



Carrie Brownhill was standing outside the stage door of the Starlight Theatre wondering how to respond to her friend's outrageous comment.

'So. What would you actually do if Huw had an affair?' Rowena asked again.

Carrie paused longer than she should have done before answering, partly because her teeth were chattering with the cold but also because the prospect of her fiancé, Huw, shagging another woman was something she'd never even dreamed of. 'You mean if I actually *caught* him with someone else?' she said.

'Well, I don't mean in the act, with his pants round his ankles,' said Rowena, in between puffs on her cigarette. 'I just wondered what you'd do if you found out he was dipping his wick on the other side of the fence.'

'Oh, blimey. I don't know,' said Carrie, stamping her feet to keep warm. It wasn't surprising she was freezing, because (a) it was February, and (b) she and Rowena were dressed like fifties tarts. They were taking a break from a dress rehearsal for the local drama society's production of *Grease*. One of the Pink Ladies had set fire to her wig which had triggered the smoke alarms and sent the

director into a hissy fit. It had also given Rowena the chance for a sneaky fag.

‘Now come on, honey. Would you be calm and dignified or turn into the vengeful bitch from hell?’ drawled Rowena, getting into the part of her character, Rizzo, but managing to sound more like Marge Simpson.

‘Oh, calm and dignified, of course,’ simpered Carrie, pretending to be Sandy.

Rowena took a long, slow drag on her ciggie, then blew out a smoke ring. ‘Bull *shit*, honey.’

‘Okay. Maybe you’re right. If I caught Huw with another woman, I’d probably go totally berserk and wreak vengeance on him.’

‘What? Pour paint stripper over his car?’ said Rowena, flicking her ash into a tub of winter pansies.

Carrie feigned horror. ‘The Range Rover? My God, no. I love that car. It’s my baby. I couldn’t hurt it.’

‘Cut up all his clothes, then?’

Carrie thought for a moment, then felt her mouth stretch in a smile of glee. ‘No. Way too clichéd. I’d make the punishment fit the crime. Hit him where it really hurts.’

‘You don’t mean you’d do a Bobbitt?’ gasped Rowena.

‘Oh, much worse. I’d pour sugar in the fuel tank of his Massey Ferguson.’

‘His *what*?’

‘His Massey Ferguson. It’s his new tractor. He adores it. He said he’d like to shag me in it.’

‘You farming types are all pervs,’ declared Rowena, throwing her fag end on to the flagstones and grinding it out with her foot. ‘Ow. Buggering hell. I’ve just burnt my bloody foot! These ballet pumps are as old as the hills.’

Carrie laughed as Rowena hopped about cursing cheerfully. The two of them had been friends since uni, where they'd both studied English and Drama. Now they were stalwarts of the local drama society in Packley, the Oxfordshire village where they both lived. Carrie had met Huw at university too, and they'd been together ever since. She'd once dreamed of appearing in the West End but had ended up helping him run his farm business instead. It was a full-time job just keeping up with all the admin while he managed the dairy herd and small business units at the farm. But if she ever had a pang of regret about not making it in professional theatre, she felt the rest of her life more than made up for it. She knew she'd never have to sabotage Huw Brigstocke's beloved tractor, slash his clothes or wreak vengeance on him. In two weeks' time, she and Huw were getting married at Packley church. Everyone was coming. The drama society, the Young Farmers, their university friends, at least half the village – it felt like half the county in fact, because Huw's mother knew absolutely *everyone*.

'Carrie? Rowena?' A vision in pink peeped nervously round the door of the theatre.

'Out here, Hayley,' said Carrie.

'I just came to warn you that we're ready to start again and Gina's been looking for you. She's already ballistic that I set off the fire alarm,' said Hayley, shivering in her Pink Ladies outfit.

'Gina is the love child of Simon Cowell and Attila the Hun,' declared Carrie, picturing the show's director searching the theatre for her and Rowena like a headmistress looking for girls smoking in the bogs. 'Can't a leading lady have some privileges? Tell her I'm just

taking a call from Hollywood. Tell her,' she said dramatically, 'that George Clooney has asked me to play the part of Scarlett O'Hara in his new remake of *Gone with the Wind*.'

Rowena let out a giggle.

'It's okay, Hayley. I'm coming,' said Carrie, finally taking pity on Hayley, who was so naïve she might actually tell Gina what Carrie had said.

'I expect Gina will be on the warpath for the rest of the night now because we've sloped off,' grumbled Rowena.

Carrie flounced towards the door, flinging back her hair like Scarlett would have done. 'Frankly, darling, I don't give a toss!'

A week later, Carrie was belting out the show's finale to a packed theatre.

*'You're the one that I want . . .'*

'More! More! More!' chanted the audience.

Carrie went for the big one. *'The one that I waa-nnt!'*

The audience leapt to their feet, stamping the floor and almost shaking the roof off the theatre.

'Listen to that,' hissed Rowena as they made their bows. 'Don't you just bloody love it!'

Carrie felt like a giant pink bubblegum about to pop with joy. Every night had been a sell-out and a roaring success, and if her voice was on its last legs, she didn't care. They might not be in the West End, they might only be amateurs, but they were bloody good ones. The curtain dropped and the girls chattered excitedly as they dashed off stage.

'Let's get changed and get to the bar. I need an urgent dose of spritzer and Huw can pay for it. I tried to

spot him in the audience but he must have been right at the back.'

'Knowing Huw, I'll bet he's waiting now, with one of those totally clichéd bouquets he's always sending you,' said Rowena.

Carrie sighed dramatically. 'I just hope he's bought red roses this time. Yellow ones are so-ooo passé, darling.'

She wouldn't really mind if they were yellow roses, or even a bunch of dandelions. All she wanted was to see Huw, who had promised to be at her final performance even if it did mean calling in en route from his stag weekend. In fact, she wouldn't mind if he turned up half naked with a ball and chain round his ankle, just as long as he'd made the show somehow. This had been her final performance as Carrie Brownhill; the next programme would have her new name in it: Carrie Brigstocke. Tonight was special in so many ways; she couldn't wait to hear what he'd thought of her performance.

'I hope *Oxfordshire Life* send a reporter to the wedding,' she said.

Rowena mumbled a reply through a face full of cleansing cream. 'I should think it will be picked up by the nationals. You might end up in *Hello!*'

'Now you're taking the piss, Rowena,' laughed Carrie.

'Would I?'

'Yes, you would.'

Ten minutes later, Rowena was handing over a drink as Carrie scanned the packed bar for Huw's unmistakable profile. He was normally easy to spot, even in a crowded room. Six foot five in his stockinged feet, a shock of thick sandy hair and shoulders like Hercules. Stooping slightly because he was self-conscious, of course.

That was what she'd first fancied about him when they'd met at their university freshers' disco: that combination of capable shoulders and self-deprecation. She never could resist a man who didn't know how sexy he was. Flashy blokes turned her right off, but Huw, who'd braved the laughter of the entire rugby club to ask her to dance, had won her heart straightaway. She still remembered their first shag in his tiny student room, the ancient water pipes creaking and the sound of the rugby club belting out 'Roll Me Over in the Clover' from the students' union.

Over by the bar, she caught sight of Rowena batting her eyelashes at a strange man with a fake tan and an outrageous toupee. Pulling her mobile from her handbag, Carrie checked the screen. No message from Huw. Yet he'd promised faithfully to be here tonight. He always managed to make her last nights, had never missed one except for the time Millicent had had a Caesarean and he'd had to stay with the vet. Carrie hadn't really minded; the herd came first, and anyway she'd been crap that evening.

Rowena returned. 'Who's your friend Wiggy?'

'Oh, just one of my many fans. He said he thought I'd put in a performance of poignancy and vitality, a combination he'd rarely seen in amateur theatre.'

'Bloody hell. Does he want to get your knickers off?'

Rowena frowned, seemed almost offended but then grinned and declared, 'Doesn't everyone, darling? Has Lover Boy phoned yet?'

Carrie was puzzled at the sudden change of subject but dismissed it. Everyone was tired and overemotional. She shook her head. 'No. Not even a text.'

‘Maybe he’s decided to stop off at the Red Lion for a nightcap on his way home from London.’

‘He promised he’d be here for the play. I wouldn’t mind but he’s already had a two-night bender in London with his mates. How long should a stag party last?’

‘Depends who he’s met,’ said Rowena.

Carrie snorted. ‘How can he have met anyone?’

‘Well, I know the concept is hard to grasp, but you never know, he could have decided to grab his last chance to escape and run off with a Serbian lap dancer.’ Rowena’s eyes glinted wickedly.

Carrie laughed. ‘Well, if he has run away, I hope she likes his cold feet in bed.’

All around them hugging and kissing was breaking out like the plague, a sure sign that the after-show party was breaking up.

‘Look, Huw’s obviously not coming, so I’m going home,’ sighed Carrie, fishing for her car keys from the depths of her bag. ‘You don’t think anything could have happened to him, do you? He is with that bunch of Young Farmers and some of his rugby club mates. He could have been stripped naked and chained to a statue.’

Rowena rolled her eyes skywards. ‘There is no way that Huw has got involved in anything like that. He’s far too responsible. I’m sure he’ll be waiting and desperate to make it up to you, if you know what I mean.’

Rowena was right, thought Carrie. After ten years together, she ought to know Huw well enough. In fact, she thought, as she drove home from the theatre towards Packley Farm, she had a pretty good idea exactly what he’d be doing right now. He’d be sitting by the fire with a large bunch of flowers and an apology. All of which she

would graciously accept – after she'd made him suffer just enough.

Relief swept through her as she saw his Range Rover parked in its usual place in the farmyard. At least he'd made it home. There were no lights on in the farmhouse; maybe he'd gone straight up and was waiting for her in bed. Pushing open the front door with her bottom, she fumbled for the light switch.

'Oh!

Fur brushed her legs. She sighed in relief as the farm cat wound his way round her ankles.

'Hello, Macavity,' she laughed as the cat rubbed his warm body against her calves with a welcoming *miaow*.

Then Huw's voice cut through the gloom. 'Carrie? Is that you?'

'That's a very clever trick, Macavity. You sound just like my fiancé,' Carrie joked before flicking the light switch. Huw was sitting by the hearth, one arm hanging over the edge of the chair, the other clutching a tumbler of whisky. 'Hello. Have we had a power cut?' she said, depositing her stuff on the tiled floor.

'No.'

'Then why were you sitting in the dark?'

He downed the rest of his whisky before answering. 'Dunno. Guess I just felt like it.'

'You just *felt* like it?'

Carrie crossed the kitchen. Her skin prickled when she saw him close up. There were dark shadows under his eyes, which also had a glazed look in them. He stank of whisky too; she could see the almost empty bottle at the side of his chair.

'I was upset that you missed the play, but there's no

need to hit the bottle,' she said lightly. 'I'm not going to start hurling china at you. You missed a treat. I was great, you know. Everyone said so . . .'

'I'm sure you were. You always are,' he said. Picking up the bottle, he sloshed whisky into the glass, spilling half of it on his trousers. He was completely plastered. She swallowed down a rising feeling of unease. 'How much have you had?' she asked.

'Enough. So what? It was my stag weekend.'

She flinched. It wasn't like him to be whiny either. She put it down to too much booze and too little sleep.

'Sounds like you've had quite a time, but I was expecting you at the play. Where've you been?'

He shrugged. 'Just driving about.'

Carrie frowned. Huw did not drink and drive. Huw didn't even break the speed limit. Huw played by the rules, unless it was on the rugby pitch. 'You were driving about pissed?' she said, unable to believe it.

He took a slug of the whisky and wiped his mouth with his hand. 'No. I drove first. Then I got pissed. Do you have a problem with that?'

The edge of sarcasm in his voice made her hackles rise. This wasn't the man she'd known for the past ten years, and it definitely wasn't the one she was looking forward to marrying in two weeks' time. This wasn't her Huw. She tried to stay calm, hoping he'd cool down and sober up.

'I don't have a problem with you drinking on your stag weekend, but I do have a problem with you acting like this. I don't deserve it.'

He raised his glass and tilted it, peering at the liquid as if he didn't want to meet her eye. Then he shrugged as

if to say he didn't care what she thought or deserved. Carrie began to simmer. She'd had enough.

'Look, Huw. If you've had a row with some of your mates over bloody rugby or a poker match or something – or you've just got pissed off with each other – I don't mind. But I won't have you thundering home in this state and taking things out on me. I'm not sure how much whisky you've had, but I think it's enough—'

'Can't you just *shut up*?'

Her mouth fell open. This wasn't the gentle, placid giant she loved, but an angry bull of a man. She was shaking but she stood her ground, wound her five foot two frame up and said, 'Shut up? I asked you a perfectly reasonable question. Just because you've fallen out with the tribe, don't blame me.'

His knuckles whitened round his glass. He glared at her. She was angry herself and determined to face him down, because what he was doing was so unfair. Missing her last night, coming home pissed and behaving like a total shit.

'I just won't be treated like this, Huw. I won't . . .'

'Can't you see how hard this is for me?' he said softly.

Her heart started ricocheting madly. She knew something was very wrong. 'Hard for you? What do you mean?'

He was staring down at his glass again, swirling the whisky round in circles. 'I've been sitting here for hours wondering how I was going to do this, but it's no good,' he said.

She felt a cold sweat breaking out on the small of her back. 'Huw, what are you talking about? I don't understand you.'

‘I don’t really understand myself, Carrie, but I do know there’s something I need to tell you.’

‘Like what? Has your mother ordered the wrong flowers? Has the cake company gone bust?’ She tried one last stab at humour, pretending that he was only joking, that he wasn’t going to say something terrible, but he shook his head.

‘It’s been tearing me up for weeks, Carrie. I thought the stag weekend would help – make me realise that this was what I wanted, that I’d be fine once all this wedding shit was over, but it’s no good. I can’t do this to me, and certainly not to you, love. God knows I’ve tried, but I just can’t do it. Carrie, I can’t marry you.’