

One

Stevie Flint had lived in London for seven years. She no longer had the soundtrack to the movie of her life playing in her head, but had only just turned thirty and could still appreciate the buzz of the city as it headed towards night. She walked out of Tottenham Court Road Underground station, noticing a faintly sulphurous tinge to the air. Stevie shaded her eyes with Jackie O sunglasses, suddenly remembering Jasmine's, the only smart dress shop in her home town, its window screened with yellow cellophane to protect gowns from a rarely existent sun. London had a hint of yellow to it today, she decided, a septic glare. She set out in what she hoped was the right direction for the private members' club Simon had suggested. Her new sandals were too high for a long hike but she had traced her route earlier on Google Maps and been reassured that she could walk the distance without too much damage to her feet.

Soho was full of pubs and all of them were full. Drinkers had spilled out on to the pavements and it seemed that everywhere there were pretty girls and men in suits, minus ties, all of them talking and laughing and all with a glass in

their hands. Stevie caught snatches of conversation as she passed:

‘ . . . smooth, like a billiard ball into a pocket . . . ’

‘ . . . six down and he refuses to call in a . . . ’

‘ . . . I told her if she don’t like it she can . . . ’

‘ . . . that’s me done in Deptford.’

Stevie stepped on to the road to avoid a crush of bodies and felt the skirt of her dress flutter in the slipstream of a passing moped. There was dust and laughter and petrol in air that had been breathed in and breathed out, breathed in and breathed out; it was better not to think about how many times because that might set her to thinking about the water she drank, or how much of the heat currently broiling the city came from the sun, and how much radiated from the strangers pressed around her.

Stevie paused, unsure if she was in the right street after all. She took a deep breath, feeling the air hot and tarry against the back of her throat. Her shift had ended at three that morning and a headache threatened at the back of her eyes. A drunk man in shirtsleeves slid free of the crowd and put an arm around her. She felt his body heat, the sweat of his underarms touching the back of her neck. ‘Do you fancy another one, just like the other one?’ the stranger whispered in her ear, his hop-scented breath warm against her face. Stevie would like to have slipped off one of her new sandals and stabbed its heel in his eye, but instead she gave the drunk a shove in the ribs and wriggled free of his grasp. He called after her, ‘Was it something I said?’ She heard his friends laughing, and fought the urge to go back and tip their pints from their hands.

‘See how much you laugh then.’

Stevie realised she had said the words out loud and glanced around to check if anyone had noticed, but she was alone on a crowded London street, and if anyone had, they paid her no mind.

Perhaps it was the incident with the drunk that made Stevie lose her way, or maybe it was her usual lack of direction that snared her in the maze of Soho streets. She phoned Simon and when he didn't pick up, left a message, making an effort not to sound irritated. After all, it was she who was late and it wasn't Simon's fault that her bare sole was blistering. Stevie checked the route on her iPhone, retraced her steps and finally found the club, a discreet doorway with only a number to distinguish it.

The interior was self-consciously stylish, a dimly lit retro-Nordic exercise in design that would hang around for a few years, then be revamped in response to some new trend. Usually it amused her that Simon, a man whose business relied on cleanliness and precision, liked these desperately trendy dives, but they had not seen each other all week and tonight she would have preferred somewhere more intimate.

Stevie smiled at the hostess, gave her name and watched the girl's green-lacquered fingernail trace a path down the list of reservations. It wasn't really a members' club, just somewhere that people who had decided they wanted to be fashionable paid to get a table. The hostess's finger paused and she put a tick next to Stevie's name. Simon's name was slanted beside hers, unadorned by ticks: *Dr Simon Sharkey*.

‘Am I the first?’

The receptionist was signalling for a waiter to show Stevie to a table. She turned to reply and Stevie thought she saw a ghost of recognition flit across her face. The girl would work late too, Stevie realised, and for a moment she glimpsed a life not so different from her own: the high heels kicked off beside the couch, the calorie-counted snack eaten by the glow of the computer, the TV murmuring on, barely watched.

'Yes,' said the hostess, her smile wider than before. 'You're the first.'

The smile told Stevie that the girl couldn't place her. But no one had ever admitted to guessing where they knew her from, even when Stevie told them.

By the time she had finished her second glass of wine Stevie knew Simon wasn't going to turn up, but she ordered a third anyway. She didn't bother to glance again at the bars on her phone. She had already checked them and knew that the signal in the club was fine. The door opened and two girls in short summer dresses entered. They were laughing, but the sound of their laughter and high heels was drowned by the heavy beat of the music.

Something had probably come up. Things had come up already in the time she and Simon had known each other, his job made that inevitable, but he had always phoned, or got someone to phone for him.

The two girls were buying drinks. Their skin and dresses were stained yellow for a moment and then shifted to pink, violet, aqua as the mood lights embedded below the bar's glowing surface drifted through the spectrum. The barman

turned towards the gantry, lifting a hand to his mouth to cover a cough, and as if in response, one of the girls also started coughing and raised a handkerchief to her mouth. The other girl said something that made all three of them laugh again.

Stevie glanced at the five-minutes-fast clock above the bar. Her friend Joanie had been more available since her split with Derek. There was still time to call her and arrange to meet for a drink. She would be full of outrage at Simon's defection and that would help to put it in perspective.

On a video above the bar a rapper and his crew were making bad-boy gestures, while a group of skinny girls with inflated breasts and improbable rears, paraded behind them in high heels and bikinis. The rapper squatted low, his knees scissored far apart, and pulled the camera close to his face. Stevie thought he was repeating *'ho', 'ho', 'ho', 'ho', 'ho', 'ho', 'ho . . .'* but the club was noisy and she might have been mistaken.

The understanding crease in Joanie's brow would be too much tonight, Stevie decided. Maybe later she would be able to indulge in a post mortem, but for now she would leave her relationship with Simon on ice.

Stevie slipped her mobile into her bag and slid from her seat, leaving the unfinished glass on the table and trying not to care that she had been stood up. She had done her own share of letting-down in the past, and there was still the chance that something had happened at the hospital, something so quick and so urgent that there had not been time for Simon to ring her.

The barman's grin was bright and consoling, the hostess's smile sympathetic. Stevie's smile outshone them both, but

their pity embarrassed her, and it was an effort to make her eyes sparkle the way Joanie had taught her. She stepped from the bar into the warm evening haze of London in summer, and retraced her steps to the Underground station. This was their first broken date, but recently Simon had been prone to absences, even when they were together. Stevie had made a vow never to ask a man what he was thinking, but Simon's long silences and distant gaze had tempted her to break it. Now she thought she knew what had been on his mind. She had been bored with the places where he liked them to meet. Simon, it seemed, had been tired of her.

Stevie swiped her Oyster card and took the stairs down to the Central line platform. A breeze gusted from somewhere in the network of tunnels, rippling the skirt of her dress, touching the sensitive skin of her thighs. She clenched her hands, enjoying the dig of her nails against her palm. When Simon phoned, she would forgive their thwarted date; tell him it had been nice, but it was time for them both to move on.

A train rattled into the station. Stevie waited for the doors to breathe open. The carriage was almost full and she had already taken a seat beside a teenage boy before she realised that he was bent under the weight of a summer cold. The boy coughed, not bothering to cover his mouth. Stevie considered moving, but stayed where she was and fished her phone from her bag. There were no missed calls. She switched it off, trying not to care. An abandoned *Evening Standard* was crumpled on the floor by her feet, the MP, the vicar and the banker splashed across its front page. Sometimes it seemed as if civilisation rested on a slender thread.

Stevie forced herself to smile. She had been looking forward to seeing Simon, to sitting across the table from him, both of them aware of each other's skin and of what would follow later in the cool of his apartment; the doors to the balcony open, the curtains shifting in the breeze as their bodies moved together in the bedroom. Disappointment was tempting her to get things out of proportion. Simon might yet have a good excuse for not turning up, and even if he didn't, all that had happened was a man she liked had let her down. It wasn't as if anyone had died.