

Chapter One

Juno's throat was so dry that every quick breath seemed to suck her lungs sharply into her ribs like flags whipping against their poles. She touched her upper lip with her tongue and tasted salt from the light film of sweat there.

'They're a good crowd tonight,' Bob said encouragingly as he moved in beside her with a fresh bottle of Ice, anticipating his next compere's slot. 'They even laughed at one of Eric's dead-Tory jokes, so they must be pretty indiscriminating.'

Juno glanced at him briefly, too nervous to speak. Even in the half-light between the bar and the stage, his popping-out eyes gleamed with mirth as he shot her a cheer-up wink. It would be so easy to be a great stand-up comic like Bob if my face were funny already, she mused.

Bob Worth had been on the London comedy circuit for almost a decade and was a regular compe`re in the upstairs function rooms of pubs and clubs in the West End, where he bounded up to a mike stand night after night to deliver his own unique brand of off-the-cuff, off-the-wall humour. It was popularly believed that he would have made it big-time were he not so regularly off-his-face too.

Somewhere in the depths of her leather trousers, Juno distinctly felt a twang as her teddy poppers gave way. There was no time to dash to the loo to re-pop them – the queue was already out into the bar, and Bob was sinking his Ice fast as he geared up to leap on stage and introduce her. She wondered briefly if anyone would notice her having a quick re-popping delve in the gloom where she was standing, but decided it wasn't worth the risk. One or two laddish audience members were eyeing her occasionally, sensing fresh blood about to be thrown Christian-like on to the stage.

Why do I do it? she thought wretchedly. Why do I put myself through this?

Up on the small, raised rostrum which was acting as the stage, a droopy student with a ginger goatee beard, which clashed disastrously with his hyper-fashionable carrot orange Diesel surf-shirt, was giving a long, observational spiel about other students eating his Coco Pops. Hardly anyone in the audience was listening to him. Only his close friends and supporters laughed. The crowd had started to feel restless, their glasses empty. People were already slyly creeping off to the bar to get their rounds of drinks in before the rush started.

‘Got any friends in tonight?’ Bob asked distractedly as he glanced at his watch and winced. Everyone on the bill so far had overrun their allotted time.

Juno shook her head. She could usually guarantee that her brother and Triona, his tempestuous girlfriend, would be inhabiting the front table, along with various loudly cackling friends who were just as likely to heckle mercilessly.

But tonight was different. Sean was currently airborne over the Atlantic, heading for New York where he was planning to spend six months working as a freelance photographer. Triona was holed up in her flat crying her eyes out as a result, and Sean’s loyal band of friends would see no point in turning out to support the little sister of the man they called the Top Shot, when the great man himself had deserted them. Her own friends were banned from her occasional slots at comedy clubs because she became even more hopelessly nervous with them around.

The student had moved on to the theft of his Low-Fat Flora now. Bob pressed his forehead to Juno’s shoulder and groaned.

‘Jesus, I hate doing this, but he was only offered five minutes and he’s already done quarter of a fucking hour.’

‘Is fucking time different then?’ Juno asked through chattering teeth as she realised her cue was almost upon her. ‘Like a quarter of an ordinary hour, only shorter? Are we talking Greenwich Male Time here?’

Bob cocked his head and wrinkled his long nose. 'That sort of feminist humour's going out of fashion, babe – too oblique. Stick to the family and friends material.'

Juno felt even more hellish. Bob usually humoured her enough to laugh at her nervous pre-act gags, an act of charity few of the hardened, regular comperes afforded her. But tonight he simply handed her his half-smoked fag and stalked on stage to reclaim the mike.

'Terrific stuff! Rory Hanson, ladies and gentlemen – a star of the future. And if the future is as orange as his shirt then I personally am planning to kill myself tonight. Let's hear it for him – Rory Hanson!' He more or less elbowed the confused student off-stage and then adopted a conspiratorial stance, allying himself with the audience, long nose wrinkling, eyes narrowing against the wall of cigarette smoke as he scanned them all. The crowd respected Bob, were intimidated by his manic stare, acid humour and sheer physical presence.

'I said to him before he came on tonight that he had no more than five fucking minutes.' He rolled his eyes and shrugged. 'But you know what young lads are like, girls – to you it might be five minutes of boring fucking, to us it's half an hour of unbelievable fucking and boring and grinding and sending you to heaven and back, impaled upon the greatest seven inches of love piston that ever came out of the womb, went back in it again, came out, went in, came out, went in, came – and then rolled over and farted. You women have PMT, we men have GMT – Greenwich Male Time. And I think we all agree that Rory didn't come too soon tonight – he simply stayed too long.'

The lads beside Juno jeered, some of the girls in the audience shrieked with giggles, and Bob had them exactly where he wanted them: paying attention once more, stopping halfway to the bar or the loo to listen again, to laugh in shocked delight and exchange big grins with their friends.

Juno inwardly smarted with jealousy and pique that he'd stolen her Greenwich Male Time joke and, worse than that, made it appear screamingly funny to all around. But a few seconds later she almost forgave him.

'Now I might be planning suicide later tonight but, boys and girls, there is one last thing I want to do before I die – and that's watch our next act. She's one damned fine bit of totty. She's sexy, she's funny, she's yet to give up the day job but I think you'll agree when you see her that this lady is made for the night – for sin, for laughs and, most of all, for your enjoyment. Let's hear it for the divine Juno Glenn!'

Buoyed up by the introduction, Juno picked up her faithful squeezebox. To flattering whoops and catcalls, she wound her way towards the rostrum and decided at the last minute to inject a bit of physical energy into her routine by jumping Bob-style on to the stage.

Laughter is a comedian's addiction. The bigger the roar, the higher the fix. The communal cackle that greeted Juno's arrival on stage at that moment was the largest of her life, the loudest, longest and most gut-busting she had ever received. People were literally weeping. It was her best punch-line by far, yet she hadn't uttered a word.

Jay Mulligan sat in the back of a black cab with his biker boots up on a leather holdall, staring through the windscreen ahead at streams of red taillights on the M4.

An office block gleamed beneath an arc of floodlighting to the right. Compared to the sky-scrapers of Manhattan, it looked squat and disproportionate. To the left, a dingy yellow rectangle of light bulbs flashed the time and temperature from a dirty grey concrete wall. Jay saw 21° and shuddered in horror before realising this was Centigrade, not Fahrenheit. Even so, he felt cold and clammy and badly in need of a hot shower.

The journey to North London took far longer than he had anticipated. The parts of the city he saw on the way appeared

pretty small-scale and grubby – dimly lit pubs on street corners with dusty window boxes, row upon row of tiny houses with paint peeling from their doors, those squat office blocks and narrow streets with dinky little traffic lights.

‘What’s this area called?’ he asked.

The driver didn’t hear him, so he tapped on the glass in front until it slid to one side.

‘This place – what’s it called?’ Jay repeated, staring out at pavements crawling with gaggles of young drinkers shuffling past shuttered shops and all-night fast food cafe’s.

‘Camden, mate,’ the driver sniffed. ‘A dive. That’s the canal to your left there. Full of needles and johnnies.’

All Jay could see in the dark was a low wall and beyond it a large brick building with ‘Dingwalls’ painted on the side, which vanished as they swooped under a metal bridge and roared through the traffic with a splutter of diesel engine.

When they finally made it to Belsize Park and located the right road, the driver clocked the affluent-looking street and became chatty.

‘Nice road this.’ He nodded along the row of stucco-fronted town houses with their flower-filled balconies and porticoed front doors below. ‘Don’t that Liam Gallagher bloke live in one of these?’

‘Pardon me?’ Jay was fishing through the pockets of his leather jacket for his wad of sterling.

‘You staying with friends while you’re over here?’ The driver started to heave some of Jay’s luggage out on to the pavement.

‘Uh-huh – I’ve done an apartment-swap with a guy.’

‘Nice.’ The driver whistled. ‘Your gaff must be pretty choice to swap with one of these places.’

‘My what?’

‘Your gaff. Your house, mate.’

‘I live alone – I don’t have a house-mate.’

Jay tried not to think too hard about his huge, airy loft with its wooden floors, sparse furnishings and vast darkroom. Places like his were gold-dust in TriBeCa, and he hated leaving it – and especially his Bengal cat, Bagel, who was hell to live with but a better burglar deterrent than three Dobermanns and a Colt .45. His only solace was that Sean Glenn was a great guy who not only loved the apartment as much as he did, but also doted on the most violent feline in America. Jay guessed his place was in safe hands.

Out on the pavement, he handed over a pile of notes and searched through the pockets of one of his kit-bags for the keys that Sean had left at the British Airways desk in Heathrow for him, along with a note explaining that his dog, Rug, was being looked after by his parents, but that Jay would have to take care of Poirot and Juno himself.

‘That’s nothing compared to the task I’ve got with Bagel,’ the note had read, ‘but I’d better warn you that Poirot bites if he’s in a bad mood, and that both he and Juno make a hell of a lot of noise and mess if left alone too long.’

Jay was slightly confused by this. He knew that Poirot was a macaw that talked dirty, but he wasn’t too sure what species Juno was. He guessed it was another bird, possibly a second parrot, but he was surprised Sean hadn’t mentioned this when they’d met in New York last month to discuss the swap. He’d gone into every other detail about the place – from the dodgy boiler to the days the cleaner came and what sort of wax polish she liked. Jay, by contrast, had simply bought in some extra cat food and cancelled his mail delivery. He found it easy to leave places behind – he’d been doing it all his life.

The house which Sean Glenn’s apartment was in looked much the same as all the others in the road – tall, narrow and austere. It had a glossy black front door with a brass knob set in the centre and, to the left, three bells – one for each apartment. Sean’s was the top one, but the only thing written

in the small box to the side of it was, 'Don't ring before midday'.

Jay let himself into the gloomy communal hall, which had a low oak table covered with uncollected mail, at the centre of which a chipped vase was housing a few dusty pieces of dried grass, a broken pen and a plastic wind-twirler on a stick. The carpet on the stairs was loose and bald and, thanks to timer lights that gave a guy less than ten seconds to climb three levels, Jay risked his life as he staggered back and forth with his luggage and equipment. At last getting everything to the top, he let himself in, further appalled that the door, which was clearly fitted with three locks, had been secured with only one little automatic latch.

Inside, his mood lightened as he took in the size of the place.

The hallway, which he encountered first, had a high, slanting glass ceiling through which seeped a combination of city glow and moonlight to throw a clutter of sports equipment into high relief. Straight ahead were open double doors leading to a huge room lit by the dancing blue glare of a colossal illuminated fish tank, and by two tall, uncurtained windows the size of garage doors. Unable to locate a light switch, Jay tripped his way through the half-dark towards them and realised that they overlooked a large garden, beyond which stretched rooftops and terraces towards central London. In the far distance, he could see the pin-prick gleam of lights from tower-block windows several miles away. To his left was a panelled glass door which clearly opened out on to some sort of balcony, and to his right was a wide arch through which several green or red power lights winked and vast swathes of zinc gleamed, telling him this was a kitchen.

The fish tank was letting out the occasional faint burble and, glancing across to it, he spotted an extremely ugly reptilian face peering at him quizzically. Perched on what appeared to be a tower of kid's plastic building blocks shaped

like a sunken ship, and looming out of the surface of the luminescent water, was a turtle of some sort. It was the size of a shoe box, had flippers shaped like lily petals, a beaky snout and strange, hooded eyes on stalks which made Jay flinch in revulsion.

‘Jeez, you’re a seriously ugly individual.’ He wandered across to it, tripping over what appeared to be a pizza box en route. ‘Guess you must be Juno. Now where’s Poirot?’ Beside the tank was a tall light shaped like a movie lamp. Crawling around its base, Jay located a foot switch and threw it, turning back to look around.

It was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful rooms he’d ever seen. And also one of the messiest.

The walls were painted a deep, vibrant green so intense it almost blew his head off. They were covered not with the photographs he’d expected but with hundreds of framed caricatures and cartoons, all originals, and some bearing names which even Jay had heard of – Steadman, Scarfe, Searle. There was even a tiny Hogarth sketch. He was amazed. The floor – what little of it he could see – was of polished ash floorboards, so silvery grey it seemed to be cast in pure metal. A fat, rust-coloured silk sofa the size of a family car dominated the centre of the room, facing a fireplace with a grey marble mantel so laden with candles and framed family photographs it was almost cracking under the weight. Dried wax of every colour dripped decadently from its rim like icicles seeping over a winter gutter. Under each of the enormous windows, a heavy oak table shouldered its way into the room, gleaming like wet tar with polish.

The rest of the furniture was also minimal, very old, and beautifully proportioned. And almost every piece of it was covered in fast-food litter, wine bottles, drink cans, brimming ashtrays and clothes – what appeared to be women’s clothes. Skimpy women’s clothes. The same went for the floor, the sofa, the protective cover on the fish tank, the old-fashioned

painted radiators and even the palatial parrot cage beside the balcony window. Wandering over to it, Jay peeked beneath the sleeve of a red satin blouse and saw a scraggy red parrot bearing the same expression as a grumpy lush awoken at six in the morning by a neighbour asking for sugar. Blinking evilly, it opened its beak, poked out a grey tongue and shrieked, 'A tenner on the three-fifteen!' before lunging violently at the side of the cage.

Jay hastily dropped the sleeve of the blouse and backed off.

Opening a door beside the cage which he assumed to be a bedroom, he encountered the boiler Sean had told him about, covered with yet more female clothes – most of them lacy undergarments. Jay knew from talking with him that Sean had a girlfriend called Triona who was furious that he was going to the States for six months, but surely vandalising the flat with fast-food containers and pantyhose was kind of weird.

The kitchen was so full of junk and dirty dishes that he backed straight out again, hardly taking in the high-tech gadgets and pots of fresh herbs on the window sill. The smell of old Big Whoppers decomposing in their plastic containers was too much.

Back in the hallway, he peered in trepidation through each of the four remaining doors. One led to a huge, plant-filled bathroom, in which the steam of a recent shower and a sweet scent still lingered, swamp-like. Two were bedrooms: one large, neat and impersonal, like a luxury hotel suite awaiting its one-night stand, the other smaller and cluttered with books, clothes and dirty mugs, and dominated by a cast-iron bed that looked not only slept in, but sex-marathoned in too. A twisted wire coathanger lay in the centre of its creased cream duvet like a man-trap.

The final door was Jay's release from this confused arrival. He could forgive Sean any amount of messiness and mad girlfriend revenge when he looked through it. Inside was a darkroom of glorious technicality. Jay only wished he would

need to use it while he was in England – but that was about as likely as his ever meeting the extraordinary subjects of the photographs Sean Glenn had left behind on his drying racks.

It was past midnight when Juno got home, and she was somewhat baffled to find all three bolts on the flat door double-locked, necessitating a lot of key-rattling, cursing and fiddling to get inside. She couldn't remember leaving the place that way, but she'd been hellishly distracted when she'd rushed out earlier.

Kicking off her boots as she wandered through the hall, she was even more perturbed to find that the place looked tidier than she'd left it.

She stopped midway into the sitting room, baffled. Then she remembered that their cleaning lady, Simmy, had promised to call in and give the place a quick once-over before the photographer Sean was flat-swapping with arrived tomorrow. She must have let herself in after Juno had left for the club.

Relieved that she'd solved the mystery, Juno untied the borrowed shirt from around her waist and looked down at her stomach, where one paltry button restrained her bulging spare tyres from their desired escape route. They'd made it through the zip – blasting it like explosive through a safe door – but the riveted fly button had held firm, unlike the poppers on her lace teddy. At least she was wearing knickers underneath, she mulled dejectedly. She'd heard of a duff joke, but to her knowledge no one had, as yet, been laughed off stage for a muff joke.

Disgusted with herself, she peeled off her ruined leather trousers and dragged the defective teddy over her head without a second thought. The relief was exquisite, especially as the agonisingly tight, sweaty trousers had creased the flesh of her thighs until they resembled raw, pinched pastry, and the waistband had pressed the fabric of her teddy so tightly to her belly that it had indented its pattern and she was now wearing

a temporary red lace belt. She kicked the trousers hard across the floor and headed through to the kitchen for a juice, pausing briefly to blow a kiss at Uboat, who was balancing on her plastic reef and looking lovingly at her.

‘I know you love me, darling,’ she sighed, wondering if she could resist slobbering in front of late-night cable TV before heading to bed.

She did a double-take when she opened the fridge. Not only were there about twenty cans of Diet Coke inside which she was certain hadn’t been there earlier, but yesterday’s half-eaten curry take-out, which she’d been looking forward to finishing, had disappeared, along with her yoghurt and avocado face-pack mix and half a whiffy St Paulin her friend Lydia had brought back from France the previous week.

‘And where’s my chocolate penis disappeared to?’ She peered deeper inside.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ demanded a furiously angry voice behind her.

Spinning around in fright, she took in the glorious sight of a long-haired, narrow-hipped Adonis wearing nothing but a towel. Burglars don’t wear towels, she told herself logically, noticing that he also had a pair of scuffed biker boots on his feet.

‘I’m Juno,’ she squeaked nervously. ‘Nice outfit.’

Jay backed off in horror. With the steely blue light of the refrigerator behind her, this mad woman was standing there in nothing but a pair of cream lace panties.

‘*You’re Juno?*’ he managed to croak.

‘I’m afraid so. Don’t tell me – you’re Jay?’ She was desperately trying to cover herself up with a carton of Covent Garden soup and a packet of ready-mixed salad. ‘Welcome to London. Now, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll go to bed – it’s been a long day.’

Squeezing past him, she fled into the messy bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

snap happy

Jay kicked shut the refrigerator and headed for the phone to dial his own apartment in New York.

It was eight in the evening there, and Sean clearly hadn't arrived yet. Jay listened to his own voice up until the beep and left a furious message, demanding to know why Sean had left his flat in a complete mess with an incumbent mad woman in it. Feeling better, if still confused and slightly freaked, he headed back to bed, carefully locking the door behind him.

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