

SARRRA
MANNING

nine
uses
for an **ex-**
boyfriend

DOES TRUE
LOVE REALLY
LAST FOREVER?

About the Book

Hope Delafield hasn't always had an easy life.

She has red hair and a temper to match, as her mother is constantly reminding her. She can't wear heels, is terrified of heights and being a primary school teacher isn't exactly the job she dreamed of doing, especially when her class are stuck on the two times table.

At least Hope has Jack, and Jack is the God of boyfriends. He's sweet, kind, funny, has a killer smile, a cool job on a fashion magazine and he's pretty (but in a manly way). Hope knew that Jack was The One ever since their first kiss after the Youth Club Disco and thirteen years later, they're still totally in love. Totally. And then Hope catches Jack kissing her best friend Susie ...

Does true love forgive and forget?

Or does it get mad ... and get even?

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*Nine Uses for an
Ex-Boyfriend*

Sarra Manning

Dedicated to my best friend, Kate Hodges, who was gestating and then giving birth to Dusty and Arthur while I was writing this book. Your finished product totally trumps mine!

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Prologue

It was obvious it wasn't the first time that Hope's boyfriend and her best friend had kissed. It also looked, to the casual observer, as if they usually did more than kiss when they weren't on a clock or running the risk of being discovered.

Hope could hear the wet clash of their mouths and Jack's groans as Susie stroked him, and she didn't know why she was simply standing there when she should have been charging out of the back door and shrieking something along the lines of, *What the hell are you two doing? You utter, utter bastards!*

Jack and Susie were illuminated beautifully in the glare of the sensor light that Jack's dad had fitted on the outside wall to scare off the foxes that kept scavenging through their bins, and Hope had a perfect view of Jack's hand threaded in Susie's glossy treacly brown hair so her beautiful face was upturned, his other hand making strange, contorted shapes under her Catherine Malandrino silk top. If she squinted extra hard she was sure she could even see the tangle of tongues as they kissed as if they were starring in their own porn film.

Jack never kisses me like that any more, Hope thought to herself as she stood on the steps that led from their tiny kitchen to their tiny back garden. Hasn't done for ages and ages. Not since they'd been teenagers snogging furiously in the no-man's-land between their respective houses, ten minutes after Hope's curfew had ended. But Hope would never have shoved her hands down the front of Jack's jeans in those days, as Susie was doing now, and if Jack had tried to touch her breasts *under* her clothes, Hope would have

screamed loud enough to wake her parents, if her parents had actually been asleep instead of staying awake until their only daughter was safely tucked up in her single bed.

And still Hope stood there as if her feet had taken root, hands lifted to her mouth to mute any noise she might make. The scent of garlic clinging to her fingers made her stomach heave and oh God ... Her childhood sweetheart, the boy she'd been with for half her lifetime, her one true love, the man she was meant to be with for ever and ever and ever, amen, was passionately and furiously kissing her best friend.

How could they?

Chapter One

AT PRECISELY TWO on a sunny Saturday afternoon Hope Delafield came to the sudden and shocking realisation that she should never have decided to throw a dinner party.

This epiphany came during her fifth attempt to tie up her lamb roulade without the stuffing oozing out. The same leg of lamb that had meant an hour-and-a-half round trip, up and down several hills, to get to the organic butcher's in Kentish Town. It was only after she'd lugged the lamb and four bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc back home in the blistering early-September heat, that Hope realised she'd forgotten to ask the butcher to butterfly the joint and had been forced to retrace her steps.

At least it had been a brief respite and a dose of fresh air for Hope who'd been up since six making double pesto for the roulade filling, a marinade for her scallops starter and soaking brioche in Cointreau for a bread and butter pudding. 'God, I never want to see another pine nut as long as I live,' she proclaimed loudly, but it wasn't loud enough to be heard over the racket of *Red Dead Redemption* and the new Fleet Foxes album. Hope didn't know how Jack could play video games and listen to music at the same time, and she wanted to barge into the living room and yell at him, because the noise was giving her a tension headache.

She even took a step out of the kitchen but stopped herself. She was getting a tension headache because there was double pesto dribbling out of her roulade on to the

worktop and even with the back door open their tiny kitchen was stuffy and hot. None of that was Jack's fault and he'd had to work really late the night before and though he thought having a dinner party was a stupid idea, he'd been a really good sport about it, even when Hope had cooked scallops for tea every evening that week as she'd tried to find the right balance between raw and rubbery. It had taken three attempts to get them lightly seared and although there had been a lot of lip-tightening, Jack hadn't said anything, apart from heaping lavish praise on her minted pea purée.

Jack wandered into the kitchen half an hour later as Hope was tentatively poking at the lamb with a wooden spoon as she gave it a quick sear in a frying pan.

'Why the long face, Hopita?' he enquired, leaning over her shoulder so he could peer at the contents of the pan. 'Is it meant to be oozing like that?'

'I don't know!' Hope turned off the gas so she could sink down on the floor, which was liberally scattered with pine nuts, and sit with her back against a cupboard and stretch out her legs. 'I'm this close to going out and getting eight ready meals.'

'You can't do that. You've already blown our entire food budget for the month. We're going to be living on toast and spaghetti hoops as it is,' Jack said wearily, as he prodded the meat with his finger. 'Smells nice though.'

Inspiration suddenly struck. 'Maybe I could baste the joint with the gloop that's oozed out?' Hope mused, hauling herself up as Jack squatted down so that for a moment they were nose to nose and he kissed her forehead, so he couldn't be that mad with her. 'I'm sorry. You were right and I'm never, ever having a dinner party again, even if one day we can afford to live in an actual house with an actual dining room and have the whole thing catered.'

'Do you promise?' Jack asked, taking Hope's sticky, garlicky, pine-nutty hand and placing it over her heart. 'You

have to promise.'

'I promise,' Hope said, wiping her hand off on her T-shirt, which was already smeared with olive oil, butter and jam. 'I mean, I like cooking. Just not when everything has to be perfect and weighed out and ...'

'You end up using every single dish and utensil that we own,' Jack interrupted, as he rose to full height and surveyed the kitchen, which had pots and pans and cutlery heaped on every surface and even stacked on the two gas rings that Hope wasn't using. 'It's a small kitchen ...'

'I think you meant to say "poky".' Hope flapped her arms to illustrate said pokiness. Jack could actually stand at the epicentre of their kitchen, stretch out his arms and touch the walls. 'A poky kitchen in a poky basement flat.'

'It's not poky; it's bijou,' Jack argued. 'It's not a basement flat; it's a garden flat. And it's your first step on the property ladder, young lady.'

'The scary thing is that I can't tell whether you sound more like my mum or your mum,' Hope said, picking up her spoon so she could poke her roulade again.

'Well, when they start on the topic of owning your first home they're pretty interchangeable,' Jack said absently as he looked around at the havoc that Hope had wrought. 'You know, if you just tidied up as you went along, then it wouldn't get so chaotic and you could tick off each item on your checklist and you'd feel a lot calmer. I bet you don't even know where the list is.'

Hope knew exactly where the list was. Nowhere, because she'd never got round to making a list. Jack was all about tidying up as he went along and lists and minimalism and sleek, modern lines, and she was about letting things happen in an organic fashion until they all happened at once, like now, and Jack had to force her to write a to-do list, while he started on the washing-up.

Jack was also very anti leaving things on the draining board instead of drying them with a tea towel and putting

them away so the whole process took half an hour, though Hope put up a spirited defence against putting away things that she'd need again in five minutes, until Jack scooped up a handful of sudsy water and flung it at her so the ends of her red hair, which weren't skewered in a bun held together with two HB pencils, were soaked and her T-shirt clung to her breasts.

'Don't you feel better now that you've got a list?' Jack demanded, adroitly fending Hope off as she tried to get in on the dishwasher action. 'Like everything's under control?'

'Well, I suppose,' Hope panted, as she tried to duck under Jack's arm. 'The thought of making the list wasn't as bad as the actual making of it, but I'm *drenched*.'

'I know,' Jack said with a leer, reaching up with a wet hand to give her sodden left breast a quick squeeze. 'By the way, nice tits.'

Hope pretended to glare at him but after twenty-six years of knowing her, Jack could spot one of her fake glares at fifty paces so he just grinned as he slyly tweaked her other breast. And even after twenty-six years of knowing him, when Jack was beaming at her like that, Hope was powerless to resist him.

'You'll never get to see them again if you keep doing that,' she told him sternly, because it didn't do Jack any good to know just how potent the power of his smile was.

It was no wonder that Lottie and Nancy from next door, who were ten and twelve respectively, went red in the face and giggly every time they saw Jack. The week before, Jack had been bare-chested as he watered the garden with the hose, and the giggling from the other side of the garden fence had got so shrill and frequent that Hope, who'd been treating her roses for greenfly, had feared for her eardrums.

But if you were a tween, then Jack was all your pre-pubescent fantasies made flesh and living next door. He was tall and slim with thickly lashed blue eyes and a pretty,

pouty mouth that wore a perpetual smile. He had a mop-top of thick brown hair that was half Beatle, half Justin Bieber, and he dressed just like a teen popstar who'd been given a rock 'n' roll makeover by his stylist: tight jeans that were just loose enough to slip down and show his pert, boxer-shortened arse to the world, Chuck Taylors and skinny T-shirts, which clung lovingly to his chest and proved quite emphatically that he didn't have an ounce of fat anywhere about his person.

Factor in the cool job as art editor on *Skirt* magazine, which meant he could procure tickets for premieres of films featuring sparkling vampires, CDs of the latest boyband and, on one never-to-be-forgotten occasion, tickets for the *X-Factor* final, and it was inevitable that Lottie and Nancy would fall madly and hopelessly in love with Jack, in much the same way that Hope had when she was thirteen and he was fifteen and he'd suddenly stopped being the boy next door and become the measure by which all other boys were judged and found wanting. Back then, though, all that Jack had had in the way of connections was a newspaper round, which meant that he occasionally stole a copy of *J17* for her.

Hope, on the other hand, was a primary-school teacher with red hair, who'd once shouted at Lottie for dashing across the street on her roller skates into the path of a pizza delivery boy on a moped. Even worse, Hope had then frogmarched Lottie back home so she could be shouted at by her mother, Alice, too. Since then Lottie and Nancy had made it perfectly plain that they couldn't understand what the god-like Jack was doing with that 'totally mean ginger girl'.

What he was currently doing was running his eyes down Hope's dinner-party checklist. 'So you've got an hour free now between sealing the roulade and making the mascarpone cream? Shall we sort out the living room?'

Hope nodded unenthusiastically. It was far too hot to be lugging furniture about, or serving a main course as heavy as lamb roulade with dauphinoise potatoes, for that matter.

'Maybe I should sauté the potatoes instead of baking them with loads of cream,' she pondered out loud. 'Do you think you could get me some more olive oil when you go out?'

Jack groaned. 'This is why you need to be more organised. When you go off road, terrible things always happen, Hopita.'

'No, they don't,' Hope insisted, because this was nothing like the time that she'd run out of caster sugar when she was baking and had improvised by mashing up brown sugar cubes. Or when she'd been learning to knit and hadn't been able to get more of the chunky wool she'd been using so had switched to a fine yarn to give her scarf some texture. 'It's our first dinner party and everything has to be just so.'

'Our *only* dinner party,' Jack reiterated sharply, as if he hadn't been joking earlier. 'We are never doing this again. Not in my lifetime.'

It took them nearly half an hour to tug, shove, lift and heave their futon sofa (which was uncomfortable both to sit or sleep on) into the bedroom. Hope decided to multitask and use this time to get Jack on board the dinner-party train. After all, she'd invited his two artboy mates, Otto and Marvin, not just to appease Jack but also as potential cannon fodder for Hope's friends Lauren and Allison, who were both going through a dry spell. Jack had been boringly insistent that they had room for only four guests but Hope had to invite her other friend Susie as a very paltry thank you for buying her a Latitude ticket, even if it did mean that Susie's grumpy boyfriend, Wilson, had to be invited too. And anyway, 'Having a dinner party is grown up and now we own our own home and we have two sets of

bed linen and spare towels we should be doing more grown-up things.'

Jack shrugged. 'We don't actually own our own home. It's jointly owned by our parents, who lent us the deposit, and the Halifax.' He sat down on their bed, which they'd got on Freecycle and which was almost as uncomfortable as the sofa bed, and pulled Hope down to sit alongside him. 'Sorry. It's just ... well, it's our last weekend before school starts and you get bogged down with lesson plans and standardised tests. I kinda wanted this weekend to be just the two of us. And now you're mad at me, aren't you?'

'I'm not,' Hope said, though she kind of was, after all the trouble she'd gone to. 'At least I've learned an important life lesson about planning a menu that can be made days in advance and shoved in the freezer.'

'Well, as long as it's been a teachable moment then that's OK.' Jack kissed the top of her head, even as he sighed. 'So, olive oil, and what else have you forgotten? Did you buy a couple of decent bottles of wine that The Pretentious Wanker will deign to drink?'

'He's called Wilson,' Hope said mildly, because Wilson was a pretentious wanker, who only seemed to come with one facial expression, a world-weary sneer. 'The offy was having a four-for-three promotion, so I did get wine but, hmm, I suppose we do need to get something a lot more expensive with a subtle bouquet.'

'And some bottles of fancy imported lager that are teeny tiny and cost three quid each,' Jack said sourly. 'God, he's such a pretentious wanker.'

'Really is,' Hope agreed, pleased that they were finally back in sync, even if it was over the wankerness of Wilson. 'And if you're popping into Waitrose anyway, can you get some clotted-cream vanilla ice-cream in case my mascarpone curdles in the heat?'

Jack grumbled a little more about the dinner party bankrupting them and how they'd have to live on

SupaNoodles for the rest of the month, but Hope ignored him as she added a few more items to the shopping list and sent him off to B&Q with a cheery wave.

Their cunning plan to get around the obstacle of not having a dining table was to buy a wallpaper-pasting table, which they'd return tomorrow in pristine condition. Hope had promised Jack faithfully that she'd put down newspaper under the tablecloth, in case of spillages. Of course they needed eight chairs too, but Jack and Hope would sit on their kitchen stools and Gary the estate agent, who lived in spacious splendour in the rest of the house above them, had promised that they could borrow his four expensive Heal's chairs, though Hope had had to flirt with him for ten very long minutes ('Really? You've doubled your commission in the last six months? Wow! You must be so good at selling houses ...'). He even carried the chairs down the crumbling concrete stairs that led to the basement flat and into the re-purposed living room.

Hope was now meant to go next door, according to her checklist, and borrow two chairs from Alice, Lottie and Nancy's long-suffering mum, but she wasted valuable time following Gary around the flat as he kicked at their skirting boards and advised Hope that she and Jack would 'easily add another ten thou on your resale value if you ripped out the kitchen and put a new one in'. Jack was much better at dealing with Alice anyway as she always wanted to badger Hope about primary-school league tables and whether Nancy had ADD, dyslexia or was just plain lazy.

She was loath to admit it, but having a list made it easier to finish all the preparations, and less than an hour later Hope had nothing left to do in the kitchen until soon before her guests arrived. She couldn't lay a table that didn't exist and so had no choice but to indulge in a long soaky bath, and when Jack still hadn't come home, she even took the time to blow-dry her hair sort of straight.

By now it was after five, Jack had been gone nearly two hours, and Hope's Facebook invites stated quite clearly that pre-dinner drinks would be at seven sharp.

Where are you? she texted him, and it wasn't until she'd finished putting her make-up on that he texted back, *On my way. Arsenal r playing @ home. Holloway Rd blocked solid.*

'Why didn't you take the back roads then?' Hope muttered to herself, as she applied one last coat of mascara and stepped back to assess her appearance in the mirror glued to the inside of one of the wardrobe doors.

To make up for the rustic, make-do charm of their borrowed table and mismatched chairs, Hope had been going for a look that shrieked effortless glamour, but she wasn't entirely sure she'd succeeded.

She'd started with the shoes; her beloved Stella McCartney leopard-print satin wedges, which had been an unexpected birthday present from Jack - he usually bought her a dress that was at least a size too small and the biggest box of chocolates he could find. The wedges were higher than Hope was used to and so far she hadn't dared to wear them outside, but they went beautifully with her black broderie anglaise maxi dress.

Hope was always grateful that she was the sort of redhead that tanned, or rather freckled until all her freckles mostly joined up to create a tan, and the thin straps of the dress showed off her sun-kissed shoulders. The fabric fell in graceful folds over her pot belly. Hope ran a hand over her tummy, which always made its presence felt during the school holidays. When school broke up, she was always full of plans to visit the gym every day and swim and go on long walks, but the plans usually petered out before the end of the first week in favour of meeting friends for coffee and cake, or lunch, or a cinema outing which involved ice-cream and popcorn. In fact, eating vast quantities of food in a social setting won out over the gym every time, leaving Hope ten pounds heavier at the

beginning of term. Although she was hating her midriff right now, she knew that spending seven-hour days wrangling a class of six-year-olds, and going to the gym to alleviate the stress of seven hours spent wrangling a class of six-year-olds, would make the belly fat melt away pretty quickly. Until then it was big knickers and maxi dresses all the way, all the time.

She leaned closer to the mirror to peer critically at her face to make sure that her tinted moisturiser was evening out both freckles and the paler skin in between the freckles and yes, she still loved the creamy-rose shade of the Chanel Rouge Coco Mademoiselle lipstick Jack had got her from a *Skirt* beauty sale. Susie insisted that Hope could get away with a deeper red or even a fuchsia pink on her mouth, which Jack gamely said was a perfect cupid's bow and her oldest brother Matthew used to describe as a cat's bum, but Hope refused.

Her mother had drummed into Hope since she was practically embryonic that she should accentuate her widely spaced blue eyes rather than draw attention to her snub nose and her freckles, which had been the bane of her adolescence. She'd tried everything to get rid of them, from rubbing lemon slices on her face (which had stung like a bitch during her spotty teen years) to green-based foundations and concealers, which she'd never been able to blend in properly and had made her look bilious. Now Hope had learned to love her freckles because it was obvious she was stuck with them, like she was stuck with red hair.

Technically it was auburn. A deep, dark red that wasn't orange and definitely wasn't ginger. It was the kind of red hair that was more Julianne Moore than Sarah Ferguson, or, God forbid, Miranda in the first season of *Sex and the City*. Hope's eyebrows and eyelashes were also the same deep auburn but she'd still been called 'ginger pubes' all the way through school. Even now, Hope could be walking down the street, minding her own business, only to hear

someone bellow, 'Oi! Ginger pubes!' from a passing white van, but such was the redhead's lot in life. Hope liked to think that having hair this colour had instilled huge amounts of guts and gumption in her from an early age and, when she wasn't at school, she wore her hair long and loose with pride, even if after half an hour of being long and loose, it was a mass of Medusa-like tangles.

'You'll do,' she told her reflection. 'As long as you don't break your neck on the sticky-up bit of lino in the kitchen.'

Chapter Two

JACK STILL WASN'T back less than an hour before kick-off. Hope grumbled furiously to herself as she consulted Jamie Oliver's recipe for the toasted almonds she was making for pre-dinner nibbles.

But by the time she started concocting a punch from a bottle of fake-Pimm's, a bottle of five-quid vodka from Aldi and two litres of passion fruit juice, Hope was pretending that she was on *Come Dine With Me* and happily talking to an invisible camera.

'... and one little tip I have for making a really good punch is to nick a syringe from Janet, the school nurse, so I can inject vodka straight into the strawberries. Gives the punch an added kick,' she babbled, as she chopped up half an elderly cucumber. 'It's also a good way to use up all the fruit that's about to go mushy. I mean, even if it has gone mushy, the alcohol will just disguise the taste and ...'

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock and she hurried into the hall in time to greet Jack as he staggered through the door, dragging the ersatz dining table behind him.

'There you are!' Hope exclaimed. 'I thought you'd gone to Cornwall to get the clotted-cream ice-cream. People will be here in half an hour!'

'It's not my fault the traffic was gridlocked,' Jack replied angrily. His hair was sticking up as if he'd been clutching at it in frustration at the gridlockedness of the traffic. 'I texted you!'

'That was an hour ago,' Hope reminded him. 'Did you get lost in a time-space continuum that suddenly opened up on Tollington Road?'

'Yeah, and I managed to get everything that you scribbled down on the fourth shopping list for this bloody dinner party, thanks for asking.'

'You're so late getting back you might just as well not have bothered,' Hope said ungraciously. 'People will be arriving in thirty minutes and you need to get two chairs from Alice next door and have a shower 'cause, quite frankly, you're smelling pretty ripe, and now I have to lay the table when I should be parboiling potatoes and warming my bruschetta.'

'Well, if you'd organised things better then ...'

'Now's really not the time for a lover's tiff, you two,' said a warm, amused voice from behind Jack, and Hope saw Susie walk through the door clutching two Waitrose carriers and a huge bunch of what might have been flowers or could have been an avant garde art installation. 'Jack saw me coming up the road and gave me a lift, didn't you?'

Jack was still bright-red and furious. 'Sorry about that, Hope. I'm sure that made me at least a whole minute later than I already was.'

Hope wanted to throw herself at Susie with pained little cries but she was too mad with Jack to do anything but say, 'You're early,' in a tight voice.

'Oh dear,' Susie cooed. 'Thought you might need a hand but I can always decamp to the pub across the square if I'll be in the way.'

'God, don't do that,' Hope cried, pushing past Jack to grab Susie by the arm. 'I *need* you.'

'Well, you've got me,' Susie said, dropping the Waitrose bags with a dull thud that made Hope wince because she didn't want olive oil over everything, but then Susie was hugging her hard, the spiky fronds from the bouquet

tickling Hope's shoulder blades. 'As it's you, I'll even volunteer my services as your kitchen bitch.'

Hope hugged Susie hard back, until Susie made a small distinct sound of protest. Hope let her go and watched her friend smooth down her peach silk, ruffle-sleeved Catherine Malandrino top, which she was wearing with teeny-tiny cut-off denim shorts and a pair of very strappy, very high gold sandals.

'You look gorgeous,' Hope said, and it wasn't even a compliment but the absolute truth. Susie was small, slim and sleek, from the top of her shiny dark-brown hair, which looked as if she soaked it in keratin every morning, to her perfectly pedicured size-three feet. The bit in between hair and feet was pretty stunning too. Susie was, there was no doubt about this, sultry-looking. Deep brown, sloe-shaped eyes peeped out from behind her fringe, she had a tiny smudge of a nose and full, plush lips that were either pouting or smiling like she'd just heard a really filthy joke.

She also had an olive complexion, a generous helping in the breast department and what her legs lacked in length they made up for in their toned perfection, even though Susie could eat obscene amounts of food and not go near a gym in weeks.

It was hard not to feel less-than when you were in the same room with Susie. And it was also hard not to feel more-than. Hope always felt that she wasn't pretty enough or slim enough or just plain *enough*. When she was with Susie, being five foot, six inches was too tall and being a size twelve was too fat. Right now Hope felt like a gangling Goth in her shapeless black dress. And all that chuff about her redhead pride? Pffft! She was a freckly ginger who ...

'You're the one who looks gorgeous, Hopey,' Susie interrupted her pity-party. 'How come you always manage to look dreamy and ethereal when I'm sweating like a stuck pig?'

'You need to get your eyes tested,' Hope snorted, as she tried to hide her pleased smile. 'And you couldn't look like a stuck pig if you tried.'

'Well, stuck piglet,' Susie conceded, as Jack brought in two dining-room chairs from next door. 'What needs doing first?'

'The table,' Hope decided. Her voice was getting very squeaky. By her own estimation she was five minutes away from a pre-dinner party meltdown. 'Oh shit, I don't think there's even time to lay the table.'

'Yes, there is,' Susie said firmly, pushing past Hope so she could start grabbing handfuls of cutlery out of the drawer. 'Hopey, find a vase for those weird flowers I got you. I thought they'd be a really cool centrepiece.'

'God, I haven't even thanked you for them!'

'Yeah, well, why don't we leave the grovelling for later and Jack, sweetie, hate to be the one to tell you this, but you stink,' Susie added, as he came into the kitchen and reached up to get glasses down from the cupboard above her head. 'Can you go and have a shower before you asphyxiate us and kill my flowers?'

Jack advanced on Susie with both his arms raised above his head while she giggled and held him back with the bread knife. 'Nothing wrong with a healthy bit of man sweat,' he declared, brandishing his armpits at Susie one final time, then sidestepping past Hope as he stripped off his sweat-soaked T-shirt. 'You look like a Modigliani,' he whispered in Hope's ear, as Susie chattered cheerfully away about how none of their cutlery matched, and it was exactly what she needed to hear.

Not that she did look like a Modigliani - his models were pale and thin and drippy-looking - but it was Jack taking the time to see she was freaking out and calming her down with one of his rare compliments. He wasn't a gushy kind of boyfriend who constantly told Hope that she was awesome so when a compliment did come her way it meant a lot.

‘Sorry I’m being such a witch,’ she muttered and Jack grinned, and as Susie and Hope finally began to lay the table, Hope could hear him singing ‘I Put a Spell on You’ in the shower.

‘There! That doesn’t look too shabby,’ Susie said ten minutes later. ‘Well, maybe shabby-chic, but you do that whole vintage thing so well. When I try, it just looks like a load of tatty old junk from Oxfam.’

Hope folded her arms and surveyed her temporary dining room and her temporary dining-room table. On top of her red and white polka-dot tablecloth (and it was impossible to tell that last Saturday’s *Guardian* was laid out beneath it) were her rose-sprigged placemats, and on top of them were assorted bowls on top of assorted plates, plus cutlery that Hope had found in charity shops and at car-boot sales. At least each setting had a wine glass that was just like the other seven wine glasses but that was only because they’d been in a sale at Habitat.

‘It’s not sophisticated,’ Hope lamented, as she tweaked the strange lemon-like protuberance that was the focal point of Susie’s bouquet, ‘but it is quirky. And now I know that I can improvise a dining room, I can sign up for *Come Dine With Me*.’

‘I’d come dine with you any time,’ Susie sniffed the air appreciatively. ‘Your whole flat smells of Cointreau and garlic. Right, so what’s next?’

Nothing was too much trouble for Susie. She finished making the punch and even though she was wearing a £400 silk top, she was happy to fill a huge B&Q bucket with ice and stick the white wine and beer in it because Hope had run out of fridge space. Susie did draw the line at peeling the potatoes because she’d had her nails done that morning but, still, it was hard for Hope to remember that the first time she’d seen Susie had been at the gym, in full make-up, pedalling sedately on an exercise bike in Stella McCartney for Adidas workout gear and reading *Vogue*, and she’d been

intimidated beyond all measure. When Hope went to the gym, she wore saggy leggings, holey T-shirts and scraped her hair back because even the slightest exertion made her drip sweat all over the floor.

Hope would occasionally see Susie in the changing rooms doing her make-up in nothing but an Agent Provocateur thong, so all the other women could admire her lithe body and truly spectacular breasts and make a solemn vow to themselves that they'd either work out harder or stop going to the gym on the same days as Susie. Well, that was how Hope had felt so when she'd signed up for a yoga class and found herself next to Susie it hadn't filled her heart with joy. Especially as Susie could contort herself into the most awkward poses while Hope couldn't even master the basic breathing techniques.

Hope had eventually decided that Susie was a stuck-up cow when she caught her smirking after Hope had fallen out of her Half Moon pose and landed on the floor with a shriek. That was it! No more sneaking admiring glances at Susie as she spent ten minutes blending her eyeshadow in the changing room mirror, no more trying to share a conspiratorial smile with her when Mr Short-Shorts was doing lunges. Even though Susie barely knew that Hope existed, as far as Hope was concerned, Susie was dead to her.

Then came that fateful yoga class when Hope had set her sights on mastering a shoulder stand if it killed her. She'd just been about to straighten out her legs, when the woman behind her had let out a volley of farts that ricocheted around the studio and Hope had gone crashing to the floor, almost dislocating her collar bone in the process. She'd sprawled on her mat for a second, trying to catch her breath, as the poor woman continued to chuff away. All around her, people were falling out of their poses, all except Susie, whose body, apart from her shaking shoulders, was in a perfect perpendicular line.

Susie had then gracefully righted herself, caught Hope's eye and wafted her hand in front of her nose. 'Someone shouldn't have had chilli last night,' she'd whispered. Then she'd tentatively sniffed the air. 'My mistake. It was obviously curry.'

After this comment, there had been a deathly silence until the woman finally stopped farting, picked up her yoga mat and practically ran out of the studio. Hope had pursed her lips tight, then risked looking over at Susie again who was now pretending that she'd been suffocated by the fumes and it was ... GAME OVER. Hope had collapsed back on her mat and put her hand over her mouth but the giggles had leaked out between the cracks of her fingers. Then she'd heard Susie snort and Hope had started to laugh so hard that tears streamed down her cheeks. When Georgie, the yoga instructor, had tried to calm Hope down with a mellifluous but detailed explanation of why yoga made some people fart, Hope had curled up in a crying, shaking, cackling ball of mirth until Susie had yanked her up and hustled her out of the room.

When all Hope had left were a few hiccups, Susie had held out her hand. 'I'm Susie and I can tell this is going to be the start of a beautiful friendship,' she'd said as if she really and absolutely meant it.

And it had turned out to be true. Susie was five years older than Hope, and had all the trimmings and baubles of a sophisticated thirty-something: a high-paid job in PR, a beautifully furnished flat in Highgate, over a hundred pairs of designer shoes, and an actual walk-in wardrobe where she stored all her other designer fripperies. But Hope had quickly discovered that Susie's outside didn't match her inside. Once you got past the sleek glossy exterior, Susie was good people.

She was just as happy downing pints in an old man's boozier on the Holloway Road and finishing up with some spicy hot wings from Chicken Cottage as she was sipping

mojitos in Shoreditch House. She'd gone through five iPhones in the eighteen months that Hope had known her; dropping them down toilets, losing them on drunken nights-out and leaving one in a service station on the M60. Susie was also unstintingly generous and had been genuinely devastated when she'd realised that Hope's size-six feet wouldn't fit into any of her size-three statement heels. She even tried to supplement Hope's teacher's salary with free dinners at expensive restaurants on her company credit card.

Hope suspected, and all the evidence indicated, that Susie didn't have a lot of female friends. Not when she looked the way she did and gave off waves and waves of serious attitude. She was rude and crude and used words that would have had Hope's mother itching to wash her mouth out with Fairy Liquid. At times she could even be downright insufferable but blamed it on being raised by a philandering father and an alcoholic mother who'd both had serious boundary issues. Even now, Hope didn't know if that was a joke, but she herself had grown up with three elder brothers who'd loved nothing more than to tease, terrorise and torment her, and she could quell a class of unruly six-year-olds without even raising her voice, so putting Susie in her place when she being obnoxious was hardly a stretch.

Susie was being particularly obnoxious as she watched Hope assemble her brioche bread-and-butter pudding. 'For fuck's sake, why did you invite two teachers?' she whined.

'Piss off! I'm a teacher,' Hope said without rancour.

'Whatever.' Susie pouted. 'If you start sharing wacky anecdotes about your days at teacher-training college, I'm going to kick you under the table.'

'Like you could even reach with your tiny little legs.'

'Why do you think I'm wearing five-inch heels?'

They grinned at each other just as Jack walked back into the kitchen, squeaky-clean, fragrant-fresh, and with a put-

upon look on his face. 'OK, what do you want me to do next?'

There actually wasn't anything left to do until the guests arrived, when Hope could whip herself into a state of near hysteria as she tried to simultaneously sear twenty scallops in one pan while frying rounds of black pudding in another.

'Everything's under control,' Hope said proudly.

'It is?' Jack sounded sceptical. 'Are you sure about that?'

'I'm quite sure,' Hope said firmly and a little huffily. 'But if you want to be useful then you could lug that bucket full of ice out of the back door 'cause it's in the way. Oh, and should we put some more wine and beer in there too, do you think?'

Jack smirked like he'd known all along that not everything was under control. Hope wriggled her shoulders in irritation.

'You're doing fine,' Susie said soothingly. 'Everything's going to be perfect and even if it isn't, just get everyone really pissed up and they won't notice if you overcook that lamb thing.'

'It's a roulade,' Hope said, abandoning her pudding to hunt for her list so she could check how long the lamb needed to cook. Should she heat the oven up now? But what if everyone was late and then the oven was too hot and the lamb dried out? Then she'd be stuck with a too-hot oven, which would lead to burnt brioche bread-and-butter pudding and ... 'Oh, God ...'

'You need a drink,' Susie and Jack, who'd finished his lugging duties, said in unison.

'I can't,' Hope whimpered. 'I don't dare sear my scallops while I'm under the influence.'

'Hopita, you could sear those scallops blindfolded,' Jack said, snuggling up behind her. 'By Wednesday night your scallops were good enough for *MasterChef*. And who doesn't like black pudding?'

‘Well, I don’t, because I’m not a dirty Northerner,’ Susie hissed, pulling a face at the two people who’d been born and bred just outside Rochdale. ‘I’m not eating anything whose main ingredient is blood.’

‘I’m going to spit on your scallops,’ Hope told her dryly, nestling back against Jack who obligingly tightened his arms. ‘And no minted pea purée for you either.’

‘Christ, Jack, give the girl a drink,’ Susie drawled. She was leaning back against the kitchen counter, legs tensed, chest stuck out as she gave Hope and Jack a wicked smile. ‘In fact, I think we should all have some vodka. Just to get us in the mood.’

‘Oh, yeah, and what mood would that be?’ Jack drawled back, and Hope realised it was her turn to drawl something vaguely flirtatious but it almost felt as if she was surplus to requirements.

And while she was trying to process that thought, or even decide if the thought needed processing, the doorbell rang. Hope tugged herself free of Jack’s arms so she could pat her hair and smooth down her dress and do a complete lap of the kitchen, pausing only to take the scallops out of the fridge.

‘Easy, tiger,’ Jack said, shaking his head as the doorbell rang again. ‘I’ll get that, shall I, while you do another circuit?’

Hope took a deep breath. ‘I don’t know why I’m so nervous,’ she said to Susie. ‘I mean, I know everyone who’s coming and I like them or I wouldn’t have invited them, so why am I freaking out?’

‘I have no idea,’ Susie said, shrugging. ‘But you need to stop freaking out because you’re getting that blotchy stress rash all over your chest. Not a good look, Hopey.’

There was a distinct possibility that her legs might give way and she’d crumple to the floor, Hope thought, but then the door opened and she could hear Allison and Lauren mocking Jack and the ancient *Death to the Pixies* T-shirt he