

# Rowan Coleman River Deep



Ever been crazy in love . . . ?

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## About the Book

**Perfect for fans of Jojo Moyes, Dorothy Koomson and Liane Moriarty, this is an uplifting and heartfelt novel from the author of *The Memory Book*, which was featured in the Richard & Judy book club 2014**

For five years, Maggie has known what her life is all about: her satisfying job in a small catering company, her boyfriend (and boss) Christian, and the future they're building together. Christian is the man Maggie's destined to be with forever, she fell in love with him the moment they met, their love runs River Deep, Mountain High – until Christian comes home one night and says the terrible words 'it's over'.

Numb, shocked and disbelieving, Maggie moves home to her parents' pub. Jobless and single, living in a bedroom still papered with A-ha and Take That posters, she's back to square one. The life she spent five years building is over. Or is it? Convinced she knows Christian better than he knows himself, Maggie sets out to win him back. But when she enlists the help of Pete, temporarily abandoned by his fiancé, she starts to wonder just how broken her heart really is ...

## About the Author

Rowan Coleman worked in bookselling and then publishing for seven years, during which time she wrote her first novel, *Growing Up Twice*, published in 2002. She left to write her second novel, *After Ever After*, and now lives in Hertfordshire with her husband and daughter.

*Also by Rowan Coleman*

Growing Up Twice  
After Ever After

# RIVER DEEP

*Rowan Coleman*



arrow books

For Erol and Lily, always



# Prologue

## St Albans, July 20th

‘Did you hear what I said? Maggie?’

Maggie opened her eyes and was momentarily dazzled by the rush of morning light that swam dizzily on the smoked glass coffee table. She screwed her eyes shut as she pulled herself into a sitting position, trying to make sense of the situation. Gradually the edge of the coffee table came into focus and beyond it sat Christian, his hair unkempt, his face dark with stubble, his eyes rimmed with red. Maggie smiled at him.

‘Oh, you’re back!’ She looked around her and down briefly at her crumpled shirt. ‘I can’t believe I slept all night on the sofa waiting for you to get home!’ She touched her face, aware that her skin would be red and creased with sleep, and pushed her tangled hair behind her ear. ‘You must have been hard at it all night?’ She gave a small laugh but there was something, some sixth sense, which stopped her just short of crossing the room to fling herself into his arms as she had done so many times before. As Christian listened to her she noticed his face crumple slightly. He dropped his chin and looked away.

She looked at the wall clock. Five forty-five a.m. ‘God, it’s still the middle of the night! I know, I’ll make us some coffee and we can take it to bed?’ She raised her eyebrows playfully. Hopefully.

‘I said – that it’s over. It’s over, Maggie. I’m so sorry. I didn’t plan it this way, I never dreamt things would end like this, but they have. You have to believe me, I’d do anything not to hurt you like this. I’d ... I’m sorry.’

Maggie stared at him, rooted to the spot. She felt panic constrict her chest, and as she looked at him she felt the same love, the same passion she had always felt ignite into an uncontrollable storm that raged behind the stupidly calm façade of her face.

‘You mean the business, don’t you?’ she asked him, knowing that he didn’t. ‘But listen, listen to me. It’s OK, because ... It will be OK. I’ve been thinking, we might have overstretched ourselves opening a London branch now, I think maybe we needed more time, maybe we were going too fast.’ She paused as he lifted his gaze to meet hers, saw tears in his eyes, and felt fear and hope all at once.

‘Because it doesn’t matter. We’re in good shape here, we might have to let a couple of people go, which is a shame, but I made sure when we started this ... I made sure that if the London branch didn’t work out it wouldn’t be the end of us, of Fresh Talent, I mean. It wouldn’t be the *end* of us. I know we’d have to start again, but we can, we built this up from nothing once, and look how far we’ve come. If we have to do it again it’ll be better, much better, this time.’

Without realising it Maggie had crossed the room and sunk to her knees at Christian’s feet; unclenching his stiff fingers and holding them in hers, she looked up into his eyes and shook her head. ‘It doesn’t have to be over, Christian,’ she said again. ‘It doesn’t have to be.’

As she looked up at him, she felt that the whole of her life, everything she had given to make things work with Christian, was balancing on a cliff edge. Christian disengaged his fingers from hers and ran them through his hair, shaking his head, and Maggie knew she was falling.

‘Please, Mags, please. Listen to me. I don’t mean the business, I ...’ He stopped, and it seemed as if he had entirely deflated. ‘I mean *us*, Maggie. We are over. You and me. I’m in love with someone else.’

Maggie felt the sudden shocking calm of a drowned woman.

### **Leeds, later the same morning**

The first thing Pete saw as he opened his eyes was the curve of Stella's bottom, like luminescent marble, smooth and firm. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her back to him, perfectly still, thinking. For the millionth time Pete marvelled at her waist-length hair which somehow managed to be all kinds of blonde and curly and straight all at once. Occasionally, when he ventured to compliment her about it, she'd laugh and mention something about it being out of a bottle, but Pete preferred the wonder of it as a mystery. In fact, Pete preferred the whole wonder of Stella as a mystery, an insoluble enigma that he couldn't hope to understand but could only marvel at. Stella was the universe encapsulated in a single small but perfectly curvy body.

Not realising he was awake, Stella lifted her bottom gently off the bed and walked over to the mantelpiece of their bedroom. She eyed herself in the mirror for a moment, turned her body a little to examine her profile, and Pete felt the familiar surge of desire for her as he watched her watch herself. That was the wonderful thing about Stella. When Pete had first met her five years ago, she wasn't like so many of the girls he'd encountered in the past. She wasn't born half empty, always looking for a fix or a cure in the shape of a man. She wasn't the type to try and rush relationships to some premature conclusion. If anything, Stella liked to keep the emotional side of things in a kind of suspended animation, and commitment was something she'd only hint at just when you thought all hope might be lost.

Pete smiled to himself and let out a small breath. It had been like that with him and Stella not so long ago. She'd come and go, and he'd be waiting for her latest fad or fling to fade until she came back to him, and she always did. But for the last year almost, eight months anyhow, there had been no one else, he was sure of it. In the last few months

she'd started to call Pete's flat 'ours' and she'd make plans with him for the weekend as early as Wednesday night. Pete was certain, he was *sure*, that his persistence had finally won her. She'd stopped searching for a more promising alternative. She was finally his.

He found it hard to prevent himself from laughing with pure joy as he watched her bend over to rifle through the contents of their bottom drawer, but just as he was about to call out and ask her to get back into bed, Stella straightened and looked at herself in the mirror again. Pete caught sight of her reflection. In her right hand was her passport.

Pete closed his eyes abruptly, his mind racing. 'Idiot. Stupid bloody idiot,' he cursed himself silently. 'Haven't you learned that tempting fate always, always ends in tears?'

He opened his eyes just a crack to see Stella, still naked, zipping the passport into her backpack and stuffing summer dresses on top of it. He'd lulled himself into a false sense of security and now, on the very morning he'd been congratulating himself on being able to keep her, she was leaving. Only this time he wasn't going to let her go.

Desperate and determined, Pete formulated the only plan to make her stay that he could conjure up in those few split seconds. It was pretty extreme, sort of Bruce-Willis-on-top-of-a-skyscraper-full-of-terrorists-with-a-nuke extreme – but needs must.

'I've got a surprise for you tonight,' he said, sitting up quickly.

Stella jumped and dropped a selection of near translucent thongs on the floor.

'Bloody hell,' she laughed, and then, gesturing to the bag. 'I was just sorting out the washing.' They looked at each other. They both knew she was lying.

'Reservations at that place you're always banging on about ...' Pete struggled for the name.

‘Hugo’s?’ Stella gave a little jump and Pete groaned inwardly, trying to keep his mind off her breasts and on the plan.

‘Yeah, there, I’ve got reservations for tonight at eight. You’ll be there, won’t you?’

Stella looked at the bag. Suddenly she reached for her dressing gown and put it on, wrapping it tightly around her.

‘Of course I will,’ she said with quiet uncertainty.

Pete ploughed on. ‘Because I’ve got to go out today, I’ve got a few things to organise, some surprises for you and stuff ... and you won’t go anywhere, will you, Stella? Promise me you won’t do anything until after tonight, until then, will you, Stella?’

Stella examined the ends of her dressing gown cords for a long moment before meeting his eyes with a smile.

‘No, I won’t. I promise I won’t, but Pete ...’

Pete knew that his plan, his last stand, was about as clear as glass and he knew that Stella could see what was coming a mile off.

‘Look, Stella, please. All I’m asking is that you come tonight and just see. Just see how you feel after tonight? I’ve arranged it especially for you.’

Stella scooped the fallen thongs up from the floor and stuffed them, temporarily at least, back into the drawer. The passport, he noticed, stayed where it was.

‘Of course,’ she said with half a smile, and turned on the TV.

‘Well,’ thought Pete, high on the terror inspired by the thought that he was going to have to get a diamond big enough to keep her and what’s more a reservation at the most exclusive place in town – by eight o’clock tonight. ‘It’s about time I took the plunge.’

# Chapter One

'Right, Mrs Billingham.' Sarah looked at the reflection of the woman in her seventies seated before her, and then at the picture of Cameron Diaz clipped neatly from *Hello!* that she held in her hand. 'You want ash blonde with honey lowlights and an elfin tousled cut, is that right?' She raised her voice just a little for Mrs Billingham's benefit.

'Yes, dear, I thought a change would be nice, don't you?'

Sarah cast an eye over Mrs Billingham's fine hair, drained and thinned by years of colour and permanent curls, and wondered if it could stand a semi-permanent colour wash let alone anything more spectacular. She leaned over the back of the chair, bringing her cheek level with Mrs Billingham's and, lowering her voice a little, caught her gaze in the mirror. 'The thing is, love, these colours aren't included in the pensioner's special. I mean, you're right, you'd look a treat, but the colours alone would set you back fifty quid. If you've got that to spare then fine, otherwise I can do a nice set and colour rinse for a fiver. What do you say?'

Mrs Billingham's face fell. 'It's a terrible thing being old and impoverished, dear. Fifty years I worked, and for what? Don't even see my son any more.' She shook her head sadly. 'Go on then, a nice set and colour rinse will have to do.'

Sarah bit her lip, feeling a pang of guilt even though she'd knocked three quid off her usual pensioner rates.

'Mum! Phone!' Sarah turned to reply to her fourteen-year-old daughter only to find she had already headed back to the flat upstairs, leaving the door marked 'Private'

swinging in her wake. Good morning, Becca, and how *are* you? she mumbled under her breath.

‘Luce!’

The junior raised her head from the five-minute job of sorting the colours that she had so far managed to make last all morning. ‘Get Mrs Billingham washed, all right?’ Sarah asked her, and headed for the stairs up to her flat. She couldn’t think who would be calling her on the flat number during the day. Everyone knew she’d be working. It must be creditors or her mother or someone else equally terrifying. Becca had tossed the handset onto the sofa and returned to her bedroom, leaving the TV blaring to an empty room.

‘Hello?’ Sarah waited for the reply and then realised who it was. ‘*Maggie! Hello!*’ she bellowed, picturing her friend jumping out of her reverie at the other end of the line. ‘I’m at work, you should have called me in the shop.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Maggie said at her end. ‘I forgot. What’s Becca doing at home, anyway? It is a Wednesday, isn’t it? Or have I totally lost it?’

Sarah listened carefully to the tone of her voice. She seemed reasonably composed: calm, if mildly distracted.

‘Summer holidays, or Purgatory for Parents as I like to call it. So, um, what can I do for you? It’s just that I’ve got Mrs—’ Maggie’s sob tore down the phone line and battered Sarah’s ear drum before she could pull it away.

‘It’s just ... I can’t stand it! I can’t stand any of it, Sarah. This bloody pub, Mum and Dad, my stupid bloody brother and the ... and the ... the fact that he’s gone. Christen’s gone and I just can’t ... can you come over? Now?’

Sarah thought about her pensioners, her Wednesday morning bread and butter, and wondered if Jackie and Luce could cope by themselves. And then she realised they’d have to. In all the years they’d known each other, Maggie had always come to her when she’d got in a mess, across

the country sometimes and in the middle of the night. The very least she could do was get across town.

'I'll be there in twenty minutes, all right?'

Maggie continued to sob regardless.

'OK, well, I'm hanging up now, so I'll be there in twenty minutes.' She paused for a moment. 'You can put the phone down now,' she added.

As she picked up her car keys, Sarah gave a cursory knock on her daughter's door before opening it.

'Mum!' Becca squealed a generic protest.

'I'm going out, all right. Keep an eye on your brother.'

Becca looked as though she'd just been handed a death sentence. 'But I'm going out ...' she began.

'It's an emergency, OK? You want to be treated as an adult, then act like one.' Sarah winced as she heard herself trot out the same words her mother used to bludgeon her with as a girl, and which she had sworn she would never use on her own kids.

'Aunty Maggie blubbing is *not* an emergency,' Becca said blithely, turning her face away as her mother tried to kiss her. 'It's been a daily bloody occurrence for the last two weeks. I don't know why it's taking her so long to pull herself together. I wouldn't let that old git Christian make me so bloody sad all the time!'

In the back of her mind Sarah knew Becca was unleashing her level-two swearing to try and keep her there for a few minutes longer, even if it was just for a fight. For once she'd have to let her get away with it.

'It *is* bloody sad,' she said to Becca as she shut the flat door and headed down into the salon. 'Bloody fucking sad.'

'My God, this is the Blue Peter time capsule.' Sarah looked around her at Maggie's old bedroom. The only room on the top floor of her parents' pub, it was small, with a sloping ceiling in which a dormer window was set. The narrow single bed on which Maggie was currently huddled was



pushed up against a wall papered in pink and patterned with white love hearts. Sarah smiled to herself remembering the day Maggie had dragged her up the many stairs to look at her new decor.

‘Finally, Mum and Dad have let me have something modern,’ Maggie had said proudly. ‘It’s skill, isn’t it?’

How old were they then? Eleven maybe? Twelve at the oldest. Layered over the paper was poster after poster, ranging from A-ha to Bon Jovi to Take That.

‘Ha! Take That! Do you remember us pretending to fancy them ironically, but actually we fancied them totally and screamed like babies when we went to see them? How old were we then? Twenty-three?’

Sarah looked at Maggie, whose head was buried between her knees, and realised that maybe now wasn’t the best time to be talking over old times. She sat down on the bed and took hold of Maggie’s hand. The summer had arrived with full force the day that Maggie and Christian had split up. For two weeks there hadn’t been even a hint of rain, and the room felt like an oven. Sarah longed to open the window, but instead she spoke soothingly to Maggie.

‘Come on, baby,’ she said, remembering how she used to soothe Becca before Becca grew prickles and became allergic to her mother’s touch. She pulled Maggie into her arms. ‘Come on, talk to me.’

Maggie lifted her head and roughly wiped her tears away with the heel of her hand. Her large brown eyes were bloodshot, and ringed darkly with grey, which made a stark contrast against her pale skin.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry ...’ Maggie began. As she talked, she felt her breathing slowly begin to even out and the edges of the room creep back into focus. ‘It’s just everything, you know? It’s this bloody time-capsule room where everything, including my life, stands still, it’s Mum and Dad always looking at me and Mum trying to talk to me, and I know she means well but if she thinks bloody ylang-ylang and

positive affirmations are going to help ...' Maggie felt her voice rise hysterically and she took a deep breath. 'It's not having anything to do, not really. I mean, Mum said I could work in the bar, but Jesus, I did that for pin money when I was a student.'

'You'll find another job in no time, with your experience,' Sarah tried to console her.

'I know, I know I could find a job, but then if I did it'd be in catering and I know everyone in catering, and they'll all know what's happened, and anyway, even if that didn't matter, it wouldn't be the same, would it? It wouldn't be the same as running my own business. Building something up from scratch. With someone I love.'

Maggie uncurled herself and leaned her back against the wall. 'Fuck,' she said simply. 'I'm fucked, and that's all there is to it.'

Sarah leaned back next to her.

'I know, shall we smoke a fag out of the window?' she said, nudging Maggie gently in the ribs, dying for a breath of smoke-polluted fresh air. 'I mean, I know we're thirty-two and can smoke where we like, but as it's permanently 1987 in here, out of the window would be more, you know, nostalgic.' She proffered Maggie the packet, more for a joke than anything else, and then covered her surprise as her non-smoking friend took a cigarette, lit it, hauled herself off the bed and opened the window.

'You know,' Maggie said over her shoulder as she leaned out, 'it wasn't because I was worried about Mum and Dad catching us that I made us smoke out of the window - they'd have been "cool" with it. It was because I thought they were so embarrassing with all their bloody "permissive" parenting. I wanted them to be more like your mum, you know, the kind of parents that forced you to hide your disco clothes in a Tesco bag until you got half a mile down the road. Not the sort that had sex in the middle of a muddy field with a few thousand other people. When I was

a kid I used to pray to be sent to a boarding school, like Trebizon or Mallory Towers or something. I couldn't stand it here, couldn't wait to get out of here and make my own life, get married, have my own kids. Force them to brush their teeth and do their homework instead of saying, "life is full of choices, Maggie, and they are all yours to make." '

She stubbed the half-smoked cigarette out in an empty coffee cup – something which, in a woman who was almost compulsively tidy and neat, Sarah considered to be borderline psychosis – and continued. 'Which is bloody bollocks, anyhow, because I didn't *choose* to be back here in my parents' pub, with my as-good-as-useless brother still living off them, still wandering about like an aimless halfwit. I didn't *choose* for Christian to leave me. I didn't *choose* any of this, but I've got it and I just can't see where I go from here, Sarah. I just can't see what to do.'

'Listen.' Sarah crossed the small room and stood in the square pool of sunlit warmth. 'I know that right now things seem as if they'll never get better – believe me, I've been there more times than I care to mention – but things will get better. It's only been a couple of weeks. You haven't had a chance to sort things out yet, you haven't let it all sink in. And what you were saying about my mum ... Have you forgotten she threw me out at eighteen because she wouldn't have a pregnant girl bringing shame on the house? I never see her, I never speak to her and she lives two miles away. At least your parents are here for you. They *love* you, Mags, even if they are a bit flaky. And at least you've got a roof over your head and a way of earning some cash until you get back on your feet.'

Sarah reached out and tucked her friend's dark hair behind one ear.

'What you need, apart from some coppertone lowlights and some *really* good concealer is a plan. You need to get some direction, move things on a bit.' Sarah paused cautiously. 'You need to see Christian, Mags. You've got

money in that business and in the flat. You have to be practical, get what's yours and move on. It's the only way, mate, trust me.'

Maggie rubbed her hands across her face and ran them anxiously through her hair. 'I know,' she said. 'I know. He keeps leaving me messages on my mobile saying we've got to sort out the practicalities, but he sounds so normal, he sounds as if he's ordering vegetables. Like *this* hasn't touched him at all. I want to see him, but not like this ...' She stopped. 'But I know, I know I have to.'

Sarah nodded and checked her watch.

'Mate, I've got to go, I've got a full head of colour in twenty minutes. Listen, I'll come with you when you see him, if you like. I could thump him for you, kick him in the bollocks? Or make derogatory remarks about his sexual prowess?'

Maggie half laughed before suffering a split-second but entirely vivid memory of Christian making love to her. She forced the image out of her mind with a small shake of her head.

'No, don't worry, I'll do it on my own.' She didn't want to tell Sarah that the last thing she wanted was someone there to keep her together. She didn't want to be together, she wanted him to see what he'd done, to realise how wrong he was. She wanted a chance to change his mind.

Sarah scrutinised her briefly and then nodded.

'All right then, but if I remember rightly, the appropriate time-capsule way of dealing with a broken heart is two extralarge slabs of Dairy Milk and two bottles of Blue Nun before a night on the town. My nan's got the kids on Friday, so you and me are going out, and we'll go shopping in my lunch hour and I'll do your hair first, no arguments. Agreed?' Sarah ignored Maggie's terrified look. 'No arguments.' She grinned at Maggie as she left. 'You just have to think of this as a beginning, not an end, OK?'

‘OK,’ Maggie agreed weakly, but what little resolve she mustered had vanished by the time Sarah had shut the bedroom door.

## Chapter Two

Every time Pete thought of that evening, of that whole day really, it was always the same. He felt a sharp pang somewhere in the location of his heart, followed by a knotted feeling in his stomach. They were always brutally physical, his reactions to Stella, as if the emotions she engendered in him had seeped into each molecule of his body; as if it was only loving her that had made him three-dimensional at all.

Looking up, he glanced out of the window of the intercity train. Birmingham had been and gone about twenty minutes ago, next it would be Milton Keynes and then he'd be properly in the south. There'd be no getting away from it then. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his long legs crammed against his backpack. He'd wanted this more or less most of his life, to break out of two-bit TV work and get into film, but now that it was happening he wasn't so sure. Now he was actually doing it he longed for his old small life, his telescope and Stella. The thought of her – just her name – constricted the flow of blood to his heart for a moment, and his fingers tightened on the seat.

Pete smiled to himself as he remembered the panic of that morning when he'd realised that Stella was leaving again, the day he'd decided, for once in his life, to stop her going. After Stella had agreed to meet him at Hugo's she had dressed quietly, sweeping her long hair off her face and tying it in a loose knot, then spent a couple of moments looking through her earrings before selecting some large silver hoops. Stella said she liked the gypsy look, said it suited her nature.

‘I have to go out,’ she’d said. ‘I’ve got to rearrange some things so that I can meet you tonight?’ Her tone was tentative and uncertain, as if she was afraid that Pete wouldn’t let her go. Except of course Pete always let her go. He always let her go and he always took her back.

‘But you’ll be there tonight? At eight, won’t you?’ he had pressed her, silently thinking he was insane to try and hold her to a time and a place that would take a sizeable miracle to arrange.

Stella had crossed the room and taken his face in her hands. For a moment Pete had been lost in the violet wheels of her eyes.

‘Yes. I’ll be there tonight.’ She had kissed him briefly on the lips, leaving him tingling, and then she was gone. For two thunderous heartbeats Pete had stood motionless in her wake, and then crumpled on to the bed.

‘How the fuck am I going to pull this off?’ he’d moaned, knowing that pretty much his entire future happiness depended on him doing just that.

It was just past nine a.m. when he’d got to the restaurant, and it was firmly shut, grilles pulled down across the huge plate glass windows, and not a sign of life in the minimalist dining room. Pete peered into the gloom and he thought he could see the faintest chink of light blinking through the swing of what must be the kitchen’s double doors.

‘Kitchen,’ he said determinedly and headed round the back. The thought had occurred to him then that turning up in his weekend jeans, the ones that hung round his hips with the hole in the knee, and his Leeds replica shirt might, on reflection, not have been the best idea. But he hadn’t had much time for reflection that morning. He hadn’t had time for anything much more than running around in a blind panic like a man about to face the axeman’s block.

The back door of the kitchen was opened on to a small courtyard and a young lad, maybe sixteen or seventeen,

was taking in a delivery of fresh vegetables. Pete paused a few feet from him and shuffled.

'All right?' he asked mildly.

The boy raised his head and nodded, turning to go in.

'Um, I was wondering, like. Any chance of getting a table here tonight? It's an emergency.'

The lad turned back and looked at Pete, a slow grin spreading across his acne-bitten face. 'This isn't McDonald's, mate!' he said with a phlegmy laugh. 'You have to book about three months ahead and you need at least two ton in your pocket to eat here. Sorry, try the Italian in the arcade, they can usually fit you in and their veal's not bad.'

Pete regarded his grey and worn trainers and wondered how it had come to this. How he, a grown man of thirty-four, had been reduced to pleading with some spotty kid for his life.

'The thing is, mate, I'm going to propose to her, my girlfriend Stella, that is. And it has to be tonight and it has to be here. Otherwise she's going to leave me.'

The kid looked at him with a mixture of horror and contempt. 'You've not heard of planning ahead, then?' he said. He propped the kitchen door open with the veg and sat down on the concrete step, pulling out a packet of fags from his apron. He offered one to Pete, who didn't really smoke but took it anyway, and sat beside him on the step. 'Look,' the kid continued, 'I've been about, me. I've got a few birds on the go and, trust me, if your lass is that demanding you don't want to be marrying her. You want to be sacking her. Pronto.' He nodded at Pete's shirt. 'So what about last season then?' he asked him.

Pete winced and shook his head. 'You tell me how we got from playing in Europe to a relegation dog fight in just two seasons.' He shook his head glumly.

'Tell me about it. I'm Si, by the way. I'm sort of dogsbody to the sous-chef, when I'm not at college. But it's all right.



Training here means I can go anywhere once I'm qualified.'

Pete tried to look interested as he felt his small sliver of hope dissolve. He shook his head despondently.

'It's good you're doing what you want. Just make sure you never get stuck in a rut. I guess by now I should have learnt,' he told Si, taking a painful drag on the cigarette, 'that I can't stop Stella. If she wants to go, she'll go, and she'll leave me here waiting for her, living in the same old flat, going to the same studios every day, spending my entire life with Dougie the sodding Digger.' Pete took another drag. 'Sometimes I think if it was over, finally over for good this time, it'd even be a sort of relief, but ...'

'Dougie the Digger?' Si's head snapped up. 'I bloody love Dougie the Digger!' He leapt up and started singing the theme tune from the children's show right there. ' "*Dougie the Digger, Big and strong, He'll always be there to put right what's wrong!*" 'Fucking ace. I fucking grew up on Dougie, man.'

Pete stared at him and felt a curious mixture of pride and horror. 'I never realised I'd been doing it for so long that actual grown-up kids had actually grown up on it ...' he muttered.

'So then, man, what do you do, on Dougie?' Si crouched down beside him. 'Do you do the voice, do you? Hey, listen to this.' He went into a faultless impression of Dougie's rumbling Yorkshire accent. ' "Don't worry, Mr Merry, we'll have you dug out of the hole in no time. Come on, Skip!" 'What do you reckon? I could do your holiday cover or whatever.' Si laughed and shook his head, so genuinely tickled by the idea, that Pete couldn't help grinning in return.

'I'm a model maker, the special effects bloke. I build and operate Dougie and some of the other characters as well.'

Si grinned and held out his hand. 'You wait till I tell my mates I've met Dougie the Digger. Fuck.' He paused for a minute and seemed to be mulling something over. 'Hang on

there a minute, Dougie,' he said, disappearing into the kitchen before Pete could correct him about his name.

Pete waited, uncertain what he was waiting for or why. Twenty long minutes passed before Si came back. He dipped his chin and leaned in close to Pete, as if someone might overhear them.

'Right, you're in. Tonight at eight. Don't ask me how I did it, and if anyone finds out, I don't know you.' He clapped Pete on the shoulder. 'Oh, and Dougie, you're booked under the name of Mr and Mrs Everson, OK?'

Pete had spluttered a reply and thanked Si profusely before leaving. He hadn't really believed it had happened, and he'd had to double-check before he could allow himself a small celebration. For now at least there was still hope. As he had turned into the street where his building society was just opening, he had passed a bookshop with a display of Dougie books in the window.

'Cheers, mate,' he'd said, and then gone to get out two grand for an engagement ring.

He'd worried for the rest of that afternoon about whether 0.5 of a carat was enough for Stella. After ascertaining that Pete actually was a genuine buyer and not someone planning to do over the premises, the salesman had shown him a tray of rings in his price range. Pete had thought he'd get something with a bit more bling for his money, but apparently he'd need three times as much for a whole carat.

'This ring is very good sir, good clarity, good colour and an elegant brilliant cut. Plus I'll take off two fifty for cash.'

It had been over so quickly. The dream that he would one day be sure enough of Stella to buy her a ring had been in the back of his mind for so long now that he'd built up the whole scenario in detail. He'd meant to shop around to find the perfect ring that would sing out to her the moment she clapped eyes on it. He'd mentioned this to his sister once, but she'd laughed harshly and told him, 'that one claps

eyes on anything she can pawn later and she'll be singing all the way to the bank!' But then Jess had never understood Stella.

Well, what anyone else thought of all this didn't matter. Pete just hoped that the ring he'd bought in less than half an hour would be good enough to keep her. After all, he hadn't even checked the size. He'd held on to it tightly, concealing it in his pocket as he headed back through Headingly trying very hard not to look like a bloke carrying two grands' worth of diamond. When he finally got in he found his favourite Stone Roses CD and put it on full blast. At once he felt all the energy, vigour and promise he'd been so certain of at eighteen. He'd have to get ready, have a bath, iron something, but right then, with the adrenalin pumping in his veins and his heart thundering in his chest, he had to dance.

And Pete remembered he had danced until his lungs were stretched to bursting and he was dizzy on the possibility of how wonderful life would be if only she would say yes.

The train had an unscheduled stop at somewhere called Berkhamsted due to signal problems. Looking out of the window Pete saw a young couple lift a buggy off the train and wheel it towards the steps. The mother was laughing at her little girl of maybe two as she tried to put on her dad's sunglasses. That was what he'd been dreaming of that afternoon he'd danced himself stupid, not Stella on the other side of the world and him off teaching in some southern backwater called St Albans, even if it did mean a shot at working on a film. As the train pulled out of the station he caught a last glimpse of the couple briefly touching hands and exchanging smiles before they carried the buggy down the station steps.

He shook his head, and as the train entered a tunnel he gave his bemused reflection a companionable shrug. It was

wrong, surely, and strange that he should feel like this.  
That he should feel so bereft and desolate.

After all, Stella *had* said yes.

## Chapter Three

'All right, Mag?' Sheila greeted Maggie with her habitual East End tendency to shorten every close friend and family member's name to one syllable, no matter what the result.

'All right, She?' Maggie returned the compliment, glad to see her.

Sheila had worked in The Fleur for almost forty years and Maggie had grown up with her. Born in Bow, she had worked there for most of her youth – a real Bow Belle she often said, with all the young men eyeing her as she whizzed down the streets on her dad's bicycle, her voluminous skirts billowing flirtatiously over the crossbar. When she was eighteen she had married the local war hero, a copper and amateur boxer ten years her senior. 'Problem was,' Sheila had told her once with her usual sanguine detachment, 'he didn't keep his fists to himself outside of the ring.' For nearly two years she'd stood it, hiding her bruises from her friends and holding her head high, still playing the part of the feisty blonde. And then he'd beat her so badly she'd lost her first baby, a girl, when she was five months pregnant. The next day still bleeding and bruised, she packed what little she had and ran away, getting as far out of London as she could afford. She'd landed in St Albans, and she'd been working in this pub even before Maggie's parents had bought it.

Sheila had never had another child, she'd never got remarried. 'Well, I never got divorced, did I?' she'd say with a laugh. 'Wasn't done in them days.'

Looking at her now, as she leaned against the bar, her hair still meticulously blonde, her thick gold chains looped

around her neck and hoops in her ears, her make-up carefully applied, Maggie could see the eighteen-year-old Bow Belle still there, as clear as day. Years of smoking had kept her thin, and though her skin was etched with deep lines it was still taut and revealed good bones. She had often wondered if Sheila regretted the way her life had passed, but if she did she never mentioned it, never seemed to reflect on it.

To Maggie, Sheila was a second mum. Whenever she couldn't stand her parents' brand of hands-off parenting any longer she'd always turned to Sheila, who'd listen to her problems patiently and then tell it like it was. It was no exaggeration to say that Sheila had often saved Maggie's sanity, if not sometimes her very life. Maggie couldn't imagine life without her.

'Where you off then?' Sheila nodded at Maggie's attire. She had spent all of this morning deciding what to wear, how to look for her meeting with Christian. Eventually she'd plumped for a shortish black linen skirt that accentuated her slimness, and a dark pink shirt, one that contrasted well with her dark looks and light skin. It was a shame she wasn't getting her hair done until after the meeting, but she'd taken Sarah's advice and spent some considerable time applying her foundation and concealer until you could hardly see the shadows and soreness around her eyes.

Maggie had done all she could to remind Christian of the things he loved about her: her large brown eyes, her smooth white skin that never tanned, her slim and slender legs. Perhaps now, after this short break away from her – which felt like a hundred years – he'd see her with new eyes and realise exactly what it was he was leaving behind. He'd see how well she was coping, how well she looked, and realise he couldn't do it. Of course she hadn't mentioned any of these half-hidden hopes and dreams to anyone, least of all Sarah or Sheila, who would both laugh