

An extract from The Woman Who Fell in Love for a Week

Chapter 1

TO DO LIST

Copy-edit Carla's book

Eat lots of super-foods

Read a novel a day

No alcohol

Quit electronic smoking

Do something about depilation

Swim 40 lengths a day

Have sex with Roger

It wasn't hard for Jenny to close her front door and walk away from home, these days. When her marriage had ended three years earlier, so had her long love affair with the only house she'd ever wanted to take root in. She felt no great affection for the modern mews in which she lived now, bricks and mortar bought with her share of the sale of the North Oxford home in which she and Robin had raised a family and razed a marriage. She was potted out, waiting to be replanted.

She glanced back at it in the rear-view mirror as she pulled into the communal drive, her little terracotta safe haven sitting neatly among its architect-designed clones, all overlooking the Oxford canal. After the ambush of divorce, she'd eschewed any ambitions of home-making, merry-making and love-making in favour of practical necessities. At the time, the children had needed to stay close to school, and the cycle into work along the canal towpath suited Jenny perfectly too. The mews development's gated community kept her safe, locked in her own self-protective shell. The twins complained that there was no room to move amid the relics of the old family home, its antique furniture crammed into the small modern house – Robin had taken almost nothing with him to the States – but Jenny had needed the comfort they brought. Now she found it increasingly impractical to live in a museum of her marriage. Abandoning it for brief bursts of reinvention had become a great treat, and house-sitting was her favourite means of escape.

Waiting for the electric gates to slide back, she fed the postcode of the Old Rectory, Hadden End, into her sat-nav with the excited exhilaration of a space traveller inputting the co-ordinates to a new galaxy.

Most of Jenny's house-sitting work came through a free online agency, whose members' area she scanned with more enthusiasm than the online dating sites to which she also subscribed. However, her best-paid and usually most interesting work came via the books of the exclusive Home Guardians run by a flirtatious ex-estate agent called Henry, whose glossy ads promised Tatler and Telegraph readers that his sitters were bastions of home and pet care. Henry had called Jenny late the previous night, entreating, 'I know I can rely upon my absolute stellar sitter to help out in an emergency. These clients are well known, so they require discretion, good security and, above all, an experienced dog lover.' The Lewis family's usual house-sitter – one of Henry's ex-army stalwarts – had broken his leg the day before their fortnight's holiday, Henry explained. 'They leave tomorrow. I've told them you're my secret weapon, darling Jenny. Please tell me you're free.'

While she knew that she was probably the only person on his books with a life so organized and dull that she could drop everything at a moment's notice – and, judging from the late hour of the call, he'd already tried others – Jenny was rather boosted by the notion of being a secret weapon with a mission. She was also in Henry's debt because he'd agreed to find her an idyllic house-sit during her autumn term sabbatical, preferably overseas, in which she could finally write the novel she'd always wanted to have a stab at. And when she learned who the Lewises were, Jenny was only too happy to

step into the breach. What better place to start seeking inspiration for her sabbatical than a fortnight spent looking after the home of two successful writers? Richard Lewis was a critically acclaimed, media-savvy biographer whose pithy, meticulously researched insight into the lives of literary heavyweights had won him a legion of fans, Jenny among them. His fame, though, was far overshadowed by that of his wife, Geraldine Scott, the author of passionate page-turning sagas that were opened en masse on sun-loungers the world over by devoted followers like hymn books along church pews. Most legendary among them was *The Dust Storm*, sections of which a whole generation of women could quote verbatim.

Accepting the last-minute job with a rush of impulsive, almost reckless enthusiasm that was quite out of character for her now, Jenny was incredibly grateful that she hadn't already committed the first two weeks of the summer holidays. The independent school at which she taught always broke up a fortnight earlier than state ones, and many of her pupils' families and her colleagues took advantage of this by escaping as soon as the bell rang after the term's last lesson. For Jenny, these two weeks had once been among her most precious, filled with indulgent domesticity and time devoted to her own children. This year, with the twins overseas, they had become fourteen hollow days. Jenny had lined up plenty of distractions to keep her occupied, but until now nothing had seemed a perfect fit. She'd been dabbling with the idea of a cheap Med break, urged on by her English department head, who took pot luck on last-minute deals to devour the Booker short-list at this time every year. Her regular date, Roger, was equally keen to lure her into a week's hill-walking in the Peak District. Instead, to her delight, she was stepping into her favourite role: custodian of a beautiful home, with a generous bonus and the opportunity to see inside the life of one of the literary world's most successful marriages.

Driving the short hop from Oxford into Buckinghamshire, the squeak of the whiteboard marker and thunder of feet along corridors faded from Jenny's ears as the Heart FM presenter shared the happy news that the current heat-wave was heading into a second week, cueing Donna Summer's 'Hot Stuff'. She cranked up the volume and let her new house-sitting persona wash over her. She was no longer Mrs Rees, deputy head of English at a solid home-counties school, mildly OCD, neatness fanatic and devotee of Angela Carter, Oscar Wilde and the eighteenth-century novel, who guiltily smoked her electronic cigarettes outside in the back garden under cover of darkness and read all books with a pencil tucked behind her ear to correct typos. She was Jane Eyre, about to enter Thornfield Hall, Tess heading to the d'Urberville mansion or Dorothea idealistically setting out for Lowick Manor. She was about to step into the world of Geraldine Scott, doyenne of the sweeping modern romantic epic, a passionate charity campaigner and rock-and-roll bohemian, married to art-loving academic Richard Lewis, whose soft voice had lulled Jenny to sleep on many occasions while she was listening to the late-night culture show he hosted on radio.

To be true to the spirit of this adventure, she was tempted to glide sedately along the left-hand carriageway at stagecoach speed, listening to Beethoven to savour the moment, but she couldn't resist putting her foot down in the fast lane as she sang along with the disco diva, thrilled at the liberation.