answer.

‘I have to GO TO WORK!’ I yell through the crack that runs down the middle of the door. ‘I’ve got to leave before you!’

Silence. He’s oblivious. Cool as a cucumber in a crisis, my husband. The house could be scheduled for demolition and you’d still find him in the bathroom at the ten-second countdown, heedless of ticking explosives, patiently letting his automatic toothbrush finish its allotted two minutes, give a last little hum and end.

I dash downstairs, fling a few slices of bread into the toaster, switch on the kettle and speed back to the kids’ rooms. Eight-year-old Sophie has stumbled zombie-like to her feet, moving mechanically, eyes open but unseeing, while her brother, younger by twenty-two months, has stuck his hands over his ears in preparation for the onslaught.

‘Get dressed! Come on, hurry!’ I pick up a mound of clothes littered on the floor and chuck them in his direction. ‘Henrietta’ll be here any second. DECLAN!’

Blast and blithery! Well too late to shower anyway. And I’ll just have to wear my jeans and blouse from yesterday – only slightly wrinkled, no obvious food stains. That’s the best thing about advertising, the casual atmosphere. It’s about creative brilliance not fancy attire.

‘I just checked the fridge. There’s nothing for sandwiches.’ Sophie has appeared in the doorway as I’m tugging on my clothes. ‘Only a soggy mushroom.’

‘Then have school dinners today. And can you remind Josh to bring in that reading book he keeps forgetting? *Spiders in your Neck* or something. And I’ve left a cheque in the drawer downstairs for your violin lessons. See Mrs Courtland gets it. Bye, Declan, bye,’ I holler through the still closed door. ‘Make sure the kids get off all right. Oh and the cat’s been sick next to the oven so mind where you tread. I’ve got to run or I’ll miss my bus.’

Declan emerges from the bathroom, wiping foam from around his mouth. ‘Not our Wonderwoman?’ he smirks, from under the hand towel. ‘Can’t she just flap her cape and soar into the sunrise?’ He manages a quick peck on my cheek before I scurry down the stairs.

In my rush I almost knock over our new neighbour, Mrs Baker, putting out her paper recycling box.

‘Oh my Lord!’ Her bony hand flutters around her heart, as if to make sure it’s still there and beating. ‘What a fright you gave me! For a moment I thought you were a mugger.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I joke. ‘Muggers don’t start work before ten round here, union rules.’

‘Let me hang onto you, dear.’

I nearly topple over as her skinny little wrinkled arm latches onto mine.

‘Do you want to sit on the step? Catch your breath?’ I turn her around and begin making small baby steps back towards her porch.

‘Catch my death, more like.’ She stops still in her tracks and pulls her crocheted shawl closer. ‘You know I never wanted to move here? Eleanor insisted.’ Her hold on me doesn’t recede. She might look frail but she’s got the grip of a gorilla. “Move to Crouch End” she said. “It’ll be closer to me” she said. Such a dangerous place.’

‘Oh I don’t think it’s that bad.’ I put on a soothing voice and urge her forward once more. ‘I mean, the person who tried murdering me, well they did have mental health issues – really it was the medication talking. Could happen anywhere.’ I snatch a surreptitious glance at my watch. If I miss my bus...

‘They tried what?!’ Her hand flutters to her heart again.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs B. Love to chew the fat, but can’t stop.’ I prise off her arm. ‘Work, you know. Bye.’

Luckily, thanks to 14a buses travelling in packs, I manage to hop on the last of the row of three and marvel of marvels actually find a seat on the upper deck.

As we pass Archway Tube Station I begin to relax. Mornings are the hardest but that’s normal isn’t it, until we all get this new routine off pat. As Rosa says, it’s just a matter of prioritising and hey, there’s no way I’m giving up on it. I still can’t believe how things have turned out. What’s happened career-wise in the last few months has completely surpassed my imagination.

After years of struggling on one salary, putting my metaphorical hand out to my husband each month like a modern day Oliver Twist, I’m determined to make this job a success. Show the world that I’m not Cathy O’Farrell, stay-at-home downtrodden mother-of-two anymore, but rather Cathy O’Farrell, an important and vital cog of the workforce. My stupid Smartphone threw me off today, that’s all. And Declan surprising me last night by taking me to the opening of a new exhibit at the Natural History Museum followed by dinner at a swanky restaurant, having arranged a babysitter all on his own, which meant I didn’t make the supermarket. We staggered in after midnight slightly tipsy and then headed straight for bed, shedding clothes en route. Hard to believe not so long ago I was in a real mess marriage-wise, clueless as to what to do with my life, wondering if Declan even still fancied me, feeling a total failure about everything.

I gaze out of the steamed up window into the misty morning gloom, reliving the evening.

‘You’re certain you’re really Irish?’ I’d teased him as he refilled my wine glass. ‘You don’t drink Guinness, you’re not Catholic and I can’t think of the last time I’ve heard you say, yoicks, me arse. If it wasn’t for the ginger hair and twinkling blue eyes, I’d think you were a complete fraud.’

He gave me one of those looks, amused, I think.

‘No, and I don’t start warbling Danny Boy when I’m in a maudlin mood or go blethering on about the little people.’ He leaned forward in a secretive manner so that I automatically leaned forward too. ‘Though I will say, *sure and begorrah*, that’s a lovely colour blouse, you’re wearing. Makes your eyes look greener than a leprechaun’s jumpsuit, so it does.’

‘It’s new,’ I’d grinned, pleased. ‘Paid for it out of my *own* wage packet, wouldn’t you know.’

‘And I’m looking forward to removing it later tonight.’ He sipped slowly at his wine, face deadpan, eyes fixed on mine. It took a second but then a little thrill ran through me as I realised what he was talking about.

I decided to treat him to a drop down, flick up, sexy hair toss. ‘Dessert?’ I murmured huskily, running my tongue slowly over my bottom lip. ‘What do you fancy? Coffee, tea – or me?’

‘They do a great cheesecake here,’ he missed it entirely, nose stuck in the menu. ‘How’s the office lately?’

‘Fabulous!’ I raved. ‘Walt Whitman dropped by, hung around chatting. We hired him for the mineral water gig I was telling you about. They’re off to shoot in Hawaii next week. And then about two o’clock all the creative team had champagne in Turks’ office and watched his top ten favourite commercials – he says inputting is nearly as important as outputting.’

‘Does he now?’ he grinned and shook his head. ‘And there’s you who used to run three miles *and* jump a stile whenever I mentioned finding yourself a job. Who was it said it was nigh on impossible to combine proper mothering care with a worthwhile career?’

‘Ah but that was then,’ I swirled my wine around my glass, ‘and this is now. Things change. People move on. Besides I was merely waiting for the right opportunity. Didn’t want to waste my many talents on menial work.’

‘Many talents, huh? Like super sleuthing for example?’ He arched his left eyebrow in a sardonic pose. ‘So I guess that means you won’t be leaping in to catch the infamous Crouch End Creeper? Made page seven of *The Independent* today.’

‘*The Independent*? Wow. So what did...?’ I caught myself just in time and skilfully changed my mildly interested tone to dismissive-who-cares-a-fig. ‘Haven’t they better things to write about? I mean, what’s happening in the Middle East? How’s Germany’s economy? Besides I’m far too busy.’

‘Tell me again, what exactly it is you do all day?’

‘Think up new campaigns. Write copy. Mostly hush hush. I’m not supposed to talk about it actually.’ I dabbed my lips with a napkin. ‘Client confidentiality, you know.’

‘Oh I see,’ he whispered back, raising his palm between us as a shield from prying ears. ‘I didn’t realise. Heard anything from Gabby or anyone?’

By anyone, he meant half my close friends who seemed to disappear at roughly the same time towards the end of last year. Not exactly a case of one got squashed, one got lost, one had an operation. More one got sent to an asylum, one emigrated and the other disappeared to Cornwall in an attempt to get her teenagers off the weed.

‘Gabby called last week, funnily enough. She’s loving it down in Padstow. Her boys have a collie and a goat and acres of land. And Belinda emailed me from Toronto about a month ago. She started making her jams, and Geoffrey’s furniture is actually selling. Great, eh?’

‘Good luck to them, going after their dreams. I envy them in a way.’

‘Why?’ I stared at him in surprise. Not like Declan to sound wistful. ‘I could never imagine you tugging at goats’ udders or carving sparrows out of tree-trunks. Besides I thought you loved it at Wilson Inc.’

‘Oh I do, I do. Sure and isn’t it the dream of every young Irish lad,’ he mocked, ‘to be employed by an old established manufacturing company with a final salary pension plan and a real gold watch on retirement.’

‘Well, what is your dream then?’

‘Don’t know,’ he sighed and looked thoughtful. ‘But I suspect it’s nothing to do with end of year accounts. Ach, never mind,’ he put on the accent again. ‘Right now, I’m dreaming of bed with my Irish queen and stripping her of that fine linen blouse. Too la roo la roo la.’

Later that night, I snuggled up against his warm naked body.

‘I think you’ve been in Crouch End too long. You’ve the worst Irish accent I’ve ever heard.’

He wrapped his arms around me. ‘And hard to believe you’re more interested in matters abroad than happenings in your own neighbourhood. Well done.’ He kissed the top of my head.

‘I’m not a small town gal anymore,’ I’d sighed heavily, gloriously content.

Chapter 2

I walk down Oxford Street, take a left, second right, then right again down a narrow side alley, until I come to a black shiny door with a plaque next to it which reads *Younger and Wilding Advertising Agency*.

The polished brass knocker reflects my gleaming beam as I inspect my teeth for lipstick marks and eyes for mascara smudges. I still can't get over it. Me, with a proper job. Not a doss one like my friend and fellow mother, Henrietta, poor thing, chasing up unpaid invoices in that musty office in Islington for a grumpy old codger who's still living in the dark ages.

I smile with sympathy at a woman who is pushing a pram while dragging behind her a screaming toddler. Nope. After a dodgy few months middle of last year everything's just clicked into place. Snap. Marriage on track – Declan proud as punch. Snap. Two children seeing their mother as a balanced and worthy role model. Snap. Top job in Central London where I get to attend action-packed meetings and high-powered lunches with all my superb colleagues.

Colleagues...doesn't the word just roll off your tongue? In fact, I realise as I deposit my card in the slot and the automatic doors swish aside to let me through, I'm a colleague myself. Another hat to wear. And an employee. And like all the other employees here I've a brand new state-of-the-art computer of my very own – which, although admittedly I'm finding a tad difficult to master, is heaps better than our big outdated monster at home which not only takes up a whole desk to handle its gigantic proportions but is slower than a lumbering mammoth. Plus...and this is the greatest bit, I'm working as a team with Rosa. How cool is that? At thirty-seven, she's two years younger than me, has been my best friend since forever and was the one who got me this gig.

While I gave up my career almost the minute I got pregnant and took a nose-dive professionally speaking, she worked her way up through the years. And it was only luck and generosity on Rosa's part that she let me hide under her metaphoric cloak and sneak in via the back door by suggesting the La La campaign. It was so successful it saved her boss's bacon and to thank me, she insisted on my joining her as her partner. Where I go, Cathy goes, type of thing. Wasn't quite 'Shane, Shane, Come Back!' from that great old Western but it was very moving.

Yes, I ponder as I ascend in the lift to the seventh floor, I've a hell of a lot to be thankful for. Compared to being a bored browbeaten housewife, going back to the office is peasy pudding. Peasy peasy pudding.

'Exquisite cardigan, dearheart,' Lewis walks past with a pile of folders as I'm taking off my coat.

'Thanks,' I say pleased. 'River Island.' I bought tons of clothes before I started here – just to make a good first impression. But my extremely generous salary should soon catch up with the credit card bills. Once I've paid off the boiler, that is.

'Yep,' Lewis doesn't miss a stride, 'liked it yesterday. And the three days you wore it last week.'

What? I know for a fact I didn't wear it more than twice. Friday, I wore that...what was it? Then Thursday, I wore... But he's not hanging around to let me explain. So maybe I didn't buy *quite enough* new outfits.

Alice, the receptionist, chatting on the phone, raises her free hand in greeting just as Rosa rushes up to me, all flushed cheeks and smiley mouth.

'Turks just called a powwow.' She grabs my arm and her violet eyes crinkle with amusement. 'Come on, Cath, I'll fill you in on last night's big news. If you can catch me that is. Last one to the conference room's a cockerel's cock.'

We race down the corridor, giggling and laughing and shoving each other out the way like naughty schoolgirls as we slip and slide round corners on the highly polished floor. If we're lucky we might find a big plate of croissants and Danish pastries awaiting us – sometimes Alice buys them and sometimes it's Turks, our boss, who likes feeding our creative juices. Another powwow? Wonder what it's about this time?

Really it's amazing any of us get anything done with all the meetings Turks calls. He's big at brainstorming, team feedback, putting our collective heads together, which means we get to spend a lot of time in the conference room viewing videos and making smart comments – well, other people do. Mostly I just sink deep into my chair so as not to be noticed. I know I'll be more confident in future, just I'm new to this game and would rather not show myself up by spouting nonsense.

This time it's Gurlet Mute's turn to star. He's the new young blood in Younger and Wilding. Dark haired, skinny, black winged specs, the post-modern ironic look, so they call it, sporting a flash Paul Smith jacket and yellow flowery-patterned t-shirt. Someone said he picked his name from the dictionary and one day I looked it up – Gurlet – meaning a pickaxe with a head pointed at one end. And Mute meaning. Can't speak. Which he can. Too much so, sometimes.

Turks is standing at the head of the large oak oval table with Vivien, who everyone here calls Vicious Viv. He's wearing, as always, a Stetson, teamed with a black open-necked shirt and denim jeans; she's in a tan and teal striped jacket with a tasteful knee-length matching skirt showing off elegant shapely legs, her hair a glossy immaculate copper helmet. From our few interactions, talking to Vivien is like someone gently stroking you with a razor blade. Superficially friendly but slightly terrifying as you never know when they're going to turn it sideways and nick you. They're whispering together, leaning over papers, ignoring the other ten or so people in the room, until Turks sits down, crosses one leg over the other and stretches ostentatiously. The cue to begin.

He has this laid back couldn't care less manner but that's just a front. Rosa says he's been known to stay as late as midnight even when it wasn't to chat up one of the secretaries. He has a bit of a reputation.

To my left there's Rosa, three inches taller than me at five foot seven, streaked-blond hair, voluptuous figure. She used to be nicknamed Raz and every now and then I forget and call her Raz. If you look closely at her waistline, you'll see a bump protruding, product of her relationship with her fiancé, Alec, Declan's cousin. She's pregnant, you see. Yes. Yes. I snigger to myself every time I think of it. Rosa with a baby. She has *no idea* what's going to hit her. Not a sodding clue. Mothers' most widely kept secret. And people think men are the sneaky ones. Oh I know she'll be fab at it and heaps better than me, but still... Poor innocent. Every time I look at her, the words slaughter and lamb leap to mind.

Next to her is Alice, receptionist but also a bum model in her spare time. Mid twenties, good skin, she's really rather pretty when she lets down that long golden ponytail of hers. Skinny, no chest to speak of, but her bum's to die for. I know because I've seen it so many times. She'll come in and say, 'Hey did anyone watch *Holby City*?' or 'Did you catch *Corrie* last night?' And we'll say, 'Oh no we missed it' and she'll say, 'Don't matter, I have it here' then show us clips on her iPhone with her backside in the starring role. She's not fussy what she takes on. Dead bodies, sex shots, lap dancing stuff, anything. She even once had a dagger protruding from her left buttock. I think that was a *Miss Marple*.

On the other side of me is Lewis – not certain exactly what he does but he's at all the meetings – and beside him – well, there are media buyers, production assistants, marketing executives, research people, interns. To be honest, they're mostly men, some scruffy, some smart, almost all young. It's hard keeping track of all their names.

'OK, let's start,' Turks drawls. 'Now you all remember our dazzling Vivien here recently managed to win us our biggest account so far this year. We're talking nationwide, print, prime time TV, even some big budget cinema slots. Anyway I threw it at Gurlet and he's played around

with a few ideas. Thought we'd shoot them past you. Just an informal trial run, get some team feedback. OK, Gurlet, you're on.'

'Right.' Gurlet stands up and rubs his hands. 'Well, for those of you living on another planet these last few months, the Government's pushing a big campaign for a healthier Britain, trying to get us to clean up our acts, get off our couches, out of the fast food chains and away from NHS hospitals. So what we're talking about today is part of a Government-sponsored programme for healthy eating – in this case bread, baby. We're thinking keep it visual, minimal copy, target the fifteen-year-old Nintendo junkies, and their kid brothers will come along for the ride, making it cool, chic, masses of youth appeal. So farewell to Dvorak's New World Symphony, liquorice and knickerbockers and hello to let's catch some air on the half-pipe, dude.'

'Sounds like he's been smoking his own half-pipe,' Lewis says cattily under his breath.

'Who's Dvorak?' I whisper to Rosa.

'Largo. Hovis bread. We walked down to the shops me mam and me.' She puts on a thick Yorkshire accent. 'And there was real boota for ma tea.'

'Ridley Scott 1973 classic. Once polled the favourite commercial of all time,' Lewis informs me. 'But of course Gurlet the God can do better.'

Gurlet scowls at the three of us. 'Incredi-Bread Gradual Brown loaf.' He pulls out a board with a sketch of a wrapped loaf, 'Whole wheat white flour, but ordinary enough not to scare the kids, who'll see your regular sliced white with sexier packaging and a sassier image. Aha, but wait...' Another board. Same loaf of bread, different colour wrapper. 'Incredi-Plus. Phase Two, we up the fibre and so on and so on, until, drum roll please, we present Mega-Incredi. By this time the kids are hooked. We've got them eating one hundred per cent stoneground, packed with vitamins, seeds, Omega 3, Seratone 5, whatever the hell they want to throw in there.'

'And the little darlings won't even notice,' Lewis mutters under his breath.

'Josh and Sophie would,' I reply. 'Can't even sneak a Go-Buys lemonade past them.' Rosa and I both begin to giggle until we're stopped by another glare from Gurlet.

'Actually the kids will think it's mega-cool. Graduate to Gradual Brown, are you hip enough to dare the next level...? We're calling it Gradual Brown because it slowly darkens as we change the nation's eating habits step by step. So, here's the pitch.' He smoothly zips over to the pull-down screen and picks up a remote. 'We're fat, flabby and pasty – why? Because of our terrible diets and couch potato culture. But as that changes, so do we. I've created a rough mock-up to give you the general gist. Of course, the real thing will be high-tech, sleek, very expensive. We're talking with the guys from Pixar. Think Toy Story or maybe – if we want to go that route – Japanese anime.'

'Blimey,' I hiss in Rosa's ear as the screen comes alive with a few Pillsbury doughboy kids slumping on a sofa, Playstation controllers in one hand, sandwiches in the other. 'He made this himself?'

'Oh yeah, Gurlet's a tech genius, all right,' Lewis says in a low voice from my other side. 'Did he forget to tell you?'

The little doughboys have pushed their TV aside now and rolled up the carpet, bringing out skateboards, donning baseball caps, busting out hip-hop moves, all the while munching on a never-ending stream of sandwiches. As they get thinner and their antics wilder, their skin darkens in conjunction with the bread. By the time Mega-Incredi flashes on the screen, there's a bunch of muscle-bound teens on a tropical beach, jigging round the campfire, playing volleyball and flaunting long dark locks and six packs that'd make Arnie jealous.

'Incredi-Bread, Incredi-Plus and Mega-Incredi.' The voiceover booms out. 'Your children won't notice the change. But everyone else will.'

'Brilliant!' Turks says when it ends. 'Good job, Gurlet. Feedback?'

'Yeah, baby,' someone cries. 'Where can I get a slice?'

'Come on, guys. This is a massive campaign. I need critiques. Any problems, I want them ironed out before we present to the clients.'

There's a murmur of 'great', 'terrific', 'fantastic', 'fab'. Gurlet looks pleased.

‘Cathy,’ Turks fixes on me, ‘you’ve got kids. You must have made a million packed lunches?’

‘Um...yeah...s-s-sure.’ I suddenly develop a stutter.

‘So? What do you think?’

What do I think? I gulp. I think everyone’s staring at me like a pack of hungry wolves scenting a wounded deer. That’s what I think. I feel my cheeks explode in a mass of red blotches and turn to Rosa. She gives me a go-for-it-girl smile, but it doesn’t help. I’m on my own. ‘Stand up so we can see you. We want your ideas.’

My knees are shaking so violently I’m afraid I might collapse and end up slithering on the floor like a beached mermaid. I rise to my feet and stick my hands on the table to steady myself as I try gathering my wits, but it’s no good, they’re all racing in opposite directions.

‘Well...um...I don’t know... Ideas? Right. Hmm. Well maybe...maybe in the last scene they could all be singing, “Don’t worry ’bout a thing”.’ I didn’t even know I was going to say it until it popped out.

Gurlet raises his eyeballs skywards, Turks looks baffled and Vicious Vivien is smirking.

‘Bob Marley. Reggae,’ I explain. ‘Just an idea, since you’ve got the little Rasta kids. Or “Oh I’m going to Barbados, Oh sun-ny Caribbean sea”. And I really like the name, Gradual Brown. Really hip.’ They love to think things are hip here. ‘But in a Generation X kind of way...er, perhaps.’

Lewis snorts. Other people are grinning, some more openly than others. Rosa’s jaw is hanging in a southward direction.

‘What on earth does she mean?’ Turks asks Lewis with a puzzled expression.

‘I think Cathy’s under the impression that eating Gradual Brown will turn your creamy fat couchies into reefer-smoking Rastafarians,’ Lewis titters. ‘Great trick if you can manage it, Gurlet.’

‘What?’ Turks stares at the screen, then laughs. And laughs. Everyone else joins in, lolling about holding their stomachs and retrieving tissues from handbags, pockets and cuffs. Still I’m not confident all the looks coming my way are friendly. Gurlet’s certainly aren’t.

I grab the chance to collapse back in my chair and Rosa squeezes my hand. ‘Was I OK?’ I ask quietly.

‘Spot on,’ she replies with a curious look on her face.

‘Fucking ridiculous!’ Gurlet blasts. ‘What the hell does she know about...?’

‘Bugger me, no, Cathy’s right.’ Turks is wiping his eyes now, mouth open. ‘Hey, Gurlet, why not endow them all with dreadlocks and a big bamboo while you’re at it?’

‘Not a bad idea,’ I whisper to Rosa, who’s busy doodling a foetus on her notepad. ‘They could limbo dance under it.’

‘Cathy,’ she sniggers, ‘a big bamboo is what they call a willy in Jamaica.’

‘Trust you to know willies of the world,’ I nudge her arm, relieved the focus is finally off me.

‘Don’t tell me you’re about to present our clients with a campaign that suggests their bread’s gonna turn us gradually black?’ Luckily, Turks is still on at Gurlet so he doesn’t notice us heads down, biting our lips, trying hard to keep our faces straight and shoulders from shaking. ‘Solve the nation’s health problems and end racial tension all in one.’

Gurlet presses a button and removes the disc, looking huffy. ‘Obviously the visuals are rough. And, with all due respect to Cathy,’ he gives me a daggers look, ‘she’s hardly experienced enough to grasp the bigger picture. Maybe the concepts of hip and cool are foreign to her...’

‘But buying bread isn’t, is it?’ Turks slaps him on the back. ‘Don’t you see, Gurlet, Cathy’s our secret weapon, Mrs Average Housewife. The hand that rocks the cradle, buys the groceries and actually spreads the darn sandwiches. Unappreciated, unnoticed, invisible – but the crucial force in the marketplace, isn’t that so, Viv?’

He's right, I inwardly reflect, I'm rarely appreciated, seldom noticed, often invisible. Even in my prime I could stand at a bar for hours, waiting for drinks and waving fivers while all were served around me. Younger and Wilding's secret weapon. I puff with pride.

'Absolutely.' Vivien nods her head in agreement and smiles at me. 'Cathy's our eye into all those overweight frumpy women that the rest of us rarely notice unless their kids are squalling.'

Wait a minute! That doesn't sound so great. My ego deflates faster than one of Richard Branson's air balloons, as she waxes on.

'The voice of the middle-aged don't-know-how-to-be's even if it was handed to them on a plate, trudging through our supermarkets, desperately trying to find something to throw down their children's necks so they can get back to watching the latest reality show. Sorry, I agree with Turks. The clients'll never go for it. They're pretty conservative themselves.'

I definitely don't like this. I'm almost under the table, head ducking into my shoulders against numerous pairs of staring eyes.

'Exactly,' says Turks. 'It's a no go, Gurlet, I'm afraid. See if you can come up with a version of hip that doesn't fit into some stereotypical image of our ethnic society. Last thing we need is the racial equality commission hounding us.' He shudders. 'We could end up accused of regressing the black movement forty years. Meeting over, everyone.'

There's a heavy silence between Rosa and me as we wait until last before leaving the conference room. I'm not risking running into Gurlet.

Then, 'I think that went quite well,' she says in a fake normal voice.

'Oh God, I didn't...I wasn't...I thought it was a good campaign. Honestly. Really colourful. And clever. I was just trying to say something halfway intelligent. And now Gurlet probably thinks I scuppered it on purpose. The way he dug those pointy eyes into mine.'

'Who cares?' she shrugs. 'He's a total tosser, anyway. Do him good to get taken down a peg. And Turks was obviously impressed with what you said.'

She leads me along the corridor, keeping up the reassuring chatter, though as far as I'm concerned it could be the Green Mile with me heading for old sparkie and Rosa shouting, 'Dead Man Walking!' so people have the decency not to stare.

'I really did think they were Rastafarians,' I try to explain as we turn the corner towards our office. 'What an idiot. And then I almost died when Vicious Viv got stuck in. All those cracks about moronic housewives watching reality shows. Do you think she was having a go at me?'

'Of course not,' Rosa says dismissively, before a glint enters her eyes. 'Although I'd like to stick her on a reality show – something with big hairy rats in.'

'Yeah and she'd have to eat them all and everyone at home would be calling out, "Go on, Vicious Viv" as a long pink tail slithers down her neck. "Go on." And Viv...'

I stop as Rosa elbows me in the ribs. Vivien's standing inches away leaning against the water dispenser and by the scowl on her face she's heard every word.

Chapter 3

For the first time since I started at Younger and Wilding, I feel like I'm escaping as I climb the spiral stairs of the double-decker bus. What a day!

As we reach the familiar boundaries of Crouch End I breathe a great big sigh of relief.

London, N8. West of Wood Green, east of Golders Green, south of Muswell Hill, north of Archway. Residents like it here because a) we don't have a tube station, so we're kind of an isolated pocket and b) everyone knows each other in one way or another. Hang around a few months and it's almost impossible to walk down the Broadway without being accosted by someone you know from playgroup, Montessori, YMCA, Pilates, primary schools, etc. It's like you're a star, but of course, you're not because everyone in Crouch End's the same.

After picking up Josh and Sophie, I arrive home to be greeted on the second from bottom stair by another pile of cat vomit.

Great. Truly great.

I hold my left arm out as a barrier. 'Wide berth, guys.'

'Not again!' Sophie says in disgust.

'Yukkee da!' exclaims Josh.

As I drop my little package of puke into the wheelie bin, I spot the elderly Mrs Baker outside her back door in the company of a tall thin man with a shock of white curly hair and an exasperated-looking woman in her late fifties, who I recognise from moving in day as her daughter, Eleanor. Also known as Mrs Baker. They both married Bakers apparently. Not bakers as in bread makers, just bakers as in Mr Baker, though I'm told not related. The man and the young Mrs Baker, Eleanor, are talking earnestly while staring up at the old Mrs Baker's top floor windows.

'Mother,' I hear her say, 'I really don't think—'

'You can never be too careful,' the older Mrs Baker's emphatic. 'Isn't that correct, Mr Shannon? Here, this lady will tell you.' She catches sight of me sneaking back to my house and waves me over. 'She almost got killed. Drug addicts, mass murderers, you name it. She was only saying this morning.'

'Oh,' I reluctantly amble across to them, 'I don't believe I said mass murderers. Although there was those bodies found in Cranley...' I stop as I catch Eleanor's shrivelling glance. Is it my imagination or does she seem a teeny bit hostile?

'Most of our customers find—' the man in the uniform starts before Eleanor butts in.

'It'll make the property look ridiculous, Mother. Like Wormwood Scrubs.'

'I really think one of our top of the line alarm systems—' he starts again.

'Not to mention the value plummeting,' Eleanor once more interrupts. 'When you come to sell it.'

'Mr Shannon here is going to place some nice white bars on all my windows. Won't that be sensible, Mrs O'Farrell?' Now it's Mrs Baker's turn to talk over her daughter.

'Er, maybe, yes. Shannon's?' I scrutinise the man's green uniform. 'You're putting up bars? Why?'

He smiles and shakes my hand. 'Keith Shannon. Shannon Securities. Fitters of burglar alarms, home or office video systems, wall safes. All your security needs. We're trying to persuade Mrs Baker here that no-one uses bars these days. Wouldn't even know where to look for them myself.' He rolls his eyes at me, then across at Eleanor, making it pretty obvious that we're dealing with a batty old lady. 'Most of our clients are extremely satisfied with a top-notch

alarm system. We can trigger all the entry points; have them wired straight to the police station. Someone so much as cracks a window, the cops'll be on your doorstep.'

'And just an alarm sign is enough to stop most would-be intruders, isn't it?' Eleanor looks from Mr Shannon to me and back again, rallying support.

'Great deterrent,' I agree enthusiastically.

'But not as effective as bars, eh?' Unfortunately Mrs Baker, the elder, is also rallying support.

Oh God. I glance from one set of stubborn eyes to the other, then back again, not knowing which one to pin my colours to, when thankfully my mobile starts ringing.

'Sorry, er, I have to take this.' I quickly walk towards the road, out of earshot.

'Good day?' It's Declan.

'Good day to you, Bruce. How's it hanging?' I attempt an Australian drawl, which goes a bit South African at the end.

'It's hanging fine,' he tries an East Coast American twang, but it comes out more Liverpudlian. 'But what I meant was, did you have a good day at the office?'

I can tell he's smiling.

'Terrific.' I lie. 'You?'

In the background I hear Mrs Baker and her daughter have resumed their squabbling. I walk another ten paces forward.

'Not wonderful. That's why I'm ringing. I've a couple of things needing sorting so won't make dinner. Meeting with senior executives and all that.'

'Oh, OK.' I'm mildly disappointed, but can't get too distraught. After all, first time in ages he's been late back and considering how overworked he used to be. 'Well see you when I see you, I guess. I'll leave something on the stove.'

'Thanks. Better go. They're buzzing me.'

'And you've neighbours right on your doorstep you can call on too,' Eleanor's saying as I head back towards them all.

'Neighbours,' Mrs Baker's expression oozes contempt. 'Fat lot of good that is when they're criminals themselves.'

'No, no, you've got it wrong,' I try and placate her. 'The person who attacked me wasn't a criminal. Just insane. I never even pressed charges.'

Mrs Baker folds her arms smugly as if I've just added fifty points to her scorecard. 'You see!' she says defiantly. 'Bars, I said, and bars it is.'

'Mother!' This time there's no ambivalence about the look Eleanor gives me. You'd almost think I'm to blame for this whole argument.

'Oh well, I'm sure you'll sort it out.' I back away, just as the front door opens. At the top of her lungs Sophie yells down the front path. 'Mum-ee. Mum-eee. Tic-Tac's done diarrhoea in the bath.'

I get a barrage of what-kind-of-a-family-is-this looks before everyone turns their backs on me.

'Cats!' I shrug in explanation but no-one's listening. The argument's in full flood again. No. Not what you'd call a perfect day.

Now which do I press? I'm staring at my keyboard trying to choose between the little England flag and the Alt button. It's the next afternoon and we're hard at work. Rosa trying her mightiest to research the best position to give birth in, me trying my mightiest to put yesterday's faux pas behind me.

I eeny meeny between the two keys, press the winner and a message flashes up on my screen.

'Shit! Shit! Rosa, help! I've done it again! I've committed an illegal abortion!'

Rosa drops the papers she's holding and rushes over to my desk. 'Cath, calm down. And it's not an *abortion*. It's an *operation*. And we shouldn't really say the "A" word in front of the little one, should we?'

'Oh, but he/she's not formed ears yet, has he?'

'God I'm not sure. I'll better check.' She scrambles amongst the box files on her desk which are hiding a multitude of baby books, leaflets, magazines with graphic illustrations. And I mean *graphic*. 'I need to know anyway because Alec bought me a Beethoven CD yesterday. We're going to play it to him/her every morning. Helps the brain develop.'

'Maybe I should listen to it as well? Might help me get to grips with these bloody machines.' I glance again with dismay at my monitor.

She flicks through her books. 'Yes, yes he does have ears.' She turns it ninety degrees. 'Well holes anyway by the looks of things. Oh God, I should have bought the CD in this morning. Don't want him/her missing out.'

'I suppose.'

'What's the matter, Cath? You look a bit drained.'

'Didn't sleep too well reliving that horrible meeting and Vicious Viv catching us at the water dispenser.'

'I'm certain she didn't hear us.' She puts her hand on her tummy and gently rubs in a circular movement. 'She's deaf in one ear. Measles as a child. And anyway even if she did she wasn't exactly raving about you, was she? Not that she was talking about you per se,' she adds hastily.

'It's not as if I even watch reality TV. Only *Wife Swap* and *Secret Millionaire* and the one about holiday sharing.'

'And *Undercover Boss* and *Hell's Kitchen*...'

'Is *Hell's Kitchen* reality? Not documentary?'

'Whatever.' She walks over to the fruit bowl and chucks me a Cox's apple. 'Look, just don't let her rattle your cage. Accounts Executives make bad enemies – they can completely poison the clients against your best work.'

'What about Art Directors? Gurlet's probably mad as hell with me,' I probe anxiously. 'Scuppering his ideas.'

'I told you yesterday, ignore him. He's not worth twisting your knickers over.'

'So you don't think people resent me jumping on your back? Lewis, for instance?'

'Oh Lewis resents everyone,' she soothes. 'Especially women. You'll get used to him.'

'But I thought gay men were meant to be girls' best buddies. Commiserating with them on their tangled love lives.'

'Lewis is a one-off. Just because he's camp doesn't make him gay. Rumour has it that he may be the new asexual.'

'New asexual?'

'Third sex that everyone's been talking about lately.'

'Does seem to have quite a chip on his shoulder.'

'More a giant sack of Yukon Gold. My advice is steer well away from him as well. According to the grapevine he once...' She stops.

'What?'

'Nah,' her face clouds over, 'doesn't matter. Better not pollute my baby's new holes with bad vibes.'

'No, I know, but let me just write this all down. I need to be prepared.' I grab a post-it note and begin scribbling. 'Steer clear of Lewis, ignore Gurlet, don't let Vivien rattle my cage. What else?' I feel like Bob Hope in *Paleface*. He draws from the left, so lean to the right. There's a wind from the east, so aim to the west. He crouches when he shoots, so stand on your toes. 'And Turks?' I hold my pen aloft. 'What about him?'

'Listen, Cathy, all I'm saying is best thing you can do is keep well out of office politics. The advertising business can make your bitchy playground gossip look like kids' stuff. It's a case

of don't only mind your back but keep an eye on your front and both sides well. Right, that's all. Lesson over for today, so what's up with that machine of yours?

'I can't believe I've lost it all!' I plant my head despairingly in my hands as she comes up behind me and taps away on my keyboard over my right shoulder. 'Turks wants these hotel and apartment descriptions for the Sunny Hols brochure by the end of the week and I'm only halfway through. That's three hundred "basic but homey", "simple yet charming", "a mere bus ride from the beach" evaporated into cyberspace.'

'I told you to make back-ups, didn't I?' She presses the enter key three times, a few pluses and minuses and my machine springs back to life with the words 'Document Recovered' on top. 'There. That's it.'

'Why can't I just write down everything? You know the old pen and pad method that used to be so popular in my day?'

'Thought it was quill and parchment?'

'Bloody cheek!' I throw a small stash of paperclips at her.

'Oh by the way,' she begins rubbing her tummy again, but now in an anti-clockwise direction. 'Alec overheard Declan boasting about your job to everyone at Wilson Inc. yesterday. He sounded dead proud.'

'What did he say exactly? Word for word.' Alec works with Declan, although different departments, which means I've got my very own spy in the camp. Not that I need it, as I *totally* trust my husband.

'Something along the lines of having the girl he wed back again. I think that's rather beautiful.' She goes all dewy-eyed on me. 'God I hope Alec and I will be as happy as you two are after all those years of marriage.'

'Course you will. You're made for each other.'

'Isn't it fab!' she squeals. 'We're just absolute soul mates.'

They haven't been together long so are still in the 'can't keep their hands off each other' stage, even more so now the baby's on his/her way. I know because she keeps asking me with a worried frown if multiple orgasms bring on premature births. The bitch!

'All we need,' she adds dreamily, 'to complete our perfect lives is for you and I to win the RNW account.'

'What RNW account?'

'Didn't I tell you? RNW are developing this new eco car. They're aiming to launch it next year and they need to market it in the right way. Turks heard they're unhappy with their advertisers and hoping to switch. All very hush hush. It would be so absolutely fantastico if we got it.'

'Fingers crossed?' I cross my fingers.

'No, more than that. This calls for visualisation. We need to concentrate for a second or two. Close your eyes.'

I close my eyes.

'Hummm,' she says.

'Hum?' I ask.

'No. Shhh. Hummmm. Hummmm. Hummmmmmm.'

Don't know whether she's expecting me to join in or not, so I open one eye to check. She looks like she's concentrating really hard, both index fingers touching her temples, when my glance wanders from her face to the clock over the door. 'Bugger!' I announce. 'I have to dash.'

She comes out of her trance-like state. 'What about that batch of hotel copy you were finishing off? Don't forget to drop it on Turks' desk on your way out.'

I squirm. This is the part of the job I dislike most.

'Can't you do it? Just have a peek at it first. Check everything's all right.'

She laughs. 'It'll be fine.'

'You think?' I hesitate in the doorway, filled with a sudden panic. 'It might be crap. Maybe I should give it one last polish before I hand it over?'

‘Polish anymore,’ she snatches it from the shelf, ‘and you’ll wear a hole in it. Now go on. Off with you.’

Unfortunately as I’m bolting out the building, Lewis is leaning against the reception desk chatting to Alice. I see him glance at his watch.

‘Leaving already?’ he quirks an eyebrow. ‘Tell me, I’m curious, dearheart. You and Rosa working as a duo, does that mean you share a salary?’

‘Funny, Lewis.’ Alice leaps to my defence. ‘So with you and Gurlet only having the one dick, I take it your salary must be teensy weensy...’ She holds up her little finger. ‘Eh, Cathy?’

‘Not sure how it works,’ I squeeze past him. ‘See you all tomorrow. See you.’

I’m clearing up the plates from Mama’s special Wednesday Night Children’s Surprise (left-overs from Monday and Tuesday, mashed with a blender, fried fast and smothered in tomato sauce) when I hear Declan’s key turning in the lock. I check the wall clock. Six-thirty. He went through a difficult patch a few months back. There was a threatened take-over and for a while things looked grim, possibility of him being made redundant, etc. and he had to work all the hours he could before it got sorted, which thankfully it did. All that remains of those days are a few worry lines on his face but heck he’s forty-three now so I’d be worried if they weren’t there. Anyway, apart from yesterday’s blip, he’s been home every night recently to have dinner with me, which is a complete change from those bad old days.

‘How was work?’

‘OK.’ He throws his briefcase on a chair.

‘Just OK?’ I lean forward and raise my cheek for a peck.

‘Well,’ he says glibly, ‘we can’t all have dream jobs like you, can we?’

‘Suppose not.’ I follow him into the kitchen. ‘Dinner’s on the boil.’

‘Great,’ he lifts the saucepan lid and takes a sniff. ‘Mind if I eat in the other room? I’m shattered.’

‘I’ll bring it in to you.’ Excellent wife, I think to myself. Works all day – well, part-time anyhow. Brings in wages. Cares for children. Has home-cooked meal waiting on husband’s return. What more could a man want? I mean the house is still a mite messy but you can’t have everything, can you? Thank goodness for Pimple, our cleaning lady. At least she whips it into shape once a week.

‘Mum,’ Sophie’s sitting at the table, stabbing a pencil into an exercise book, ‘I need help with my homework.’

‘In a minute, darling.’ I smooth down my metaphorical apron and kiss her head. ‘Just getting Daddy’s dinner first.’

Back in the lounge, Declan’s sitting with his feet up on the coffee table. ‘They’ve a lead on that Crouch End Creeper.’ He puts aside the *Hornsey and Crouch End Journal* before taking the tray and laying it on his knees. ‘Police have outdone themselves this time. They say here that—’

He’s interrupted by his ringing mobile. Apologetically he hands the tray back, twisting to reach inside his back pocket.

‘Hi, Mike. Yes, yes. Oh no.’ He drops his feet back on the floor. ‘When? How? I’m gobsmacked! What about his wife? Is she...’

I move closer, tray still in hand, trying to eavesdrop.

‘I was only talking to him yesterday,’ he continues. ‘So full of... Is there anything I can do?’

I put his cooling dinner on the table and edge even closer, until my head’s pressing into his, pushing against the phone. Still all I can hear are squawks and growls. Irritated, Declan switches the phone to his other ear and waves me away.

‘Right, whatever. Let me know. Yes, yes...I’ll be in all night. Call me whatever time.’ He rings off and turns to me. His face is ghostly pale and he’s shaking his head as if not quite believing something.

‘What is it?’ I ask concerned. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Hugh’s had a heart attack.’

‘Oh no!’ I say automatically. ‘That’s terrible.’ Then I pause. ‘Who the hell’s Hugh?’

‘Young feller in the office. Fit as a fiddle. Mid-thirties at most. Plays squash most weekdays, cricket at weekends.’

‘Go on.’

‘Ran most evenings. Swam early mornings.’

‘I didn’t mean go on, tell me about his whole fitness regime.’ I stifle a giggle and attempt to downturn my mouth. Not that I’m callously indifferent to Declan’s unknown workmate but tragic situations often have that effect on me. A nervous reaction, defective brain wiring maybe, but it’s horribly embarrassing. I remember once eyes streaming with laughter as one of my friends told me the sad story of how her father died by a lightning-struck tree falling on him and I was feeling really sympathetic, I swear I was. ‘I meant, go on, what happened?’ I wheeze, trying to compose my face.

He rubs a hand through his hair. ‘According to Mike he collapsed out jogging a couple of hours ago. Heart attack. They took him to the Whittington Hospital.’

‘He’ll be all right,’ I console.

‘It sounded pretty desperate. Intensive care.’

I hesitate as I look at his sad face. ‘Maybe I should stay in this evening?’

‘No, no. Go out, enjoy yourself,’ he insists. ‘Not like there’s anything you can do. I need to make some calls.’

I hustle the children into their baths and prepare them for bed. Josh wants me to read him the *Nine Armed Mutant from Mars* again while Sophie’s hiding the *Beano* behind a maths book. I’ll take on Josh first.

‘Come on. Into bed.’

‘Won’t be a sec.’ Josh reaches up to adjust the temperature gauge for his vivarium. ‘I have to dust the crickets.’

Oh God, not again. He has to sprinkle this calcium powder on these poor little crickets so Lizzie, his pet gecko, absorbs enough nutrients. Kind of like seasoning.

After I finish the book I pull up his duvet and tuck it around him. ‘Now, Mr Head in the Bed, I want you to shut your eyes and think lovely thoughts.’

‘Are you going out, Mummy?’

‘Yes, I am, my precious one.’ I sneak his teddy bear next to him which he pretends not to notice. ‘See you in the morning.’

‘Is it your ATMs meeting?’

‘TTMs,’ I correct making Teddy kiss his little pink ear. ‘ATMs are cash machines. While TTMs are my mothers’ restaurant research group. But they’re not called TTMs anymore, because we changed Tuesdays to Wednesdays and it’s once a week instead of twice a month. Now, enough.’ I gently pinch his warm left cheek. ‘Sleep tight.’

As I leave the bedroom, eyes averted from the sight of the gecko staring greedily at his walking grub, I can hear Declan mumbling on the phone upstairs. I do feel a mite guilty going off to meet the girls, but he was adamant, wasn’t he? And after all, it’s not like Hugh’s dead or anything, is it?