



‘**B**ollocks!’  
Fern Moss stared in dismay at the car next to her. She’d been so busy craning her neck to see if the off licence was open she hadn’t realised just how close she was to the shiny red paintwork. Parallel parking had never been her forte and her elderly Beetle was hardly equipped with state of the art power steering, so the first Fern knew about its fatal attraction to a Mercedes was a horrible scrunching sound.

‘Oh no!’

As Fern stamped desperately on the brake her platform boot slipped on to the accelerator and with a sickening jolt her car became the proud owner of a third wing mirror, one which was considerably more expensive and electronically endowed than the others.

‘Damn! Blast! Bugger!’ Fern thumped her head against the steering wheel in despair. Bye-bye no claims bonus. Hello, irate Mercedes driver. Perhaps she should have checked her horoscope before she came out this year.

Fern’s life truly was going from bad to worse. On top of everything, Seb had gone and he wasn’t coming back. No. Correction. Seb had gone and Fern wasn’t going to let him come back, no matter how sorry he said he was or how often he insisted Vanessa had meant nothing and that it was Fern he really loved. It was over. He could ring and text as much as he liked. She wasn’t going to change her mind.

She killed the engine and took a deep breath. Her hurt feelings were red raw and every time she thought of Seb and Vanessa together it felt as though someone was dragging barbed wire through her guts. How could she ever get over such a betrayal? If she felt like howling every time she remembered they’d never again share a secret joke across the pub, that she’d never thread her fingers through his silky black hair or curl up with him at night, it didn’t mean she should cave in and forgive him, did it?

No, it bloody well didn’t.

Sighing, Fern opened the glove box, sweeping

magazines, unravelling cassettes and Tampax on to the floor, and bingo! There was her emergency chocolate supply.

Unwrapping a bar of Dairy Milk and biting off a chunk, Fern munched gratefully. If ever a girl deserved a few thousand calories it was now. After all, wasn't chocolate supposed to be a love substitute? In many ways it was far superior. Chocolate never dropped its socks on the floor or left the loo seat up so that you fell down the bowl in the middle of the night. And chocolate certainly never cheated on you with a blonde Twiglet woman from its office. With chocolate a girl knew exactly where she stood.

Fern had never quite known where she stood with Seb, which had been exciting and frustrating in equal measure. His job as an advertising creative at one of London's leading agencies had been glamorous and she'd certainly enjoyed the novelty of attending functions at hotel bars and fancy restaurants. Life with Seb, a charismatic charmer with classic dark good looks, had never been straightforward but it had been fun. Their arguments had been legendary; both being creative types Fern supposed that they'd been bound to clash, but the making up had more than compensated.

Fern wasn't going to think about all that right now, though, not when she was on her way to her best friend's hen night. Tonight was about celebrating Zoe and Steve's relationship rather than dwelling on the car crash of her own.

And talking about car crashes, maybe she ought to think about sorting out the damage she'd just done to the Mercedes.

Tearing up a stray magazine and retrieving an eyebrow pencil from the assorted clutter on the dashboard Fern wrote out her name and phone number, telling herself that a lesser (but richer) person would have just driven away. But Fern, with her finely developed Catholic sense of guilt, couldn't live with such shoddy behaviour.

She'd get to heaven yet.

Clambering out of her Beetle, she tucked the note under the Mercedes' windscreen wiper and prayed the owner wouldn't return just yet. Call her a chicken but she'd rather be a safe distance away when he discovered what she'd done. Like maybe the other side of London.

She shrugged her big beaded bag on to her shoulder and darted across the road to the off licence, dodging the rush hour traffic and trying her hardest to claw back some time by running, which

was easier said than done in four-inch platform boots. Glancing at her watch, she groaned. She was really late now, which wasn't that unusual since she was famous for her inability to be anywhere on time. Fern never meant to be late – in fact she always had every intention of arriving early – but things had a habit of happening and delaying her. It was like an unwritten law of physics or something. Take this evening, for instance. Just as Fern had been about to leave the Angel Theatre, sitting back on her heels admiring the effect of the set she was working on, the wardrobe mistress had invited her to have a rummage in the props cupboard. One tiara, a set of fairy wings and a green velvet cloak later Fern was well and truly behind schedule. Hence the frantic dash through the Friday evening traffic while attempting to reapply her make-up every time she met a red light, and her even worse than usual parking skills.

She'd buy a really nice bottle of champagne to make up for being late, Fern decided as she clomped through the off licence, pausing to admire the bottles of Cristal and Dom Pérignon before moving on to the Moët. She'd just been paid so maybe she'd buy two bottles to make the evening go with a swing? Zoe had said that there'd be five of them at

her house for a quiet girls' night in. No strippers, she'd said firmly, fixing Fern with a beady look, and certainly no stretch limos and dancing on tables in clubs. They'd get a takeaway and maybe watch a DVD. She wanted a civilised gathering not a raucous party.

It was all a bit disappointing really, Fern decided as she selected two bottles of champagne and meandered to the till. A hen night was the perfect excuse to let your hair down, something Zoe hadn't done for ages. It wasn't so long ago that Zoe had been the original wild child, but nowadays she and Steve were more of an old married couple than Richard and Judy. It would have been fun to have a really wild night out. They could have dressed up and hit a club, maybe even had a theme . . .

'Fancy dress?' the shopkeeper asked.

'Sorry?' Dragging her thoughts back to the present Fern smiled at the elderly man behind the counter.

'Your clothes.' He nodded at her outfit. 'Going to a party?'

'Oh!' Fern's small silver-ringed fingers flew to her mouth as she caught sight of her reflection in the glass of a refrigerator. A small figure stared back at her, blue eyes wide, a tiara perched on top of her

blond curls. A long green cloak and glittery fairy wings teamed with crimson flares and platform boots completed the look.

‘Suits you,’ he continued, ringing up the purchases. ‘A seventies party, is it?’

‘It’s my best friend’s hen night,’ said Fern, deciding against telling him the shoes and flares were actually her own clothes. How could she have forgotten she was wearing half the props cupboard? Her memory was a Swiss cheese lately, filled with hideous thoughts about Seb and Vanessa one moment and the next consumed with the colours and intricacies of her latest set design. Cheeks ketchup-red, Fern pulled the tiara off. She really had to get a grip.

‘That’s forty pounds,’ said the man, lovingly wrapping each bottle in tissue paper. ‘Do you want a carrier?’

‘Please.’ Fern delved into her bag for her purse which always lurked in the deepest depths, among the remnants of tissues and leaky biros. Seb had liked to joke that Fern owned the world’s first Tardis bag and maybe Lord Lucan and Shergar were in there too. The bag was so big that sometimes Fern rummaged for ages before locating her keys or her purse. Today was one such occasion.

‘Sorry,’ she said, taking the bag off her shoulder and peering into it. ‘I know my purse is in here somewhere.’

At least she hoped it was, but several minutes’ more rummaging proved fruitless. God, surely she hadn’t lost her purse again? It had to be in there, didn’t it? Unfortunately, though, more frantic rummaging followed by a hasty tipping out of the entire contents on to the counter revealed that the purse was missing. Aghast, Fern stared at the mountain of debris. Oyster card, mobile, spare socks, cigarettes, a battered Jilly Cooper, theatre tickets to the production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* she’d designed the set for, and maybe even a kitchen sink, but certainly no purse.

How hideously embarrassing.

‘It’s not here,’ she whispered.

‘Doesn’t seem to be,’ the shopkeeper agreed. ‘Still, don’t panic, my dear. These things have a habit of turning up. Where did you see it last?’

Fern racked her brains. Then it came to her. ‘I was on eBay last night! I must have left it by the computer! Phew!’

‘There you are then. Have you got a credit card?’

‘Not on me. What a pain. I’ll have to put the champagne back.’

‘You can’t possibly have a hen night without champagne,’ the man said. Peering over his glasses at the heaped contents of Fern’s bag he plucked out the theatre tickets and studied them thoughtfully. ‘How about I take these in return for the champagne?’

‘Really?’ Hope fizzed through Fern like the bubbles in the Moët. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely. The reviews in the *Guardian* were marvellous and my wife will be delighted. That’s if you’re happy to exchange them? These tickets are probably worth more than the champagne. In fact, take another bottle. I insist.’

‘That’s brilliant! Thank you,’ Fern cried. To be honest she hadn’t intended to use the tickets anyway. While creating the set she’d watched so many rehearsals of the *Dream* she could pretty much perform it solo. And besides, it was hard to feel the same about the fairies when you’d seen them all crowded round the stage door smoking and knew that Puck was sleeping with Titania. But swapping the tickets for Moët? That was her idea of magic!

This was going to be a great hen night!