



If you loved *Footballers' Wives*,
get ready to play with
the *Golfers' Girls*

PRIVATE MEMBERS

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black bikini, is lying on her stomach on the word "MEMBERS". She is propped up on her elbows, looking towards the camera. Her legs are raised and bent at the knees. A pair of silver handcuffs is attached to the bottom of the letter 'S' in "MEMBERS".

Leonie Fox

Private Members
by
Leonie Fox

Copyright © Claudia Pattison, 2007
All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Private Members

.

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

One

Stifling a yawn, Keeley Finnegan pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and squinted across the eighteenth green. ‘About fucking time,’ she muttered as a gaggle of match-stick figures trooped into view. She glanced at the Cartier watch encircling her slender wrist and couldn’t help smiling as the sun’s rays caught the baguette-cut diamonds, making them sparkle and dance. ‘Three hours it’s taken them to get round this stupid course,’ she said, resuming her frown. ‘Meanwhile, *we’re* all stuck out here, dying of heat exhaustion – not to mention boredom.’

‘Oh it’s not over yet, darling,’ said Marianne, the oldest member of the group by nearly two decades. ‘Not by a long shot . . . if you’ll pardon the pun.’ She ran a well-manicured hand over her elegant platinum chignon, smoothing imaginary stray hairs. ‘There are thirty teams taking part in the tournament; this is simply the leading pair.’

‘Which means,’ said Laura, who was married to a pro golfer and therefore knew her eagles from her birdies – even if, like Keeley, she did find the game unspeakably dull – ‘that there are another couple of hours of play left at least. Then there’s the prize-giving ceremony; that’ll take a good hour. *And* the charity auction, of course. I’d be surprised if we sat down to eat before, ooh, eight o’clock at the earliest.’

Keeley sighed crossly. ‘I can’t believe Fabrizio talked me into this. I can think of a thousand other things I’d rather be doing.’

Spotting an opening gambit, Cindy McAllister, who had contributed precious little to the conversation in the past hour (though not for want of trying), seized the opportunity with both hands. ‘I guess you’re spoilt for choice, huh, honey?’ she said, patting Keeley’s knee in a way she hoped wouldn’t be deemed too intimate. ‘There’s so much to see and do in Delchester; the city’s practically drowning in culture – that’s part of the reason I was so excited about relocating here.’ She cleared her throat, suddenly feeling nervous. ‘I hear the Haymarket Gallery is running a fabulous Toulouse-Lautrec exhibition. I was wondering if any of you gals fancied making an afternoon of it. We could have lunch afterwards, maybe wander through Chinatown . . .’

There was a brief – but pointed – silence before finally Marianne spoke. ‘I’m afraid we’re not great culture vultures, Cindy,’ she said, managing to sound apologetic and patronizing at the same time. ‘We don’t really *do* galleries, do we, girls?’

‘Ugh, all those dusty old paintings,’ said Keeley with a stagy shudder. ‘They give me the creeps.’

Cindy bit her lip to mask her disappointment. ‘No? How about ballet?’ she said brightly, keen to demonstrate her good taste and broad range of interests. ‘There’s a Frederick Ashton season on at the Royal Exchange. The *Sunday Times* critic described it as a “must see”.’

Laura shook her head, knowing how the gesture caused her corkscrew curls to bob attractively. ‘I hate ballet,’ she

said with a startling degree of vitriol. ‘Those stick-thin dancers make me feel so fat and ugly.’

‘Yes, but all those men in tights, darling,’ said Marianne. ‘It’s always useful to see what credentials a man’s packing before you get him into bed. Don’t you agree, Cindy?’

‘Oh, uh, sure,’ said Cindy, trying to sound as if she were used to broaching such matters over a glass of champagne on a Saturday afternoon. Then, in a desperate attempt to raise the tone: ‘So, why don’t you tell me exactly what it is you like to do?’

‘Shop, shop and shop some more,’ said Keeley in a deadpan tone. She cocked her head and batted her eyelashes coyly – a gesture that made her look much younger than her twenty-seven years. ‘Fabrizio has promised to buy me a diamond if his team wins the tournament.’

‘Oh, the joys of dating a premiership footballer,’ said Laura sarcastically. ‘Tell me, Keeley, how *are* your Italian lessons coming along?’

Keeley wrinkled her freckled nose. ‘I’ve given them up; I’m rubbish at learning. I was always bottom of the class at school; my teachers told me I’d end up on the checkouts if I wasn’t careful.’ She ran a finger over the face of her £20,000 watch and added in a soft voice: ‘But I showed them.’

Keeley had been dating Fabrizio da Luca, Delchester United’s top striker, for four months. They’d met at St Benedict’s Country Club & Spa, which was where Keeley found all her boyfriends. In fact, it wouldn’t be too much of an exaggeration to say it was the sole reason for her membership.

‘How on earth do you and Fabrizio communicate when

you don't speak a word of Italian and *he* speaks less English than a four-year-old?' asked Marianne.

'Oh, I let Fab's wallet do the talking,' said Keeley matter-of-factly. She let out a filthy laugh. '*And* his dick.' She leaned forward conspiratorially. 'You know what these continentals are like. He keeps wanting to do me up the arse.'

'No!' squealed Marianne and Laura in unison.

Behind her Prada sunglasses, Cindy rolled her eyes. This was going to be a very long afternoon.

At that moment, a young Latino waiter, clad in white cotton trousers and a matching Nehru jacket, emerged from the clubhouse. He moved smoothly round the women's table, topping up glasses with Dom Perignon. As he leaned over Cindy's shoulder, he couldn't help admiring the striking redhead and the way her Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress clung to her figure, showing off her slim waist and magnificent cleavage to perfection.

Marianne noticed the waiter noticing Cindy and was instantly on the defensive. Extending a honey-coloured arm, she reached behind her and, without any preamble, languidly stroked her hand across the waiter's crotch, causing an immediate and visible stiffening. The waiter's eyebrows shot up, but his champagne-pouring hand didn't wobble.

'Nice to see you again, Enrique,' Marianne purred as she unhandled the waiter. 'I did so enjoy our last . . .' she paused and ran her tongue slowly round her peony-painted lips ' . . . encounter. We must do it again some-time. Why don't you call me?'

The waiter smiled lazily. 'Certainly, Mrs Kennedy. It

would be my pleasure,' he said in heavily accented English. 'Now, if you ladies will excuse me.' He gave a small bow and, lowering the champagne bottle to mask his swollen manhood, retreated into the clubhouse.

Keeley shot Marianne a sharp look. 'Tell me you're not?'

Her friend thrust out her chin and smiled smugly. 'I'm afraid I am, darling.'

Keeley sighed. 'I don't know how you do it, I really don't. I just hope I've got half as much energy when I get to your age.'

Laura turned to Cindy, who couldn't quite believe the flagrant act of indecency she had just witnessed. 'You'll have to excuse Marianne. To say she's got a wandering eye is something of an understatement.'

Marianne sniffed haughtily. 'And I make no apology for it. I may not be young, but I'm certainly free and single – and I happen to be very highly sexed.'

Cindy smiled weakly, acutely aware that she mustn't evince the smallest sign of disapproval. A native Californian, she had arrived in Cheshire just four short weeks ago and was still struggling to find her feet in this unfamiliar milieu. Being, as she was, an inveterate social climber, the one condition Cindy hated more than any other was feeling like an outsider. She would do anything (well, almost anything) to belong – and, more than that, to be at the heart of the action; to be the sparkling pivot round which everyone else revolved, like planets round the sun. The instant she had laid eyes on these three – Marianne, Laura and Keeley – giggling over Sunday lunch in the club's sumptuous Ladies' Lounge, while other

women shot them looks of disapproval tinged with envy, Cindy knew that this was the clique she wanted (correction: *needed*) to belong to if she were going to make her mark at St Benedict's.

Set in 200 acres of prime Cheshire parkland, St Benedict's was one of England's most exclusive country clubs. It lay some eight miles west of Delchester, in the village of Kirkhulme, which was notable for possessing more millionaires per square mile than anywhere else in the country. With a two-year waiting list (though this was regularly waived in the case of celebrities and aristocrats), the club's invitation-only memberships were as highly sought after as bottles of 1961 Château Latour. Dominating the landscape was St Benedict's famous Grade II-listed art deco clubhouse. Built on the crest of a hill and approached by a long rhododendron-lined drive, the vast white building enjoyed sweeping views of the eighteen-hole golf course, which had played host to numerous championships in its illustrious 110-year history, including two Ryder Cups and ten British Opens.

The annual pro-celebrity golf tournament was the highlight of St Benedict's summer calendar. Launched in 1972, the event had raised millions of pounds for children's charities, and each year the list of players grew more impressive. Today's competition featured no fewer than ten world-ranked golfers, two soap stars, a veteran TV presenter, an international recording artist, an Olympic rower and three premiership footballers – including Fabrizio da Luca, whose powerful physique and smouldering Mediterranean looks made him the ladies' choice.

Not surprisingly, the tournament attracted hundreds of spectators, many of whom positioned themselves on the course, faithfully following their favourite player from hole to hole, cameras and autograph books at the ready. Others, like our little quartet, preferred the Manolo-friendly environs of the VIP seating area outside the clubhouse, where champagne flowed and vast cream linen parasols offered some relief from the searing July sun.

Marianne frowned. Not that you would have noticed – four-monthly Botox injections kept her forehead as smooth and plump as a teenager's. For several minutes now she had been aware of the distant – but nonetheless irritating – sound of an engine revving, and it seemed to be getting closer. Marianne was very sensitive to noise. Tea-slurping, birdsong and the wilful cracking of finger bones set her teeth on edge; the churning of a washing machine made her physically nauseous; gum-chewing drove her to distraction. A month earlier, the sound of a dripping overflow had kept her awake all night; so had the plumber who came to fix it.

Twisting round in her chair, she surveyed the stretch of undulating parkland, edged with banks of azaleas and well-regimented flowerbeds, which lay on the east side of the clubhouse. 'Where in God's name is that noise coming from?' she said tetchily. 'I can feel one of my heads coming on. I shall have to take an aspirin if it doesn't stop soon.'

A moment later, the mystery was solved as a golf buggy came bouncing over the crest of a man-made hillock.

Hunched over the wheel was a mahogany-skinned twenty-something with an artfully tangled mane of hip-length hair and a manic glint in her eye. Judging by the way she kept casting worried looks over her shoulder, she was fleeing from something – or rather *someone*. After driving straight through a flowerbed, crushing a row of lovingly cultivated Himalayan blue poppies and a rare hybrid tea rose, the blonde floored the accelerator, pushing the buggy to its maximum speed of 20mph.

Suddenly, a second buggy came hurtling into view. Its driver was also deeply tanned and blonde (with a few coffee-coloured streaks thrown in for dramatic effect). This buggy appeared to be chasing the first and, as she drew closer to her quarry, driver number two could be heard screeching a string of unintelligible insults.

Pursuing both buggies on foot was a middle-aged man, perspiring heavily in his regulation Barbour wax jacket, which he refused to remove, even in the warmest weather. Bob Daley was St Benedict's head groundsman. It was his job to maintain the club's eight putting greens, six tennis courts (four grass and two clay), crown green bowling lawn, 17,000-square-foot greenhouse that provided the 180,000 flowers for planting every year – and the jewel in the crown: the Peter Alliss-designed championship golf course with its computer-controlled pressurized irrigation system. With the gap between him and the buggies widening by the second, Bob quickly gave up the chase, shaking his fist at the departing vehicles before collapsing to his knees, his fifty-eight years clearly having got the better of him.

'Those carts are going awful fast,' said Cindy – who,

having struggled to find any common ground with her companions thus far, was glad of the distraction. ‘I wonder what’s going on.’

The women watched in amusement as the buggies zigzagged across the clubhouse’s rolling gardens, their tyres throwing up fat divots of newly laid turf. ‘You know, I’m sure that’s Destiny out in front,’ said Keeley, repositioning her teak recliner for a better view. ‘I’d recognize those mingling hair extensions anywhere. I keep telling her they make her look cheap, but will she listen?’

‘Who’s Destiny?’ asked Cindy.

Keeley raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. ‘Destiny Morris. You must have heard of her.’

‘Uh, no, I don’t think so. I’m sure I’d remember an unusual name like Destiny.’

Keeley looked at the American woman aghast. ‘Destiny Morris is only *the* most famous glamour model this country has ever produced.’

Marianne made a snorting noise. ‘Which, let’s face it, isn’t saying very much.’

Keeley frowned, but didn’t have the courage to contradict the older woman. ‘Destiny’s latest calendar outsold her nearest rival’s two to one,’ she told Cindy. She paused. ‘Actually, she’s one of my very best friends.’

‘Really? Wow, that’s great,’ said Cindy unconvincingly. ‘Has Destiny had much experience driving those carts? Only her steering seems a little shaky.’

The women watched as the model’s buggy veered sharply to the left, decapitating a low-lying topiary peacock. In the distance, Bob Daley started keening. ‘It certainly doesn’t look like it,’ said Marianne.

‘So who’s that chasing her?’ asked Laura, shading her eyes with a hand as she strained to identify the second buggy’s occupant.

Keeley smiled tightly. ‘I’ll give you three guesses.’

By now, other VIP guests had noticed the rapidly advancing buggies. An elderly woman nursing a Shih Tzu at the next table shook her head despairingly and remarked to her companion: ‘St Benedict’s used to be such an exclusive establishment. See what happens when you let the riff-raff in?’

Keeley’s eyes narrowed. ‘Aren’t dogs banned from the clubhouse?’ she said in a loud voice. She glared at the dog. ‘They don’t call ’em *Shit-zus* for nothing, you know. If I get doggy doo-doo on my new Gina sandals, *somebody’s* going to find themselves barred for life.’

The dog owner opened her mouth to fire back a retort, but before she could speak her friend grabbed her arm. ‘Oh my goodness, Marjorie, the lunatic girl’s heading straight for us!’

She was right. In the tight confines of the two-man buggy, Destiny Morris was struggling to maintain her course, hindered as she was by her gargantuan 32F breasts, which were apparently trying to fight their way out of her three-sizes-too-small vest top. The look on her face was one of grim determination as she tried to steer the buggy away from the dozen or so tables ranged outside the clubhouse. Meanwhile, Destiny’s pursuer had slowed her buggy to a crawl, apparently waiting to see what would happen next.

Spotting a disaster in the making, Enrique thrust a tray of martinis into the hands of his nearest colleague and

started running towards the buggy, keen to avert any incident that might affect his customers' tipping generosity. 'You must stop!' he bellowed.

'I'm trying to!' Destiny shrieked, as her foot pumped the pedals in vain. 'Which one's the brake? I haven't passed my driving test yet.'

The waiter skidded to a halt. 'Try the handbrake; it's in between the seats,' he yelled. 'You must hurry, or people are going to get hurt.'

'Enrique is terribly macho; you wouldn't believe how dominant he is in bed,' said Marianne, shuddering as she relived some earlier act of depravity. Behind her back, Laura and Cindy exchanged wry looks.

Meanwhile, the buggy continued on its collision course. Enrique manfully stood his ground, but behind him there was mayhem as the VIPs took to their heels. Chairs were sent toppling, champagne bottles were shattered, canapés were mashed into the lawn. Keeley, Laura, Marianne and Cindy joined the stampede, grabbing their designer handbags and fleeing to the safety of the clubhouse. Realizing that self-sacrifice was pointless, Enrique was hot on their heels.

Seconds later, Destiny's buggy clipped one of the heavy wrought-iron tables, sending it crashing to the ground. The impact seemed to shock the model into action because she turned her steering wheel sharply to the left, just in time to avoid mowing down the Shih Tzu, who had given his mistress the slip and was lapping up spilled caviar from a broken Conran dish. As the dazed spectators regrouped around the wreckage of their tables, Destiny's buggy trundled on, now heading directly for the

golf course. The second buggy followed close behind, its driver's face locked in a bitter smile.

Over at the eighteenth green, Laura's husband, Sam Bentley (world ranking: 52), was preparing to take the shot that could win him and his team mate – soap sex kitten Annalise Terry – the tournament, and his name etched on the coveted cut-crystal rose-bowl trophy for the third time in as many years. Adjusting his grip on his putter, Sam surveyed the short distance between golf ball and hole, trying to focus in the way his sports psychologist had trained him. He was just about to take the shot when a spectator's mobile phone started to ring, shattering his concentration. Immediately, Sam spun round and glared at the miscreant until he produced his phone from his backpack and shut off the call, grimacing apologetically. This may be a charity tournament, but Sam played each and every game as if it were the Ryder Cup final. Suddenly aware of the BBC North West camera trained on him, Sam's scowl turned into a smile. 'I hope you didn't just hang up on your wife, mate. I'd hate to be responsible for the break-up of someone's marriage,' he quipped, prompting a ripple of laughter among the spectators.

Once the tittering had died down, Sam refocused, blocking out every sight and sound around him – everything but the five-foot stretch of turf that lay between him and victory. Oblivious to the distant drone of a brace of golf buggies, he assumed his set-up stance: legs shoulder-width apart, weight centred over the balls of his feet, forearms tensed. Around him, the crowd held its collective breath. Sam was certain the tournament was

his; only an idiot would fluff a five-foot putt. At the very second Sam's club left the ground, he heard a loud shriek from Abi, his caddie. The next thing he knew, the crowd of spectators clustered round the green had scattered and he was lying face down on the closely trimmed turf, felled by a painful rugby tackle from one of the course stewards. 'You fucking idiot!' said Sam struggling to his feet and wiping his nostrils free of dirt. 'You've just ruined my shot.'

'Sorry, Mr Bentley, it was the buggies, sir,' said the red-faced steward. 'I was trying to protect you. It looked as if they were heading straight for you.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Sam snapped. 'Buggies are banned during tournaments. The club brought in a ruling last year.'

'I'm well aware of that, sir – but two of our members appear to have torn up the rulebook.'

Sam followed the steward's pointing finger and watched in disbelief while a pair of buggies, painted in the maroon-and-gold livery of St Benedict's, hurtled across the green, forcing players and caddies to flee in every direction. 'What the fuck . . .' he said as the lead buggy flattened the flag marking the eighteenth hole before careering through the avenue of pine trees that separated the green from the fairway beyond. Realizing where the real story lay, the most agile member of the BBC North West camera crew grabbed a hand-held and took off in pursuit.

Back at the clubhouse, the women had relocated to the Moorish-style roof terrace, which afforded excellent views of the unfolding drama below. 'This sure is turning into

a strange afternoon,' remarked Cindy as she settled on a mosaic bench. 'So c'mon, guys, put me out of my misery. Who *is* the chick in the second cart – and what's her beef with Destiny?'

Laura settled beside Cindy. She was warming to the vivacious Californian, and it wouldn't do any harm to forge an alliance with a fellow golfer's wife. In fact, it could prove eminently useful – here, at last, was someone who'd understand what she had to put up with. Everyone thought Sam and Laura had the perfect marriage; few understood precisely how difficult, demanding and downright temperamental professional sportsmen could be. Laura linked her arm through Cindy's. 'It's another well-known glamour model – Shannon Stewart. Believe it or not, she and Destiny used to be best friends.'

'Until Shannon waltzed off with Destiny's fiancé.' Keeley pursed her lips. 'And if that wasn't humiliating enough, poor Des only discovered she was being two-timed when Shannon 'fessed up, live on *Richard & Judy*. The little slapper had an autobiography to promote, and I suppose she thought that shagging her best friend's boyfriend and then shooting her mouth off about it was a sure-fire way to drum up interest in her pathetic little memoir.'

'She was right too,' added Laura. 'The tabloids had a field day with the story and Shannon's book flew off the shelves.'

'Poor Destiny,' sympathized Cindy. 'Is Shannon still dating this son of a bitch?'

'Uh-uh.' Keeley shook her head. 'Dean Hurley was just a means to an end. The minute his star started to fall, Shannon dumped him.'

‘You mean he was a celebrity too?’

Laura shrugged. ‘After a fashion. Dean won the first series of British *Pop Idol*. He had a couple of top-ten hits, but then his album flopped and the record company dropped him like a hot brick. At the height of his fame, he made the cover of *Heat* magazine; these days, he’d be lucky to get on the guest list at the British Legion.’

‘This all happened last year and Destiny and Shannon have been sworn enemies ever since,’ continued Keeley. ‘Des does her best to give Shannon a wide berth, but it’s pretty difficult, especially when they’re both members at St Benedict’s.’ She gave a theatrical sigh. ‘Fuck knows what this latest spat’s about. Anyway, Destiny’s an absolute angel. We’ll have to introduce you two.’ She gazed out across the fairway, where Destiny’s buggy was racing up a bunker-strewn hill. ‘That’s if Shannon doesn’t get hold of her first.’

Keeley needn’t have worried, for the model had hatched a cunning plan. With Shannon hot on her tail, Destiny drove straight into the nearest bunker and immediately engaged her newly discovered handbrake. Seeing her rival apparently stranded, Shannon sped to the edge of the bunker. ‘I’ve got you now, you munter!’ she cackled gleefully.

Two seconds later, Destiny floored her accelerator. She had timed it just right. As the buggy’s fat wheels spun, they sent up a five-foot plume of sand, which poured straight through the open roof of Shannon’s vehicle, covering the model from head to foot.

As Shannon’s anguished howls filtered up to the roof terrace, Keeley jumped to her feet. ‘Go, Destiny!’ she

shouted, pumping the air with her fist. Even Marianne was impressed.

‘Credit where credit’s due,’ she conceded. ‘The girl’s not as stupid she looks.’

By now, a large crowd – including a number of tournament competitors – had gathered round the bunker, lured by the titillating prospect of two famous models locked in gladiatorial combat. Meanwhile, a four-strong posse of suited security guards attempted to fight its way through to the front, whilst murmuring unheard commands through their wireless earpieces. But before they could reach the bunker, Destiny had released her handbrake and accelerated sharply away, treating Shannon to a second sand shower. Coughing and spluttering furiously, the model shook her head vigorously and took off in pursuit. ‘You’re going to pay for this, Destiny Morris!’ she screamed as she followed her quarry’s meandering progress up the viciously sloping fairway.

As she neared the crest of the hill, Destiny glanced over her shoulder and, seeing the look of dogged defiance in Shannon’s eyes, wondered if her pursuer was ever going to admit defeat. By the time she was facing forward again, the buggy had begun its descent and was plunging straight towards the large, kidney-shaped water hazard guarding the seventeenth hole. Horrified, Destiny slammed on her brakes, causing the buggy to slew sideways as it slid down the hill. Behind her, Shannon’s eyes lit up. ‘Gotcha!’ she whispered.

Much to Destiny’s relief, the buggy finally skidded to a halt two feet away from the edge of the lake. With a

pounding heart and a dry mouth, she turned round to see Shannon sitting on her bumper. The model was wearing a peculiar twisted smile as she revved her engine threateningly. ‘I think it’s time for a dip,’ she snarled. Before Destiny had a chance to release her seatbelt, Shannon’s buggy leaped forward, shunting her rival straight through the tall reeds that lined the banks of the lake. Destiny screamed and covered her eyes as her buggy toppled into the murky water, where its engine quickly pattered and died.

First on the scene was the breathless BBC North West cameraman, who fleetingly considered going to Destiny’s aid, but then thought better of it. Positioning the camera on his shoulder, he flipped off the lens cap and began filming as the shocked model half clambered, half fell out of the driver’s seat and into the water. Next to him on the bank, Shannon watched triumphantly as Destiny burst into tears.

‘You stupid bitch, you could have killed me!’ wailed the waterlogged model as she plucked slimy strands of pondweed from her Dolce & Gabbana miniskirt.

Shannon laughed cruelly. ‘I did say you’d live to regret it if you fucked with me.’

‘All I did was make an appointment at the same spray-tanning salon,’ hiccupped Destiny. ‘Anyway, you needn’t worry, I won’t be going back there in a hurry – not when they’ve turned me the same vile shade of satsuma as you.’

Shannon let out a loud screech. Jumping out of the buggy, she kicked off her three-inch heels and – much to the amusement of the rapidly swelling group of onlookers

– began wading into the lake. ‘I’m gonna make you wish you’d never set eyes on me,’ she spat, kicking a spray of water into Destiny’s face.

‘Oh for God’s sake, get a life. Haven’t you got better things to do than make my life a misery?’

‘You’re a fine one to talk. Who was it who got me uninvited from the MOBO Awards after-party because she couldn’t stand the competition?’ Without waiting for a reply, Shannon lunged at Destiny, grabbing two handfuls of her long hair.

‘Let go of me, you maniac!’ Destiny cried as she drove her fist straight into Shannon’s solar plexus. Momentarily winded, Shannon released her grip and bent over double, clutching her stomach.

‘Look what you’ve done to my extensions,’ squealed Destiny as she saw a ragged skein of blonde hair floating on the surface of the lake. ‘I paid a fortune for those; that’s real human hair, you know.’

‘I’ve done you a favour,’ gasped Shannon. ‘With that ridiculous mane and those revolting fake tits, you look like the bastard child of Barbie and My Little Pony.’

At this, Destiny launched herself at Shannon, sending her toppling into the water. As the two women grappled in the shallows, trading slaps and insults, their skimpy tops quickly became see-through, prompting much cheering and wolf-whistling from the male spectators assembled on the bank.

Watching at a discreet distance, Sam Bentley couldn’t help feeling aroused at the sight of two scantily clad and indisputably gorgeous women wrestling with such

passion. Abi noticed too. 'Is that a wood in your pocket, Sam?' she said, giving him a sly nudge.

The golfer grinned as he playfully patted Abi's pert rump. 'Just you wait till later,' he whispered in her ear. 'I'm going to show you a boner like you've never seen before.'

Back on the roof terrace, Laura and her coterie were busy tucking into scones with clotted cream, their appetites whetted by the afternoon's unexpected drama. After four glasses of champagne, even Cindy was starting to relax. 'I gotta say, I wasn't expecting the tournament to be quite as much fun as this,' she admitted. 'I thought you Brits were supposed to be reserved.'

'Reserved? You've got to be kidding,' said Marianne with an arch smile. 'You wouldn't believe what goes on behind closed doors at St Benedict's.' She gestured towards the lake, where security guards had forcibly separated the two models and were now dragging them, long limbs flailing, out of the water. 'Trust me, darling, this is just the tip of the iceberg.'

Two

Jeff Goodbody unwrapped a package of fifty-pence pieces and let them drop noisily into the cash register. It was Sunday – the second busiest day of the week at St Benedict’s – and soon the club shop would be bustling with customers. As head golf pro, overseeing the shop was just one of Jeff’s many responsibilities. It wasn’t the most glamorous part of his job, but it did provide a useful front for a second, more illicit, merchandising business.

As he reached for a bag of notes, Jeff glanced over to the shop’s clothing section, where his two young assistants, Ace and Dylan, were unpacking a new consignment of designer knitwear.

‘Hey, boss, have you seen these?’ said Ace, holding up a Pringle V-neck with a pink-and-purple diamond motif. ‘Pretty cool, huh? I’ve put one aside for myself.’

Jeff made a face. ‘Pink’s a bit gay, isn’t it?’

‘Nah, mate. Pink’s not gay; pink’s metrosexual,’ said Ace, spreading the sweater across his chest. ‘I reckon I’d be a real lady killer in this.’ He flashed a cocky smile. ‘Not that I need any help in that department.’

Dylan, who was barely out of his teens, let out a long sigh. ‘I wish I had half your luck with women,’ he said disconsolately. ‘They all tell me I’m sweet, but none of them want to fuck me.’

Ace clapped him on the back. ‘Tell you what, mate.

I'm seeing Astrid tonight. I'll ask her if she's got any friends that fancy educating a young boy in the ways of the world.'

At this, Jeff's ears pricked up. 'Astrid? You mean that hot little masseuse – legs up to her armpits and tits like Exocet missiles?'

Ace grinned. 'That's the one – and you know what goesers these Swedish birds are. Let's just say my fitness levels have improved no end in the three weeks since our eyes met across a Lancashire hotpot in the staff canteen.' His smile grew even broader. 'You'll never guess what she suggested the other night as we were lying in bed.'

'What?' said Dylan eagerly.

'A *threesome*.'

Dylan gulped. '*I'm* not doing anything tonight.'

'Sorry, mate, you've got the wrong end of the stick. She meant me and two birds.'

Jeff shook his head. 'You are one lucky fucker, Ace.' He was about to request more details of Astrid's sexual predilections when the shop door began to rattle. He turned to see a man peering through the glass.

Ace mugged at Jeff. 'Can't he read? The sign on the door says we don't open till ten on Sundays.'

Jeff started moving towards the door. 'That's no customer; that's the new lad.'

Ace looked at Dylan. 'What new lad?'

A few moments later, Jeff was doing the introductions. 'This is Harry Hunter. He's going to be helping us out part-time till the end of the summer.'

Ace eyed Harry suspiciously, taking in his neatly pressed chinos and Oakley golf shoes, which looked as if

they'd just been taken out of the box. 'Pleased to meet you, mate. Are you PGA accredited?'

'Er, no. But I'm a pretty useful amateur.'

'What's your handicap?'

'Eighteen.'

'Hmmm . . . not bad,' Ace grudgingly conceded.

Dylan extended a hand towards the new recruit. 'Hey, Harry. I'm Dylan. Have you ever worked in a golf shop before?'

Harry smiled. 'Nope.'

'Any sort of shop?' Ace asked.

'Nope.'

'So what was it you were doing before?'

'Motorcycle courier.'

'*Motorcycle courier?*' Ace's tone was sneering. 'You're going to need a bit of training up then.'

'Come on now, lads,' said Jeff briskly. 'Harry's only just walked through the door. Let's not give him the third degree. Dylan, why don't you take him to the back and show him where the stockroom and the bogs are, while Ace finishes hanging up those sweaters?'

'Sure, boss,' said Dylan, who was always eager to please.

As soon as the others were out of earshot, Ace sidled up to Jeff. 'How did *he* get a job like this with no experience? You should've told me you were recruiting. I know fellas who'd give their right gonad to work in this place.'

Jeff ran a hand through his thinning hair. 'Trust me, if it was up to me, he wouldn't be here.'

Ace grimaced. 'Uh?'

'He's the general manager's godson. Lanchester hired

him. I didn't have any say in the matter. I only found out about it yesterday.'

Ace made a hissing noise. 'That fucking tosspot. This place ran perfectly smoothly until he came along, and now he keeps sticking his nose in where it's not wanted. It's not good, man, not good at all.'

Anthony Lanchester had been St Benedict's general manager for less than a month, but had already succeeded in making himself hugely unpopular. Aside from his willingness to berate the staff for petty infractions (five o'clock shadows, gum-chewing on duty, failure to wear regulation footwear), Lanchester also had an unfortunate speech impediment, which caused him to spray showers of spittle from a gap between his front teeth. His predecessor, who'd run St Benedict's for twenty-two long and successful years, had possessed an altogether different management style. Officially known as *laissez-faire*, it was perhaps more accurately described as 'turning a blind eye'.

Jeff placed a reassuring hand on his assistant's shoulder. 'Don't worry, we'll keep Harry busy in the stockroom, out of harm's way. In any case, Lanchester's promised me that he's only going to be here for a couple of months max, just until he's gained a bit of retail experience. But, as long as he *is* here, we're going to have to be very discreet about our little operation.'

Ace nodded firmly. 'Absolutely, boss. You can rely on me and Dylan.'

'Speaking of which, we're expecting a delivery this afternoon. I'm running a ladies' golf clinic from twelve till four, so you'll have to deal with it – okay?'

'No probs.'

Jeff dropped his voice. ‘We’re shifting so much gear, the Baron’s cutting the wholesale price by five per cent from next month.’

‘Hey, that’s good. Are we going to drop our prices too?’

‘What – and eat into our profit margins? No way. In fact, I’m thinking about putting our prices *up*. I’m sure high-rolling customers like ours can accommodate a little inflation.’

No doubt the Professional Golfers’ Association would have been horrified to learn that one of their members had been dealing drugs out of his club shop for years. Jeff could lay his hands on pretty much anything his customers requested, but cocaine had always been his mainstay. He’d started out small – a lone operator with his contraband locked away in a petty-cash box under the counter – dealing first to friends; and later, friends of friends. But, as word spread, Jeff’s empire expanded until, for reasons of practicality, it became necessary to cut his two young colleagues in on the deal. Together, Jeff, Ace and Dylan reaped a good living from their illegal activities, but they were just the middle men. It was the individual above them in the supply chain – the so-called Baron – who was making the serious money.

As Jeff and Ace continued their preparations front of shop, Dylan was giving Harry a guided tour of the well-organized stockroom. ‘It’s pretty straightforward,’ he said, gesturing to the ranks of shelves. ‘As you can see, everything’s labelled: golf balls there, tees down below, clubs at the back, and so on. The boss runs a pretty tight ship, and there’s nothing he hates more than a half-empty

display, so you'll need to keep replenishing stock throughout the day.'

Harry surveyed the shelves dispassionately. 'And what's in there?' he said, extending a foot and nudging a battered cardboard box, which was wedged below the bottom shelf.

Dylan held up a warning hand. 'Whatever you do, do not touch any of that stuff. That's our private stash.'

Harry frowned. 'Do you mind if I take a look?'

Dylan shrugged. 'I guess not.' He bent down and hauled the box out from under the shelf, folding back the flaps to reveal a stack of sportswear. 'These are damaged goods,' he said, by way of explanation. 'So the boss lets us keep them.'

'Damaged?' said Harry, picking up a pink-and-purple Pringle sweater, still encased in its cellophane wrapper. 'But this one hasn't even been opened.'

'Yeah, well, when I say *damaged*, I mean surplus to requirements – if you get my drift.'

Harry broke into a smile. 'Oh yeah, right, gotcha. One of the perks of the job, eh?'

Dylan nodded. 'You know what, Harry, for a bloke with no retail experience, you certainly catch on quick.'

By the time the club shop opened its doors half an hour later, there was already a small queue of punters outside, eager to book golf lessons, try out the latest equipment and peruse the extensive range of casualwear. Despite Ace's misgivings about Harry, he was grateful for the extra pair of hands and impressed with the newcomer's willingness to learn. It was during the lunchtime lull, as

the three men enjoyed a game of *boules*, using golf balls and a strip of AstroTurf borrowed from the window display, that a five-foot eleven-inch blonde wandered into the shop.

‘Hello, boys,’ she said, stepping over a golf ball. ‘Not interrupting anything, am I?’

Despite himself, Harry couldn’t help staring. The woman, who was dressed in a short, tight-fitting white dress that left little to the imagination, was strikingly beautiful. What’s more, her Amazonian build, razor-sharp cheekbones and ice-blond mane of hair lent her a tantalizing air of superiority. But before he could gather his thoughts sufficiently to offer her some assistance Ace had moved to the woman’s side, grabbed her about the rump and proceeded to give her a slow, and very noisy, open-mouthed kiss. At the same time, Dylan dropped to his knees and began gathering up the golf balls, using the opportunity to sneak a peek up the woman’s dress. Embarrassed, Harry turned to a display of overpriced golf novelties and pretended to be inspecting a teddy bear dressed in a Burberry check cap and plus fours.

When Ace finally came up for air, several minutes later, the first thing he saw was Dylan crouching on the floor beside him, head craned upwards. ‘Get up off the floor, mate,’ he said, shaking his head despairingly.

Dylan grinned as he rose to his feet, fists filled with golf balls. ‘Hi, Astrid.’

‘Hi, sweetie,’ she said, patting him on the head as if he were a pet Pekinese.

‘Why don’t you go and make us all a cup of tea, eh?’

said Ace, using his thumb to gesture towards the back room.

‘Okay,’ said Dylan, setting the golf balls down on the counter. ‘How do you take yours, Astrid?’

The masseuse shook her head. ‘Not for me, thanks. I can’t stay long; I’m on my lunch hour.’

‘Awww,’ said Ace as he traced the contours of Astrid’s arse with his hand. ‘I guess I’m just going to have to save myself for later.’

Astrid bit her lip. ‘Actually, that’s what I came to tell you. I’m going to have to blow you out tonight.’

Ace’s face fell. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘Sorry, Ace. I’ve got to do the late shift. One of the other therapists has gone home sick and they’ve asked me to cover for her.’

‘Can’t you tell them you’ve already made plans?’

‘I *could* – but they’ve offered to pay me double time.’ She reached out to stroke Ace’s hair. ‘I’ll make it up to you, I promise.’ She pressed her lips to his ear. ‘I’ve spoken to my friend Eleanor. She says she’d love to have some fun with us. She’s a yoga teacher and she’s *verry* flexible. Her crouching scorpion pose will bring tears to your eyes.’

Ace let out a lewd chuckle. ‘Sounds interesting.’

Suddenly a customer appeared at the door. Instantly, Ace and Astrid sprang apart. It was Sam Bentley. Tall and broad-shouldered with a powerful physical presence, he seemed to suck all the air out of the room. Harry, who’d been lurking behind a display of putters, began walking towards him.

‘Good afternoon, sir. Can I be of any assistance?’

Ace elbowed him aside. 'No, you're all right, mate. I'll take care of Mr Bentley.' He looked at Astrid. 'Would you excuse us for a moment?'

'Oh no, please . . . I don't mind waiting my turn. You must finish seeing to this young lady first,' said Sam, unashamedly looking Astrid up and down, taking in the coltish legs and the ample breasts straining against the buttons of her uniform.

The masseuse smiled. 'It's okay, I was just leaving.'

Sam narrowed his eyes sexily. 'Don't I know you?'

Now it was Astrid's turn to give *him* the once over. 'I work in the spa, but I'm pretty sure you've never come to me for treatment. I don't usually forget a face.'

Sam held her gaze. 'And what sort of treatment do you specialize in?'

'Swedish massage.'

'Really?' The golfer reached a hand over his shoulder and began rubbing an imaginary ache in his deltoid. 'You know, I could do with a good pummelling. I'm feeling quite stiff after the tournament yesterday.'

'Well then, you must book an appointment. I'm sure I'd have you loosened up in no time. Just ask for Astrid.'

'I will,' said Sam. 'I definitely will.'

'I look forward to it,' said Astrid neutrally. She raised a hand in farewell. 'I'll catch up with you guys later.'

Sam sprang to the door, opened it, then stood, half blocking the exit, so that Astrid had to squeeze past him to exit, the tips of her breasts grazing his muscular chest as she did so.

Ace watched them, trying not to let his irritation show. 'Right,' he said, rubbing his hands together. 'Do you want

to pop into the office with me, Mr Bentley, and we can sort out that bit of business?’

‘Sure,’ said Sam, letting the rucksack he was carrying drop from his shoulder.

Harry watched as the two men walked towards the door at the rear of the shop. En route, they passed Dylan, who was carrying two steaming mugs of tea. ‘Afternoon, Mr Bentley,’ he said cheerily. ‘Congratulations on winning the tournament. I followed you every step of the way.’

‘Yeah, I saw you in the crowd,’ Sam replied. ‘I appreciate your support.’

Dylan smiled. ‘No problem.’ He walked over to Harry and handed him one of the mugs. ‘Here you are – get that down you.’ He took a noisy slurp from his own mug. ‘So, how have you enjoyed your first morning?’

‘It’s been good, really good. I hope I haven’t got in your way too much.’

‘Not at all. We’ve been glad of the help, to be honest.’

Harry nodded towards the *STAFF ONLY* sign at the back of the shop. ‘I thought punters weren’t allowed in the office.’

Dylan winked. ‘Yeah, but we make an exception for Sam Bentley. He’s one of our best customers.’

Harry bent down and picked up a stray golf ball. ‘So what’s this bit of business then?’

Dylan shifted from foot to foot awkwardly. ‘Uh, I’m not exactly sure. We had a new delivery of Nike golf gloves yesterday – we haven’t had a chance to unpack them yet. I expect Ace is giving Sam a sneak preview.’

Harry stroked his chin thoughtfully. ‘Does Jeff know about this?’

‘Course he does – Jeff’s known Sam for years. Don’t worry, mate, it’s all kosher.’

‘Can I ask you something else?’

‘Fire away.’

‘Why is Ace called Ace?’

‘Cos the lucky bugger always comes up trumps – or at least he does as far as women are concerned.’ Dylan set his mug down on the counter and lifted his hands to his chest, cupping a pair of imaginary breasts. ‘Did you see the norks on Astrid?’

‘It was hard to miss them,’ said Harry, grinning. ‘I must say, I wouldn’t mind a brisk rub down with her myself.’

Dylan snickered. Something told him Harry was going to fit in just fine at St Benedict’s.

Astrid couldn’t help feeling guilty as she hurried back to the spa. She was fond of Ace, and she didn’t like lying to him. Still, she comforted herself, it was only a white lie. She *was* working late – except not quite in the way Ace imagined. The fact was, Astrid’s spa duties extended far beyond Swedish massage. Before, after – and even, on occasion, *during* – her regular shifts, she administered her own, rather unique, brand of treatment to private clients. What’s more, a monthly backhander to the senior receptionist was all it took to ensure her extracurricular activities remained a secret from the management.

Earlier that day, Astrid had received a last-minute booking from a regular client – one far too lucrative to turn away. The minute her scheduled shift was over, she started making the necessary preparations, which began with a visit to the spa’s staffroom. After removing a small

polycarbonate suitcase from her locker, she wheeled it back to her treatment room, which was situated at the end of a long corridor and separated from the other therapists' rooms by a heavy glass fire door, making it virtually soundproof. Then she started to unpack, placing each item on a stainless-steel trolley, which had been cleared of its usual cargo of massage oils. First came a wooden paddle made of birchwood, its surface drilled with small holes to reduce air resistance. It was joined by a standard riding crop – the sort that could be purchased at any tack shop. A pair of custom-made iron wrist fetters and matching ankle cuffs emerged, followed by a leather head-harness, incorporating a built-in blindfold, and a gag, engineered from a rubber ball threaded on a length of rope. Then came a set of five whips, which she arranged in order of intensity. First, a deerskin flogger, whose soft lashes were wondrously sensual to those who appreciated such things. The second was fashioned from horsehair, which warmed the flesh nicely. The third was a heavy-duty strop, designed to shower the skin with leather kisses. The fourth was made of rubber and small enough to fit in the palm of a hand. Its lashes were short and thin – perfect for close-up work. The fifth was a traditional South African bullwhip, with a solid-core rubber shaft and a braided leather tail that was almost as long as Astrid herself. With the tools of her trade assembled, all Astrid had to do was place a soft, clean towel on the treatment couch and swap her orthopaedic sandals for a pair of black patent-leather stilettos with a punishing five-inch heel.

*

The Right Honourable Hugh de Montfort had been the member of parliament in the safe Conservative seat of Kirkhulme for as long as anyone could remember. Driven and obsessive, he was famed for two things: his stalwart defence of the pro-hunting lobby and his magnificent waxed moustache. Now in his late fifties and married with two grown-up sons, he had been visiting Astrid – or Mistress Valkyrie, as she was also known – once a fortnight for the past year. As usual, the masseuse greeted him in reception and ushered him to her treatment room, taking care to lock the door behind them. Hugh set down his briefcase and looked at her expectantly.

All at once, Astrid's beautiful face twisted into a mask of disgust. 'What have I told you about staring?' she growled through gritted teeth.

Instantly, Hugh's eyes fell to the floor. 'I'm sorry, mistress,' he grovelled. 'It won't happen again.'

'It had better not – or you will receive a punishment of the severest order.'

Hugh bit his lip and stared hard at his polished brogues.

Astrid prodded his briefcase with her toe. 'Have you brought something to change into?'

'Yes, mistress.'

'Then get on with it, you loathsome little worm. Mistress Valkyrie's time is extremely precious.'

As Hugh shuffled off behind the hospital-style screen, briefcase in hand, Astrid took the opportunity to slip a close-fitting black leather gauntlet on to her right hand, before taking up position beside the trolley. A few minutes later, Hugh emerged. He was completely naked, save for a large nappy, fashioned from a white hand towel

and secured by two kilt pins. The wodge of fabric between his legs caused him to waddle as he made his way towards the treatment couch.

Astrid snapped her fingers impatiently. ‘Hurry,’ she barked. ‘Get your pathetic arse on this couch.’

‘Yes, mistress,’ said Hugh, hurling himself on to the couch with gusto. ‘How do you want me, mistress?’

‘On your back,’ Astrid declared, a cruel smile forming on her pink-frosted lips. She reached for the wrist restraints and slipped them over Hugh’s hands, locking them securely. He whimpered in delight as she attached each one to the steel bar that surrounded the trolley so that his arms were effectively pinned to his sides. ‘Now, you snivelling specimen of manhood, I want you to recount each and every one of your misdemeanours from the past fortnight. And be warned . . .’ she took a step closer and flexed her gauntleted fist threateningly ‘. . . I shall know if you’re holding out on me.’

Hugh took a deep breath. ‘I exaggerated my expenses claim this month.’

Astrid tutted. ‘*And?*’

‘I slept with my junior researcher. Again.’

Astrid took hold of one end of Hugh’s moustache and tweaked it hard. The MP winced but didn’t cry out. ‘Anything else?’

‘I told one of my disabled constituents there was nothing I could do to stop her mobility allowance being cut.’ The MP paused. ‘I lied.’

‘Dear, oh dear, oh dear,’ said Astrid as her fingers closed round the leather handle of the deerskin flogger. ‘I can see I’m going to have my work cut out this evening.’

Three

The first time Cindy set eyes on Jackson West, she was watering the Chinese wisteria that sprouted from a terracotta trough on the second-floor balcony. Her husband, Kieran, employed a gardener to maintain the acre of lush landscaping that surrounded their five-bedroom home in the exclusive Kirkhulme enclave of Queen's Crescent. The wisteria, however, was Cindy's pet project. It had been top of her shopping list when she arrived in England as a newlywed and saw the mock-Georgian monstrosity Kieran called home. It wasn't that Cedar Lodge was ugly so much as soulless, and Cindy was hoping the wisteria – if and when the darned thing ever flowered – would help bring the house to life, while going some way towards masking the pristine brickwork that betrayed its late-twentieth-century origins. Aesthetics were very important to Cindy, and she'd always preferred period real estate. Back in southern California, she'd been the proud owner of a pink stucco *casa* with a pretty courtyard garden and stunning views of the Santa Ynez mountains. A textbook example of 1920s Spanish colonial-revival architecture, the house had provided the perfect showcase for her talents. And, as one of Santa Barbara's most sought-after interior designers, she had used her considerable influence to negotiate a hefty discount on everything, from the hand-painted Mexican tile fireplace to the modernist light fittings.

Cindy had certainly come a long way from the Fresno trailer park where she'd spent her childhood. After graduating *magna cum laude* from LA's prestigious School of Interior Design, she'd set up her own business at the tender age of twenty-four. Her eclectic style, which juxtaposed time periods, ethnicities, materials and artistic traditions, quickly marked her out as something of a maverick and earned her frequent mentions in glossy style bibles, as well as an honourable mention in *Architectural Digest's* annual 'Ones to Watch' list. But it was a commission to make over a Republican senator's holiday home – in which she daringly combined Asian *objets d'art*, 1940s Biedermeier furnishings and Modernist black-and-white photography – that earned Cindy the front cover of *Elle Decor* and sealed her reputation. By her mid-twenties, she had a raft of wealthy clients who admired and appreciated her daredevil nature and her no-nonsense personality. Being extraordinarily photogenic helped, of course, though this wasn't something Cindy liked to acknowledge. She preferred to think she had got where she was thanks to a combination of talent, determination and plain old-fashioned hard work. As the years went by, Cindy notched up a string of lucrative and high-profile commissions, so that by the time she was twenty-nine, her life was just about perfect. Her bank balance was healthy, her home was beautiful, her friends were influential and she was highly respected in her chosen career. And then she did what she always swore she'd never do. She gave it all up. For a man.

She met Kieran McAllister at the Ocean Meadows Country Club in Santa Barbara, where he was competing

in a charity pro-am. The British golfer had swung into the big league the previous year after winning the Dutch Open. Keen to raise his profile and earn some serious cash, Kieran had launched himself on the US professional circuit, where he was now in his second season. However, it wasn't his sporting prowess that caught Cindy's eye as she watched him stride across the fairway, golf club slung casually across his shoulder as if he were enjoying a Sunday morning friendly with the lads, but rather his piercing blue eyes and the easy way he laughed and joked with his teenage caddie.

Afterwards, the two had both been guests at a lavish champagne reception in the clubhouse, where Kieran, who had finished in fourth place, was much in demand. Across the room, meanwhile, Cindy found herself trapped in a spectacularly dull conversation with the golf club's vice-chairman. Their paths seemed destined never to cross, but then a woman standing next to Cindy, a whiny-voiced young media mogul's daughter, so skinny she looked as if she could travel by fax, dropped her champagne glass on the ceramic hearth tiles surrounding the grandiose fireplace, screaming ridiculously as the glass shattered and cold liquid splashed her toes.

Hearing the commotion, Kieran glanced towards the fireplace. Then he saw Cindy, still in conversation with the vice-chairman. At that moment, she happened to glance up and their eyes locked together. Kieran smiled at her, and Cindy smiled back, aware that she was blushing. In that second it seemed as if they were the only two people in the room, but then a white-coated waiter with a tray of canapés stepped into Cindy's line of vision and

the moment was broken. By the time the waiter moved on, Kieran had disappeared, having been press-ganged into signing autographs by an over-excitable PR woman. But Cindy had made a lasting impression on him. How could she not have? She was the most beautiful woman in the room. Bowled over by the almond-eyed redhead in the tight-fitting chocolate lace sheath, Kieran made it his business to discover her identity. And when he discovered that she was one of the prizes at the charity auction – or, to be precise, she had pledged to design a room (materials not included) for the winning bidder – the golfer was determined to win her services at any cost. Later, at the auction, a nervous Cindy had watched from the sidelines as the bidding started at \$1,000. It quickly rose in \$250 increments and one by one the bidders dropped out, until finally it was just Kieran and the club's vice-chairman going head to head. And when the MC's gavel finally went down, Cindy was thrilled to discover it was the hot young golfer who had secured her services for the princely sum of \$18,000. She'd been dismayed when Kieran rushed off to a press conference straight after the auction, without even coming over to introduce himself. But the following day he sent flowers to her hotel room together with a note, explaining that he was living in a rented condo in Malibu and asking if he could forego the room design in exchange for a date.

Four months later, Kieran proposed to Cindy, going down on one knee at the eighteenth hole of the La Quinta Country Club in Palm Springs, where he was competing in the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic. Cindy practically choked in her haste to say 'yes', much to the delight of

the assembled spectators, who whooped and cheered their approval. They married in Malibu the following summer – and, given the couple’s sizeable joint income, the wedding was a predictably lavish affair. The ceremony took place outdoors, on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and afterwards the eighty or so guests – among them a three-strong reporting team from *American Bride* magazine – retired to a vast white marquee, decorated in Cindy’s trademark eclectic style. At the end of the evening, as the couple stood hand in hand on the bluff enjoying the \$20,000 firework display they’d laid on for their guests, Cindy had to pinch herself to believe this was really happening to a scrappy piece of poor white trash like her.

After lengthy discussions, the couple had decided to settle in England. Both were keen to start a family and they agreed that the Cheshire countryside – where Kieran still owned a house, just a stone’s throw from the prestigious St Benedict’s Country Club & Spa – offered the best and safest environment to raise their future brood. The sky was grey and overcast when they arrived at Delchester airport after a blissful three-week honeymoon in Bali. It had taken them ages to find a cab and, when they did, the driver had insisted on taking every corner at breakneck speed. When they arrived in Queen’s Crescent, Cindy had stepped out of the cab, desperately jetlagged and shivering in her thin camisole top. She tried to hide her dismay as she surveyed her new home’s self-conscious Palladian-style portico and ghastly lead-light double glazing. ‘Let me show you around,’ Kieran said as he threw open the front door, excited as a schoolboy. He paused. ‘But there’s one thing I’ve got to do first.’ Bending down,

he scooped her into his arms. ‘Welcome to Blighty, Mrs McAllister.’ Despite her dismay at the house, Cindy laughed in delight as her new husband carried her over the threshold.

Inside, the rooms lay cold and unwelcoming and a faint smell of mothballs hung in the air. Nonetheless, Cindy couldn’t help being impressed by the billiards room, state-of-the-art gymnasium, triple garage and outdoor jacuzzi. Few people realize just how wealthy pro golfers are – even the ones who aren’t household names. The previous season, Kieran had raked in half a million through prize money alone. Added to that, a lucrative sportswear contract, and he could afford a very comfortable standard of living indeed. What’s more, Kirkhulme was an upmarket area, as Cindy had discovered from her exhaustive internet research. With a millionaire on every street corner, it was the ideal place to relaunch her career. She just hoped this quaint Cheshire village was ready for her daring design style.

All but one of the twenty houses in Queen’s Crescent had been built in the 1980s – havens for the desperately unimaginative soccer stars and manufacturing millionaires who flocked to the then newly fashionable village in search of peace, tranquillity and off-road parking. To Cindy’s eyes, the houses were frighteningly similar; all mock-Georgian, each with a 4x4 in the driveway and some object featured like a museum piece in the living-room window: a bulbous lamp, a china ornament, a vase of stiff-necked lilies. But the house at the south end of the Crescent, directly next door to Cedar Lodge, dated from a much earlier era.

Coldcliffe Hall had intrigued and enchanted Cindy from the moment she saw it. A particularly elaborate specimen of Victorian Gothic, the house seemed to disregard authentic proportions, focusing instead on exaggerated architectural eccentricities, from quatrefoil windows and flying buttresses to leering gargoyles, a pair of slender turrets and even a working bell tower. Set in a double-size plot, it was surrounded by sweeping lawns, which included an aviary, rose garden, generously proportioned outdoor swimming pool and, at the very centre, an ornate fountain, whose water gushed from the stony mouth of a falling Icarus. Both the house and gardens exuded a faint but discernible air of neglect, which only served to heighten their sense of mystery. One of the tall stained-glass windows was cracked from top to bottom, a small section of the wooden gingerbread trim was missing from the gable end and the leafy vine, which sprawled over the vaulted entrance porch, had clearly gone unpruned for some considerable time.

On her first night in England, as she and her new husband drank Shiraz in their vast kitchen, Cindy had casually enquired after her new neighbours. ‘The people at number eighteen are friendly enough,’ said Kieran. ‘He’s a dentist and she’s something in finance. They’ve got twins, a girl and boy – darling little things.’ He leaned across the table. ‘Hopefully we’ll be able to provide them with some playmates one of these days.’

Cindy smiled. ‘But not for a couple of years at least, honey; that’s what we agreed. I’ve got to get the business up and running first.’

Laughing, Kieran reached for the wine bottle. ‘You’re

the boss, but I reckon the sooner we get started on this family of ours, the better.'

'Hmmm, we'll have to see about that,' Cindy said, pursing her lips in mock disapproval. 'And the folks on the other side, in the amazing Gothic mansion, do they have kids too?'

'Ah, Coldcliffe Hall; that belongs to Jackson West. As far as I know he lives alone.' Kieran took a slug of wine. 'I don't suppose the name means anything to you, does it?'

Cindy thought for a moment, then shook her head. 'Uh-uh.'

'If you were a fan of Formula One, you'd be dead chuffed at the prospect of living next door to him.'

'Oh?' said Cindy eagerly. 'So he's a famous racing driver?'

Kieran shook his head. 'Notorious more like. A few years ago he was one of Britain's brightest racing talents, but his career came to a grinding halt when he crashed into a wall at the Belgian Grand Prix.'

'How awful – was he badly hurt?'

'From what I recall, he only sustained minor injuries from the impact itself. But a fuel line must have broken because the car went up in flames. It was almost a minute before the marshals managed to extinguish the blaze and pull him clear.'

Cindy shuddered. 'I'm amazed he survived. How old was he?'

'Late twenties I think. He was a real looker too. A bit of a ladies' man by all accounts, although I couldn't give you the details; you know me – I never read the gossip columns. But after the accident he retired from racing

and turned into a recluse, literally overnight. He didn't go out, didn't give interviews . . . nothing. He was living in London and then I think he left the country for a while. Then a few months after I went to the States, I heard that he'd moved to Kirkhulme.'

'So you've never met him?'

'Nope.' Kieran reached an arm across the polished oak table and began stroking Cindy's milky forearm with his fingertips. 'Anyway, babe, why are we wasting time talking about some fucked-up ex-racing driver? Why don't we finish this bottle of wine and get an early night? I'm dying to christen that four-poster.'

So Cindy forgot about Jackson West, at least for a while. But as the days turned into weeks and she still hadn't caught a glimpse of her mysterious new neighbour, she began to wonder if he wasn't awfully lonely, holed up in his Gothic pile. He had plenty of visitors – a daily housekeeper; the whey-faced pool boy, whose white van threw up a shower of gravel as it skidded to a halt outside the house; a weekly grocery delivery and regular supplies of wine and beer from the local vintner. Cindy watched them all come and go. But where were his friends and family, she wondered – and where, more intriguingly, was the man himself? She thought about dropping by unannounced, just to say hello and let him know Cedar Lodge was now occupied, after standing empty for more than a year. But something told her that a man like Jackson West would hardly appreciate a cold call. So she did nothing, and hoped for a chance encounter. And then, a few days after the pro-celebrity golf tournament at St Benedict's, Cindy's wish was granted.

Many times, she had stepped onto the large balcony that led from the master bedroom suite and gazed out at Coldcliffe Hall, silently admiring the Victorian architect's handiwork. From the edge of the balcony she had a bird's-eye view of the mansion's north elevation and the garden below. But that balmy August evening, she was too engrossed in twining the Chinese wisteria's tender new stems around the wooden trellis screwed to the brickwork to notice any movement next door. It was only when she heard a long, low sigh from somewhere below that she stood up straight and peered over the balustrade.

He was walking in the rose garden – a dark-haired man of average height and slender build, dressed in well-fitting jeans and a black shirt. Dusk was closing in and the man's face was turned away from Cindy, but his shoulders were hunched, lending him an air of melancholy. As she watched, he stooped down and picked up a fallen rose petal, stroking its velvety surface before pressing it to his nose. She waited until he'd placed it carefully – almost reverentially – back on the ground before she called out to him.

'Excuse me, Mr West?' she said, her voice sounding thin and high-pitched. The man started and spun round, eyes straining in the gloom. Cindy waved. 'Up here, on the balcony.' Tilting his head back, Jackson West locked eyes with Cindy. Now that he was facing her full on, she could make out a long keloid scar, which sliced his face in two on the diagonal. She laughed nervously. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was out here watering the wisteria and I saw you taking the night air.' Suddenly aware that she was gabbling, Cindy paused to clear her

throat. 'I'm Cindy McAllister. Kieran and I – that is, my husband and I – moved in a few weeks back. I've been meaning to come over and introduce myself.'

After a small pause, Jackson smiled tightly and raised an arm in greeting. 'Pleased to meet you,' he said, although he didn't sound pleased at all. He turned and glanced back at the house. 'I'm terribly sorry,' he said softly, 'I think I can hear my phone.' Abruptly, he turned on his heel and started back to the house, walking at first and then breaking into a jog. Cindy cocked her head, listening for the sound of ringing. The night was silent.