

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Butter Wouldn't Melt

Penny Birch

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About the Book

AJ pushed me towards the back of the arch. Nobody could see us unless they came directly past the opening, but we were still in the street, and I was shaking as I levered my knickers down underneath my skirt. They immediately fell down to my ankles, increasing my resentment and feelings of exposure as I tugged up my skirt to show her my bare bum. She bent close, examining me.

‘Have you been behaving yourself?’ she asked.

When Pippa is accepted as a trainee in a city law firm, she fondly imagines a life both cultivated and intellectual, rather than the crew of sleazy ambulance chasers she ends up with. Worse still, they know more about her private life than she would have liked, leaving her little choice but to accept some highly humiliating duties in areas which involve very little legal know-how and a great deal of having her knickers taken down. To make matters worse, the possessive AJ – notorious diesel dyke and boss of a motorbike courier firm – regards Pippa as her private property, and American businessman Hudson Staebler, has his eye on Pippa’s little sister.

About the Author

Penny Birch is our most popular and biggest selling author. She is also an academic, fetish scene player and club organiser.

By the same author:

A TASTE OF AMBER
BAD PENNY
BARE BEHIND
BRAT
DIRTY LAUNDRY
FIT TO BE TIED
IN DISGRACE
IN FOR A PENNY
JODHPURS AND JEANS
NAUGHTY NAUGHTY
NURSE'S ORDERS
KNICKERS AND BOOTS
PEACH
PENNY IN HARNESS
PENNY PIECES
PETTING GIRLS
PLAYTHING
REGIME
TEMPER TANTRUMS
TICKLE TORTURE
TIGHT WHITE COTTON
UNIFORM DOLL
WHEN SHE WAS BAD
TIE AND TEASE
WHAT HAPPENS TO BAD GIRLS
BRUSH STROKES
SLIPPERY WHEN WET

THE INDIGNITIES OF ISABELLE
THE INDISCRETIONS OF ISABELLE
THE INDECENCIES OF ISABELLE
(Writing as Cruella)

Why not visit Penny's website at
www.pennybirch.com

BUTTER WOULDN'T MELT

Penny Birch



One

‘SO WHAT’S IT like being spanked, Pippa?’

It’s not the sort of question you expect from your little sister, and it took me a moment before I could answer at all.

‘How should I know?’ I demanded, but I’d already started to blush.

‘I know you get it,’ she insisted.

I threw a pillow at her, but she dodged it easily and folded her arms across her chest, looking down at me with that stubborn look she always uses when she wants something. She wasn’t going to go away until I’d answered her, but I still didn’t want to admit it.

‘What makes you think so?’ I asked, hoping she was only guessing.

‘I saw AJ make you bend over her bike when you came home last night,’ she answered.

Now my cheeks were really burning, and I was wishing I had something a lot harder than a pillow to throw at her. The little witch had been peeping at me, but I knew I should really be angry with myself and not her. I’d been teasing AJ, and not surprisingly she’d punished me, but I could easily have refused, or at least put it off. Oh no, not me, I’d done as I was told, bending over the bike and sticking my bum out, in full view of the house.

She’d told me to get bare, and like an idiot I’d done it, turning my skirt up and wriggling down my knickers to show my bum to the night so that she could plant a dozen firm smacks across my meat. It had felt good, so good I’d left my knickers down while I’d kissed her good night, confident that

at two in the morning everybody would be asleep in bed. I'd been wrong.

'Well?' Jemima demanded.

'It . . . it's just something we do,' I blustered. 'A game.'

'A punishment game?' she asked, all interest. 'Like, when one of you is naughty the other one smacks her bottom?'

'Sort of,' I admitted, fighting down the dreadful compulsion to tell her the truth.

'So what's it like?' she went on.

'Stingy,' I told her, but I knew I couldn't hold it in, not any longer.

I'd wanted to tell her, right from the start really, but I'd always persuaded myself not to. All our lives she'd followed where I'd led, and I'd always liked my role of confident, protective big sister, but now it was different. I'd grown up to be a little pervert, but that's my nature, not hers, and I didn't want to risk corrupting her. Now she knew anyway, and I could only hope she was old enough to make her own decisions, because I wanted to tell her, badly.

'Stingy,' I repeated, 'stingy but nice. AJ's my girlfriend, and she spans me for fun . . . for pleasure.'

'I thought so,' Jemima answered, thoroughly smug. 'You never really liked boys, did you?'

I just shrugged, unable even to begin to explain my feelings; on other girls, on men, on the whole confusing mess of my sexuality. Jemima came to sit on the end of my bed and began to toy with a string of her hair, her voice soft and sympathetic as she spoke again.

'Are you going to tell Mum and Dad?'

'No.'

'But they're bound to find out.'

Again I could only shrug in response. It wasn't a subject I wanted to talk about, or even think about. Jemima continued to play with her hair, curling the long brown strands around her finger.

'I'd already guessed you were a lesbian,' she said after a pause, 'but I never imagined you'd like to be spanked.'

I gave another embarrassed shrug.

'So, last night,' she went on, 'what did you do to get it?'

'I was teasing her,' I explained.

'To make her spank you?'

'Yes. It's better if I feel I'm being made to give in to it. Only I get it.'

'That's not very fair.'

I couldn't even look at her for embarrassment as I began to explain, but I still felt the most wonderful sense of relief.

'That's just the way it works. I like to be spanked, and she likes to do the spanking, so we make a good couple. It feels right for her to spank me too, because she's so tall and strong, and because she's older than me.'

'She's scary.'

'She turns me on.'

'But . . . doesn't it feel bad, being made to take your knickers down like that? Doesn't it make you feel small?'

'Sort of, yes, small and stupid, but being made to feel that way is part of the pleasure, especially when I'm made to show my bare bum. Normally, when she spansks me, she holds me down across her knee and takes my knickers down herself. I feel so helpless, and it's hard to explain why I like it, because it ought to feel awful, but it's so nice, just to be completely under her control, to be bare and know she's going to spank my bottom and that she won't stop until she's done with me, and . . .'

I realised I was babbling and went quiet, my face hot with blushes for my confession, but Jemima merely gave a solemn nod. Maybe she even understood, a little, because I'd expected her to laugh at me. Some of my confidence had begun to return as she spoke again.

'She always gets your bum bare then?'

'Always. It's part of the ritual, for any girl who's going to be spanked to have her knickers taken down. Everybody

does it.'

'Everybody?'

I realised my mistake immediately, grimacing as I tried to cover up.

'You know, everybody who's into it. I go on net forums and that sort of thing.'

Again she nodded, apparently accepting my explanation. After all, it was supposed to be the truth, that only AJ got to spank me, and there was no way on earth I was admitting to who had introduced me to my secret pleasure, and still did me occasionally, as I did her.

'Tell me more about what you do with AJ,' Jemima demanded.

I found myself colouring again, but I wanted to tell her.

'Usually it's just like last night,' I told her, 'mainly play really, but special too, something to confirm how we feel for each other, like a kiss. Then there are punishments, which are a lot harder, and longer.'

'You let her punish you? What, for real?'

'Yes. It feels right, and it's what I want. It's cathartic too, that means . . .'

'I know what cathartic means, Pippa. I suppose that makes sense, to feel better after a punishment, so long as you've done something wrong. What does she spank you for?'

'Anything she likes. You see, I've given her the right to discipline me as she sees fit, so it might be anything. She's quite strict, and sometimes I know it's just because she wants to do it, but it's always best when I've actually been naughty.'

Jemima giggled, bringing the colour to my cheeks once more, but I went on.

'Last week she spanked me for scuffing her boots - which is a big dyke thing - and she put me over her knee in the kitchen and spanked me with a wooden spoon, bare bottom of course. It hurt like anything, but I felt so good afterwards,

even though my bum was red hot . . . no, because my bum was red hot . . .’

Jemima was smiling, the same mischievous little smirk I knew so well. I stopped, blushing again even before she spoke.

‘I wish I’d seen that. You must have looked so funny!’

She laughed as she finished and dodged for the door, reaching safety an instant before my hand closed on my second pillow, which was the only missile within easy reach. Her laughter trailed off as she fled down the stairs, no doubt expecting me to follow, but I stayed on my bed, my thoughts as confused as ever. I was glad she’d found out, in a way, because it had hurt to keep a secret from her, and yet I knew there would be drawbacks. She would tease me mercilessly, but I could cope with that. What I couldn’t cope with was the thought of her trying to imitate me.

I rolled over onto my front, listening to the familiar morning sounds, with which I was no longer involved. It felt strange, after following the same routine for so long, and I even got an involuntary flush of panic as I heard the sound of the bus, worried I’d miss it and be late for school. That set me smiling. There was no more school, never again. I was free, with over a year in front of me before I went up to university, a year to discover myself.

Not that I intended to waste my time. With any luck I would manage to find a work placement with a law firm, allowing me to get ahead of my colleagues before I even arrived at uni. That would mean I’d be earning enough to fulfil my other ambition and buy a motorbike, although that was going to mean facing up to the parents. They didn’t like me riding pillion with AJ, despite having no idea about our true relationship, and it wasn’t just the danger. To Mum in particular a motorbike represented everything she disliked, and which they’d done their best to keep me away from. Buying my own was not going to be popular.

Fortunately they couldn't stop me, not once I was earning my own money, although it was tempting to keep it at AJ's for the sake of peace and quiet. Then again, AJ would laugh at me, the way she always did when she felt I wasn't standing up to my parents. Possibly she'd even spank me, for being weak, or even something worse, a thought which sent a delicious shiver right through me.

I began to daydream, imagining the conversation, how I would explain what I wanted to AJ. Her mouth would move gradually into a knowing sneer as I spoke, and I'd know what was coming long before she told me I deserved a punishment, filling me with that wonderful sense of utter hopelessness that only comes when I know I'm going to be spanked and there is nothing whatsoever I can do to get out of it. It was always best that way, as a proper punishment. I like teasing her to make her do it, but I far prefer finding myself in trouble and no way out.

My mind began to dwell on the possibilities. Maybe it would be in her room and she'd put me over her knee on the bed, take down my knickers and smack my bottom until I was well and truly contrite, after which she'd put me on my knees and make me lick her pussy. Then again, if we'd been talking motorbikes it might be in her garage, in which case she'd probably put me over the seat of her big black machine for my punishment. Perhaps she'd even make me mount it, after having me strip from the waist down, or nude. Either way my bottom would be fully open to her, with my bumhole showing between my cheeks and my pussy all wet while she spanked me. Her hands would be dirty, making black handprints all over my skin, and when she'd finished she'd use the grease-gun to lubricate my bumhole so that she could slip a screwdriver handle up my bottom. She'd leave me like that too, to think about how ridiculous I looked, mounted on her bike in the nude with a screwdriver sticking out between my smacked cheeks.

I was going to have to play with myself. There was nobody else in the house anyway, so why not? I wanted to do it face down and imagine I'd been spanked, so I quickly lifted my hips to push down my knickers from underneath the old shirt I'd worn to bed before turning up the tail to leave myself bare behind. Just the feel of exposing myself was enough to send a powerful shiver through me, and I knew it wouldn't take long. Parting my knees and lifting my bottom a little more, I imagined myself in the same position over the seat of AJ's bike, legs spread and vulnerable, hiding nothing as she worked my bottom over with her dirty hands.

Everything about it felt good, the cool air on my bare bottom, the tautness of my knickers around my thighs, the subtle feel of my upturned shirt tail on my back, all of it keeping my exposure firmly in mind. I slid a hand back to find pussy, already moist, my lips puffy and swollen, pouting out from between my thighs. My cheeks were open too, my bumhole on show, tempting me to reach back and tickle the tight little knot of flesh until it began to pulse and squirm.

I imagined how the screwdriver handle would feel up my bottom, hard, thick and round, and wondered if being sodomised with a tool counted as losing my anal virginity. It was such a delicious thought it made me squirm, wiggling my bottom as I eased the top joint of my finger into my hole. For a moment my mind slipped, as I wondered how it would feel to have a man insert his penis into the same tight orifice, or even in pussy, taking my true virginity as I posed spanked and spread before him. As always when I thought of men, distaste quickly pushed aside the thrill, and as I began to tease my clitoris my thoughts were back on track, or almost.

My mental image had shifted, to my kitchen spanking of the week before. It had hurt like anything, and left my cheeks marked with dull bruises, but the sense of utter helplessness under so much pain had been overwhelming. I normally take it quite well, fairly well anyway, but not then,

not held firmly down across AJ's knee with my bottom stripped as she applied the big wooden spoon to my meat. She'd been mercilessly hard, and I'd wriggled and kicked and squirmed, going into what a certain somebody called a spanking tantrum. Jemima was right, it must have looked funny.

I was on the edge of orgasm, unable to stop myself as my fantasy slipped to where I desperately did not want it to go, imagining that Jemima had really been there, watching as my jeans were pulled down, giggling as my knickers followed and big sister's bottom came bare, laughing openly as the spanking began and I went into my helpless, agonised tantrum. A sob of deep shame escaped my lips, but I couldn't stop myself, and I couldn't get the image out of my head, spanked in front of my little sister . . . spanked bare bottom in front of my little sister . . . spanked bare bottom in front of my little sister and then made to masturbate with a finger up my bumhole, just as I was doing now.

My orgasm came and I cried out in a mixture of ecstasy and overwhelming shame, but I still couldn't stop myself, my mind fixed firmly on the image of my own well-spanked bum with my finger inserted into the little central hole as Jemima laughed at my plight. Not that it was the first time I'd got carried away with a fantasy, but I was left feeling sheepish and distinctly sorry for myself as I went slowly limp, and I stayed lying on the bed with my knickers still down behind for a long time, lost in thought.

I'd put a lot of effort into getting my work placement, writing to dozens of firms and constantly pestering Dad to use his business contacts. Unfortunately I wasn't the only aspiring law student with a clutch of A*s on my CV, and so far I'd had nothing but rejections. Now, as I finally managed to haul myself downstairs after playing with pussy and taking a

leisurely bath I found that another two refusals had arrived in the post, which completely spoilt my mood.

There was nothing to do, and I spent the day mooching around the house, until Jemima got back from school, along with Mum, who'd spent the day at Granny's. They picked me up a little, but nothing like as much as when Dad got home. He was grinning from ear to ear as he threw a big white envelope down on the kitchen table.

'I think this might be what you're looking for, Pip,' he told me.

I'd already guessed what it would be, and was tearing the envelope open even as I kissed him in thanks. As I'd hoped, it was a letter from a firm of lawyers, and not just any old lawyers, but a firm in the City of London with a very grand and old-fashioned sounding title – Montague, Montague, Todmorden and Montague – arranged beneath an elaborate gold crest and a foundation date in the mid-nineteenth century.

'How did you manage it?' I asked.

'Contacts,' he replied casually. 'No, seriously, one of the Montagues is the lawyer for the firm who're developing Thames Vista Estate, and they owe me a favour. You have to get through an interview as well, so it's not a foregone conclusion.'

'Thanks anyway,' I answered, already scanning the letter.

They wanted me to come down the very next day, to an address in the Minories, EC3, which sounded very grand indeed. As I let my imagination run that evening I was imagining a stately old house nestled in among the smart office blocks and ancient institutions of the city, quiet and respectable, with only a polished brass plaque to announce their name – Montague, Montague, Todmorden and Montague – four words that were still going around and around in my head as I fell asleep.

Next morning I was up early and through the shower while Jemima was still yawning and dishevelled in her nightie. I

was determined to make a good impression, and had a clear idea of what Montague, Montague, Todmorden and Montague would expect. They were an old firm, and old-fashioned too, so would expect me not only to be smartly turned out, but in a style that reflected their values.

I didn't have to be there until the afternoon, so I badgered Mum into driving me into Henley to buy some new clothes. For once we were largely in agreement on the sort of thing I'd need, and we quickly purchased a set of white blouses, smart black shoes with just an inch of heel, three packs of black stockings and, at her insistence, three packs of plain white knickers and bras to match. I tried to point out that the people who interviewed me weren't going to be seeing my knickers or bra, but got her lecture on dressing properly in return.

That left my suit, and while we both agreed it had to be black I couldn't resist a new style they were showing in Russell's, which not only had a tapered knee-length skirt and a tight-waisted jacket, but also a neat little waistcoat which I felt gave it a daring touch as well as making me look as if I had hips and a bust. Mum said I looked like a boy who'd dressed up in his sister's clothes.

Back at home and inspecting myself in the mirror, I had to admit she was right, but if I looked like a boy then it was a very pretty one. Aj was going to love it, but I brushed my hair out and tied it back in a curly black ponytail instead of the tight bun I'd been planning, which softened the look a little. It was going to have to do anyway as time was getting on and I needed to be at the station in less than half an hour.

I just made it, and spent the journey fidgeting with impatience and adjusting myself as I rehearsed what I would say to either Todmorden or one of the Montagues. Only when I got to Paddington did I begin to lose a little enthusiasm. The tube was packed, and I found myself wedged in at armpit height among a group of German

tourists who seemed to have spent the morning working out and not bothered to shower. The thought of having to repeat the same journey every morning in even thicker crowds was pretty depressing, until it occurred to me that I might be able to use the journey as an excuse to stay with AJ.

She lived in Kingsbury, and came in early every morning to her bike couriers, so I would be able to catch a lift as far as the West End of London and get to work with just a short tube journey. I'd spent the night with her a few times, but actually living in her house would be rather different, and opened up all sorts of exciting possibilities, which kept me smiling as I finished my journey.

I hadn't been to the City for years, but it was as I remembered, the modern mixed in with the ancient, and everything redolent of money. Everywhere I looked people were hurrying from place to place, all of them smartly dressed and about half of them talking into mobile phones. It was hard not to feel a little awed, but the way I'd planned my life I'd be doing the same soon enough, and hopefully earning as much as the best of them, perhaps even as a partner of Montague, Montague, Todmorden and Montague.

By the time I turned into the Minories I'd constructed a wonderful fantasy world, in which I would be a partner before I was out of my twenties, with an office in the top floor of their fine old building, only to have my dreams crumble around me as I searched for the address. The top of the road was much like those I'd already followed, but it quickly changed, first to great low concrete buildings like something from a council estate, and then to dirty red brick where a railway bridge crossed the road in a broad span, with a tiny shop built into the wall. Next to the bridge, and also made of red brick, although perhaps a fraction less dirty, were the offices of Montague, Montague, Todmorden and Montague.

The only part of my mental image that was at all accurate was that the office was old and surrounded by taller, newer

structures, only not so much nestled in as loomed over, with a vast concrete and glass building casting the whole area in a somewhat dank shadow. Nor did it look particularly busy or efficient, with the huge black door firmly closed and the windows open against the July heat. A single buddleia had managed to insert itself into the corner beside the railway bridge, to send up long shoots tipped by deep purple flowers nodding lazily in the sun.

I tried to put my disappointment aside, telling myself that they would no doubt be handling all sorts of fascinating cases and that the experience would be far more valuable and interesting than anything I could gain from a firm dealing with financial matters. There was at least a brass plaque, although it looked as if it had last been polished around about the same date the firm had been founded – 1852. I rang the bell and waited, my hands folded in my lap and my face frozen in a smile, which had worn off long before the door opened to reveal a man who looked like a lizard.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m Philippa Bassington-Smyth,’ I told him. ‘I have an interview.’

‘Come right in,’ he said, his initial look of perplexity vanishing to be replaced by a toothy smile. ‘I’m Mark, by the way, Mark James. Anything you want to know around here, just come to me.’

‘I have to be accepted first.’

‘Oh you’ll be accepted,’ he assured me, pushing open a door. ‘Maggie, this is Philippa Bassing . . . er, something double-barrelled, our new trainee.’

Maggie, or Miss Phelps as the sign on her desk read, looked as forbidding as Mark James had been welcoming. She was a thin, middle-aged woman, very precise in her crisp white blouse and with her dull blonde hair wound up in a bun. The look she gave me over the top of her glasses as she turned away from her computer wasn’t exactly

unfriendly, more irritated, as was the tone of her voice when she spoke.

‘Your name is?’

‘Philippa Bassington-Smyth.’

She moved back to her computer, frowning as she examined the screen and employed her mouse with brisk, exact motions.

‘Catch you later, doll,’ Mark James addressed me and he had left.

‘You have an appointment at three-thirty,’ Miss Phelps said after a while, her tone suggesting that by being twenty minutes early I was making a thorough nuisance of myself.

‘I thought it best to arrive a little early,’ I began but trailed off as she reached for the telephone on her desk.

I waited as she spoke into the receiver, and was surprised to see her irritable scowl suddenly soften as whoever was on the other end replied to her statement that I had arrived. When she put the phone down again she was positively beaming.

‘Mr Montague and Mr Todmorden will see you now,’ she said. ‘if you would like to go up. Second floor, the front office.’

Thanking her, I quickly climbed the stairs, telling myself that the worn state of the ancient wine red carpet was a sign of reserve rather than merely slovenly. There was no mistaking the room she meant, with a set of double doors open on the second-floor landing and two men visible at a huge desk within. I knocked anyway, smiling as I quickly took in my surroundings.

The office was comfortably furnished, if a bit shabby, painted in foxy brown and magnolia with paintings and photographs decorating the walls, while a sign in the middle of the desk allowed me to identify Mr Montague, presumably the senior partner. He was tall, almost military in his bearing, and somehow managed to look stern and benevolent at the same time, for once absolutely in keeping

with my original image. Mr Todmorden was very different, a squat, heavy-set man with a roll of reddish fat escaping from around his collar, while his smile of greeting was pretty much a leer. He was going bald, and had combed some strands of greasy-looking hair across the top of his head in a futile effort to hide the fact. Both rose to greet me, Mr Montague extending his hand.

‘Ah, Philippa,’ he said, ‘a pleasure to meet you. We’ve heard a lot about you.’

‘Nothing bad, I hope?’ I joked, not at all sure why he would have heard anything about me at all, beyond my desire to spend my year off working as a trainee in a law firm.

‘Not at all,’ he chuckled. ‘You come highly recommended. Indeed, I believe Morris is a little jealous.’

I had no idea who Morris was, but it didn’t seem advisable to ask and risk making a fool of myself. There was a chair in front of the desk, to which Mr Todmorden was gesticulating, so I sat down on it, smiling and wishing every detail of what I’d learnt in the last two years hadn’t abruptly left my head. I did at least have my CV, which I passed across. Mr Montague took it, but only gave the top sheet a cursory glance before speaking once again.

‘Your qualifications are, of course, not in question. When can you start?’

‘Immediately, if you like,’ I answered, astonished at what seemed such ready acceptance.

‘I don’t think we need be quite that precipitant,’ Mr Montague replied. ‘Monday morning should do very well, don’t you think, Lucius?’

Mr Todmorden nodded his agreement. I seemed to be in, without having to answer a single question, which just went to show that’s it’s not what you know, but who you know. Naturally I would have preferred to get in on my own merits, but if that was the way it worked then only an idiot would have protested.

‘You’ll be assigned to general duties at first,’ Mr Montague was saying, ‘filing and so forth, but I’ll make sure you have plenty of opportunity for work experience. For the moment, I’ll get somebody to show you around. Not one of us, of course.’

‘Of course,’ I answered hastily. ‘I wouldn’t dream of taking up your valuable time.’

‘I mean to say, not one of us,’ he repeated, now emphasising the final word.

‘Um . . . no,’ I managed, thoroughly confused.

‘There are, in fact, only four of us,’ he went on, ‘Lucius and myself, my secretary, Helen Stevens, and Maggie, Miss Phelps that is, our clerk. From what Morris tells me you will find Maggie particularly gratifying.’

I nodded, now completely lost. He had pressed a button on his desk, and spoke briefly into a microphone. Before I could ask any questions a young woman had appeared.

‘My secretary, Helen,’ Mr Montague explained. ‘Helen, this is Miss Bassington-Smyth, who’ll be joining us as a trainee, if you would be so kind as to find somebody to show her around.’

‘Certainly, Mr Montague,’ she replied.

‘Thank you,’ I said, trying to address all three of them at once as I stood up.

‘My pleasure, I assure you,’ Mr Todmorden answered me. ‘I look forward to seeing you on the Monday, unless of course you’ll be there on Saturday night?’

‘Um . . . no, I don’t think so,’ I answered.

‘A pity,’ he said, ‘but another time, no doubt.’

The interview was obviously over, and I’d been accepted.

I was so astonished I barely heard what Helen Stevens was saying as she led me out onto the landing, and I had to make myself focus on her words.

‘. . . you’ll like it here,’ she was saying. ‘We’re very informal, although of course you must dress the part for the sake of the clients. The partners’ offices are on this floor,

and my own. There's Mr Montague, and Mr Todmorden, and young Mr Montague, Mr Montague's nephew.'

'Aren't there three Montagues?' I asked.

'Oh no,' she said, smiling and nodding towards an open door as we approached it. 'Old Mr Montague, who was young Mr Montague's father, died several years ago. Mr Montague, meet Philippa Bassington-Smyth, our new trainee.'

There were altogether too many Mr Montagues for me, but the man she was introducing me to was obviously the young one. He was very much like his uncle, tall and straight with a handsome, clean-cut face, but with jet-black hair and a fresh, almost boyish look despite being maybe thirty-five or forty. My smile was returned with a knowing grin, and as soon as we were out of earshot Helen Stevens spoke again.

'Watch out for that one. He's a bit of a wolf.'

I'd already guessed, but thanked her for the warning. She was going to go down the stairs, but Mark James appeared coming up them, speaking immediately.

'Showing the new girl around, Helen? Let me do that. I'm sure you have something to type or whatever.'

Helen Stevens made no protest, but I was quickly hustled off, back up the stairs to the third floor, which was entirely occupied by a large, open-plan office in which half a dozen men and women of assorted ages were seated at their desks while the walls were lined with ceiling-high bookcases and ranks of files.

'Hi guys,' he greeted them. 'This is the new girl, Philippa Double-Barrel. Say hi to the Blockhouse, Philippa.'

'Call me Pippa, please,' I answered, trying not to blush as every head in the room turned to me.

'Pippa it is,' Mark James assured me and began to make the introductions.

Half-an-hour later I'd completed my tour and even knew where I was going to be working, a tiny cubby hole on the top floor which looked out over the railway with the Tower of

London and the Thames beyond. Among the staff, old Mr Montague and Mr Todmorden apparently only worked for a few clients, while young Mr Montague, Richard, was the driving force behind the firm. Most of the actual work was done by the five men and two women in the big office known as the Blockhouse, including Mark James. The first floor was the domain of Miss Phelps and her two juniors, with the library and various utility rooms, while the ground floor contained her office, a big reception room for clients and the kitchen. Downstairs was a shadowy area in which the older records were kept, apparently under the watchful eye of an elderly custodian, Mr Prufrock, who was the only person I wasn't introduced to.

By the time I left my head was whirling with names and faces, while I was elated to have been accepted, and so easily. I immediately rang AJ, hoping she'd be in the office and not out on a job, as despite running her company she insisted on riding as well. She was there and invited me over, promising a congratulatory drink. I took the tube, now indifferent to the crowds although they were thicker than ever with the rush hour already picking up.

Getting out at Tottenham Court Road, I walked up to AJ's office, to find her in conversation on the phone and not looking too happy. I kissed her anyway, quite hard as there was nobody else about, then sat down to wait for her to finish her call. She did so almost immediately, throwing the phone down into its cradle as she spoke.

'Bastard! How dare he!'

'Who was it?' I asked, taken aback by her anger. She may be my girlfriend, but she still scares me sometimes.

'Morris fucking Rathwell!' she swore. 'Do you know what the bastard wanted?'

'No,' I admitted.

'He wanted me to come to one of his parties,' she spat. 'Me! God I'd like to kick the little shit right in the balls.'