

One

At first, I thought it was a joke, probably due to the unfeasibly large grin on Mark's face as we drew up outside the house. When he suggested we got out and took a closer look, a sense of unease spread over me. And at the point where I stepped on to the pavement and caught sight of the garish pink and orange 'For Sale' sign in the front garden, I realised this was definitely no laughing matter.

'Well, what do you think?' Mark said, gesturing towards the large red-brick detached house which stood in front of us.

What I was thinking was that our happy, fun, not-going-anywhere-in-a-hurry carousel ride of a relationship was about to turn into the scariest rollercoaster at the fairground, the type where you had to choose between jumping off at the top while it was still moving or careering downhill into a lifetime of joint mortgage payments.

However, I also knew that in a relationship-defining moment like this, it paid to be non-committal until the other person had explained exactly what was going on. And that the last thing I wanted to do was wipe the deliriously excited expression off Mark's face.

'I think you may be about to audition for a presenter's job on *Location, Location, Location* and you'd like me to practise being an awkward, impossible-to-please house-hunter.'

Mark laughed and shook his head, although I was

Linda Green

aware I had still managed to turn the dimmer switch on his smile down a notch or two.

‘I’m going to have to spell it out, aren’t I?’ he said.

‘Fraid so. I’m obviously being a bit dense here.’

Mark took a moment to compose himself as he gazed down thoughtfully at his sandals. He didn’t usually do hesitation.

‘I’d like us to move in together. Somewhere new, not my place or yours. Somewhere we can be a proper couple and not have to have toothbrushes in two different places and dash home to get a change of clothes before work in the morning.’

It sounded more like a proposal to merge two companies than to cement our future as a couple. But then Mark was not a romantic candlelit-dinner type of guy (he cited the fact that he’d once represented a client whose sleeve had caught fire in a restaurant). He was straightforward, practical and sometimes impulsive – as he had just demonstrated – but he was never going to sweep me off my feet and whisk me away to his castle on a white charger. Which was probably just as well, as I was in my thirties and still bearing the scars from two botched attempts at broken-heart surgery and had therefore long ago stopped believing in that sort of thing.

I glanced up and realised he was waiting for an answer. Not just any answer. The one he was desperate to hear.

‘Oh,’ I said, totally inadequately, as my lips played for time while my head tried to come up with a more appropriate response.

‘Have I finally succeeded in rendering you speechless? Can I make a note of this in my diary? “Claire lost for words shocker”?’

I knew the joke was intended to cover up his disappointment. I smiled back at him, trying to make it clear that I wasn’t about to blow him out. I couldn’t; this was Mark, the man who had put a smile on my face for the past two years and had single-handedly restored my faith in men.

Things I Wish I'd Known

It would have been unbearably cruel to extinguish the flame of optimism which burnt so brightly in him.

'Sorry. It's a bit of a shock, that's all.'

'Lucky I didn't go the whole hog and propose, then.' He was grinning, well aware of my view that it would be plain rude of me to expect my friends and family to shell out for wedding presents for a second time.

'It's just that I thought you were happy with things how they are,' I said.

'I am,' replied Mark, looking serious for once. 'But I've realised I'd be even happier if we were living together.' It was as near as he had ever got to declaring his undying love for me.

I smiled at him and kissed him on the lips. Because I wanted to and because I still wasn't sure what to say. It wasn't that I didn't love him. I did. It was simply that loving someone and wanting to buy a house together were two very different things. But now Mark had bought me a ticket for the white-knuckle ride, I was well aware that continuing on the carousel wasn't really an option any more. I put my arms around his neck and kissed him again.

'Do I take that as a yes, then?' he asked when our lips finally parted.

'Argued so persuasively, how could I refuse?' I said.

The full cheek-to-cheek grin returned to his face. His greeny-blue eyes looked like they were celebrating a hat-trick for England. Mark was happy. The panic was over. Air pressure in the cabin returned to normal. I took off the oxygen mask to find I could breathe again.

'There's just one thing I'm not sure about,' I continued.

'Here we go,' said Mark. 'You're going to add in loads of conditions now, aren't you? Some sort of pre-nup for living together, where you get custody of the wok if I dare to pick my toenails in bed.'

'No,' I said. 'It's, er, that.' I pointed to the house with rather less aplomb than Mark had.

Linda Green

‘What’s wrong with it?’ Mark sounded put out. I decided not to tell him that if he’d been trying to find my dream house, an Identikit new-build in a sought-after cul-de-sac in Littleborough couldn’t have been further from it. I took a deep breath and tried to phrase it diplomatically.

‘It’s, er, a bit lacking in the charm department.’

‘OK, it’s not chocolate-box thatched-cottage material, but if it was, it would also be cold, damp, dingy and draughty, be out in the sticks somewhere and cost us a fortune in running repairs over the years – if we could afford it to start off with, that is. Whereas what we have here, while admittedly not aesthetically appealing, is new, warm, solid, light, easy to maintain, has straight walls and ceilings, no vermin living beneath the floorboards or in the loft, is within walking distance of the station and I reckon we can get it for under two hundred and fifty thousand, so avoiding being stung for stamp duty.’

I smiled. It was easy to see why Mark was capable of twisting anyone around his little finger in court. He possessed the true lawyer’s knack of being able to paint black as white, and in such a way that you started to doubt whether it had ever been black in the first place (I was admittedly jealous of this, being the type of lawyer who somehow always got bogged down in the shades of grey in between). He was also right, of course. But as someone who had always been more head-in-the-clouds than practical, I was able to overlook that. My dream home was something older and weather-beaten, something I could fall in love with at first sight, something that oozed character from its crooked stone walls to its creaking floorboards. Something which would feel like home. My home. Not a show home.

‘This is me you’re speaking to, remember,’ I said, poking him playfully in the ribs. ‘You’ll have to do better than that. I’m not going to agree to buy a house on the grounds that it hasn’t got rats.’

‘That’s all right,’ he said, pulling his sunglasses up on to

Things I Wish I'd Known

the top of his head for a moment and squinting down the street. 'Here's the very man to convince you.' I followed his gaze to where a silver Saab had pulled up at the kerb and a man in his fifties, wearing an ill-fitting suit which refused to do up over his pot belly, was bounding towards us.

'What do you mean?' I said.

'That's Chris, the estate agent. He's going to show us around.' I felt the perspiration break out on my brow. And it had nothing to do with it being the hottest day of the year so far. I wouldn't even buy a pair of shoes in the first shop I looked in, let alone snap up the very first house I viewed – especially when I hadn't even known we were looking until a few minutes ago.

'What, now?'

'Yeah, is that all right? I know it was a bit presumptuous of me, but I had a *carpe diem* moment. If you want me to put him off I can do.'

Before I could answer, Chris was shaking my hand, positively foaming at the mouth at the prospect of a sale. He brought to mind a hound which hadn't been out on a hunt for weeks and had suddenly got wind of a fox. I guessed a recession did that to estate agents.

'Right,' he said when the introductions were over. 'Well, as you can see, it's a quiet but convenient location, only five minutes from the M62 and ten minutes' walk from the station. Where do you guys work?'

'Rochdale,' we said in unison, me with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

'Well, you're ideally situated here,' he said, loosening his tie a touch as the sun reappeared from behind a cloud. 'And of course, you're near excellent primary and secondary schools. It really is a perfect family home.'

I nodded without saying anything and shifted my Birkenstock-clad feet on the pavement. The fact that he'd either assumed we already had kids or were planning to start a family made me a little uneasy. Where had he got the idea that it was a family home we were after?

Linda Green

I had been honest with Mark from very early on about my desire to remain 'child-free' (as I preferred to call it). I didn't announce, 'Now before we go any further, I need to make it clear that I don't want children,' as we sat down for a meal on our first date. But to be honest, I didn't have to. Because even before we'd started going out together, during the prolonged wooing phase when Mark had tried his best to charm the knickers off me every time we'd bumped into each other in the café in Drake Street, where both of our practices were based, I'd made enough references to the fact that representing a steady stream of teenage delinquents and drug addicts was the career least likely to engender a burning desire in anyone to procreate, to get the message across.

To his credit, Mark had never pushed me on the matter or tried to persuade me of the joy to be derived from seeing your offspring in a miniature Blackburn Rovers kit. But I'd long suspected he harboured a secret desire to be a father and now, suddenly, it occurred to me that this could be his first move in trying to get me to change my mind. I could see how his argument would go, something along the lines of, 'Well, now we've got four bedrooms it would be a shame to waste the space. And being so near to some good schools, we may as well take advantage of them, otherwise we're simply paying taxes to educate other people's kids.' Mark could convince anyone of anything. And before I knew it I'd have a toddler on one hip and a baby clamped to my breast.

I looked across at Mark. He gave a little shrug but made no attempt to correct Chris.

'Right, let's go inside,' continued Chris. 'This place is made for you. I have a feeling you're going to love it.'

I shrugged back at Mark and followed Chris into the small hallway, the smell of 'new' filling my nostrils.

'We'll start in the lounge,' he said, pushing the door open to reveal an expanse of laminate flooring and magnolia walls. 'Plenty of room for a big plasma screen in

Things I Wish I'd Known

here,' he grinned, turning to Mark. 'Now, Claire, while Mark's watching the footie on TV, let me show you the fantastic kitchen which will make preparing meals so easy you'll have plenty of time to put your feet up with a magazine and catch up on all the latest celebrity gossip.' I raised my eyebrows.

'Should I tell him women have the vote now?' I whispered to Mark.

'Perhaps he's used to dealing with bored housewives.'

'Or maybe he's simply reading from the script,' I replied. 'In which case I'm about to get told about the state-of-the-art appliances in the beautifully appointed kitchen.'

'Now then,' said Chris, leading us into the kitchen, 'there are some state-of-the-art appliances in here . . .'

I groaned inwardly and let Chris's sales patter drift over me as I looked around. It was one of those spot-the-difference kitchens where you don't know where anything is and would forever be opening doors and accidentally putting the milk in the dishwasher and the rubbish in the washing machine.

'Mmmm, great,' I muttered unconvincingly as Chris led us back to the hallway.

'Why didn't you tell him that I hate all this hard-sell stuff?' I whispered to Mark as we climbed the stairs behind him.

'It's like telling a Jehovah's Witness you don't do religion; they simply try even harder. Anyway, some muppet showing us around isn't going to put us off, is it?'

What concerned me about Mark's reply was that it appeared to be a rhetorical question. He clearly didn't realise that I couldn't be put off because I'd never been keen on it in the first place.

'It's a beautifully appointed master bedroom, with en suite and dressing area – so plenty of room for all those designer frocks and Jimmy Choo shoes.'

I forced out a smile to be polite, realising that we would

Linda Green

get out of the place more quickly if I went along with Chris's notion that I was Victoria Beckham in disguise.

We moved on through the next three bedrooms, inspected the bathroom (the white was at least a refreshing change from magnolia), and were finally left on our own on the landing to 'talk things through', while Chris went to open up the integral garage for our inspection.

I looked at Mark. The expression on his face suggested he would offer the asking price by the time we got downstairs.

'Well?' he said expectantly.

'You were right. The walls are straight and there's no vermin. However, I do have one concern.'

'Which is?'

'Why is he under the impression we have more children than the Waltons?'

'Ah, yes, that,' said Mark. 'He's just got the wrong end of the stick. I said it was a long-term purchase we were looking for, that we wanted to put down some roots, and he's obviously interpreted that as meaning we wanted somewhere which would cater for a growing family.'

'Right. So why do we need four bedrooms exactly?'

'Well, one of them can be a study, one room always ends up as a junk room so you may as well factor that in, and the other one can be a guest room.'

He was doing it again. Making me doubt why I had ever questioned him in the first place. I stared at him intently, looking for any visible sign that he was talking grade-one lawyer bullshit.

'And you're sure you have no desire to fill the place with the patter of tiny feet and the smell of poo and vomit?'

Mark smiled. 'I'd simply like some more space and I figured you'd feel the same way. It's the one thing neither of us has got.'

He had a point. Mark lived in a one-bedroom flat in Littleborough which had one of those all-in-one kitchen/

Things I Wish I'd Known

dining/living spaces that developers trying to maximise their profits seemed so fond of (presumably they didn't think anybody would mind if their sofa permanently smelt of last night's curry). And I lived in a small (poky was the word Mark used) two-bedroom terraced house a few miles down the road in Todmorden, just over the West Yorkshire border (something Mark used to rib me about as a born and bred Lancastrian who had come dangerously close to reigniting the War of the Roses on numerous occasions).

I glanced across at Mark. He was obviously desperate to buy the place. I felt mean for having such a downer on it. I needed to find something positive to say.

'I guess it would be nice to have a bathroom and an en suite.'

'There speaks a woman with mildew on her over-the-bath shower curtain.'

'At least I *have* a bath.' Mark's flat only had a shower (presumably having been designed by a man who had no idea how tricky it was trying to shave your legs while standing up in a tiny shower cubicle).

'There, see, property snobbery already. Before you know it you'll be saying, "Oh, don't you have an integral garage?"'

'Come on,' I said, laughing uneasily. 'Chris'll be wondering where we've got to.'

We arrived downstairs to find Chris poised to give a demonstration of the up-and-over door.

'Obviously the garage is just as it's been finished at the moment, but if you wanted to decorate it in any way . . .'

'Great idea, I could paint it pink and do some nice floral stencilling,' I said, managing to keep a straight face.

'I can see your little lady's been reading all the latest interior design magazines,' said Chris, turning to Mark. I waited until he'd turned to lead us out of the garage before banging my head on the brick wall.

'Chin up, it's nearly over,' whispered Mark.

'And of course, the garden is wonderfully low

Linda Green

maintenance,' said Chris, gesturing to the small square of lawn at the side of the property. 'So, what do you think?' he asked, almost quivering with anticipation. He was looking at Mark, of course, clearly being of the view that the 'little lady' would have no say on financial matters.

'It's great,' said Mark. 'Ticks all our boxes. Obviously we'll have to go away and have a think about it.' I stared at him, relieved that he hadn't said yes on the spot but already aware that it was going to be very difficult for me to back out of it.

'Sure, I understand,' said Chris, clearly gutted not to have finished off his prey. 'Don't leave it too long, though. I have another viewing arranged next week. This is the only one left and the others have gone like hot cakes,' he added.

I was about to point out that houses were in fact about as popular as three-day-old dried-up rolls in a baker's at the moment but decided not to put the boot in when he was so obviously desperate. Instead, I glanced around at the other properties in the cul-de-sac, a couple of which were occupied. There was a man washing his 4x4 in one drive, a woman swirling a Flymo across the lawn in a side garden and two kids on their bikes, trying desperately to outdo each other's skids. It reminded me of Potters Bar where I grew up. And of why I'd been so desperate to get out. We watched as Chris waved and drove off. At which point it was just me and Mark standing on the pavement, teetering on the brink of suburban hell.

'So,' said Mark, turning to me. 'If it was *Location, Location, Location*, what would you say now?'

'Show me the next property,' I said. Mark laughed.

'How about a serious answer for once?'

I didn't have the heart to tell him that it had been. He was clearly already working out where his hi-fi and the giant yucca plant would go. The man who I loved had asked me to move in with him and had probably spent ages scouring the internet for the ideal home, which he

Things I Wish I'd Known

had presented to me on a plate. OK, he couldn't have got it more wrong if he'd tried but I didn't want to appear an ungrateful wretch and I was well aware that a lot of people would have given anything to live in a house like that.

'It's not really the best time to buy a house, is it?' I said lamely. 'Are you sure we can afford it?' Mark earned considerably more than me; he was a personal injury lawyer (or ambulance-chaser as my father insisted on referring to him), contracted by one of those national 'no-win, no-fee' firms which advertised on daytime TV. Whereas I was a solicitor for a small family-owned business – and Legal Aid payments weren't all they could be.

'I'm recession-proof – people will always have accidents,' said Mark. 'Anyway, I've worked out the mortgage payments and everything. It's not a huge amount more than we both pay at the moment and we'll only have council tax and heating bills for one property. And I'll be covering the deposit and the stamp duty so you haven't got to worry about that. It actually makes huge financial sense.'

I smiled at him, knowing again that he was right and trying to ignore the churning sensation in my stomach. The ride was going too fast already. I wanted to get off. I reached out for Mark's hand and clasped it tightly.

'OK, can I sleep on it?' I said. 'Maybe a couple of nights, actually.'

He grinned, sensing he almost had me.

Standing precariously on the top rung of my rickety stepladder, I pushed the loft cover to one side, rested the torch on the edge and prepared to haul myself upwards through the hatch, reassured by the fact that if I did fall, I would at least have a personal injury lawyer on hand to try to get some compensation from the stepladder manufacturers.

As it was, the ladder – and my arms – held out and I scrambled unceremoniously on to the floorboards I'd laid across the joists to try to support the weight of the

Linda Green

numerous boxes which were stacked there. I waited for the dust to settle and my eyes to get used to the dimness before picking up the torch and shining it around like some 1950s usherette who was a bit apprehensive about what might be going on in the back row of the cinema.

The cardboard boxes were piled high on top of each other. The building blocks of my life. They contained my DNA. Which was why they were taped shut; no one else was allowed to look at them and I would no sooner get rid of them than agree to sever my right arm. I hadn't been up there for ages, probably not since I'd moved in eight years previously. I stuck my head up there every Christmas to reach down the tree and decorations but it wasn't the same. I wasn't within touching distance. The memories were all out of reach. But not any longer. It was time. I was standing at a crossroads, wondering which way to go. Only I couldn't seem to work out where my future lay. Probably because I still hadn't come to terms with my past.

I walked over and ran my finger along the sealed top of the nearest box, which was marked 'Photos'. Making contact with the past. Acknowledging its existence while knowing I should keep it at arm's length. It was too tempting though. I peeled off the parcel tape, feeling like a kid who had discovered her hidden Christmas presents on 23 December and decided to peek inside, even though she knew it was wrong. A pile of photo albums and bulging Kodak envelopes greeted me – a reminder of the days when photographs took up half of your household storage space instead of being contained in a few megabytes of computer hard drive. I pulled out the album on top and opened it up, immediately shutting it again as I caught sight of Andy grinning back at me. Even after all this time he still had the ability to do that to me. It wasn't as if I hadn't expected to see him; most of the boxes contained cardboard-to-cardboard Andy. It was simply that I hadn't expected him to look so good. I was sure that if most

Things I Wish I'd Known

women dug out the photos of the idols who used to line their bedroom walls, they would cringe in horror at why they'd ever thought Nick Berry from *EastEnders* was good-looking just because he'd had a number-one single, or wonder how they hadn't noticed Simon Le Bon's double chin at the time. But in my case I had to compliment myself on having disturbingly good taste in men at the age of fifteen. Maybe that was what had got me into so much trouble.

I opened the album again and started flicking through it, in case I'd simply caught him on a good day, but no, whether he was standing shirtless outside the changing rooms with his arm around me on a summer's day or bent double in a baggy tracksuit doing hamstring stretches during a drizzly October half-term at the training ground, he still looked unnervingly good. Whereas I, it had to be said, looked bloody awful: all hairsprayed flick, stick arms and highly dubious outfits. That was the weird thing about the eighties – how no one realised what a sight they looked at the time. Frankie, of course, looked gorgeous in every picture, but then she always was the exception to the rule. She probably still looked gorgeous now. It was a shame the photos hadn't continued past my sixteenth birthday, when I'd emerged from my ugly duckling phase. But by that time everything had changed and taking photos had been the last thing on my mind.

I leafed through every album and photo wallet, the vast majority full of snaps taken at the United training ground. Frankie and I must have doubled Kodak's profits in 1985. By the time I'd finished, I was on a full-blown nostalgia kick and didn't hesitate in removing the tape on the next box – the one marked 'Diaries and Mementoes'. It should have had some kind of emotional health warning on the side. Inside were piles of spiral-bound notepads (normal diaries had never had enough room for my teenage angst), many of them with doodles on the front, hearts with arrows through them declaring that CS loved AP for ever.

Linda Green

I shook my head and smiled. It had all been so innocent back then. It was as I rummaged through the diaries that I noticed the envelope poking out from the side of one of them. A sealed pale blue envelope with 'NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL 31 JULY 2005' written on it in bold black letters. I knew what it was straight away, of course. What I couldn't work out was why I hadn't remembered it three years ago. I wondered if Frankie had opened hers then. Whether she still had it, even.

I slid my finger into the corner of the envelope and started to tear. It was like going back in time to visit a medium, armed with the hindsight necessary to know how accurate she was straight away. And, rather bizarrely, knowing that the medium had been me, aged fifteen.

I unfolded the single sheet of paper. 'Twenty Years From Now' it read boldly at the top of the page.

Love life – Married to Andy Pailes.

Holidays – Florence, Italy.

Career – Partner in big city law firm.

Looks – Kind of the same but with shorter hair and bigger boobs.

Financial status – Well off but not super-rich.

Living – In a thatched cottage in the countryside, possibly in Yorkshire.

Children – Two, Steven and Lauren.

Best Friend – Frankie.

Interests – Football (United season-ticket holder, commute to games), politics (maybe a Labour councillor), law (making the world a better place).

Are you happy? – The happiest I've ever been.

I sat with the piece of paper in my hands, unable to decide for a moment whether to laugh or cry. But within a second or two the words on the page became blurred and I realised which option I'd chosen. It was silly really. How a fifteen-year-old version of me could be capable of cutting the adult

Things I Wish I'd Known

model to the quick like that. But I'd had no idea back then how life doesn't always turn out the way you plan. How all your hopes and dreams can evaporate over time. Or sometimes be cruelly squashed in an instant. And no idea that one day I would sit in a dusty attic with tears streaming down my face wondering how my life had fallen so badly short of my expectations.

I sniffed, wiped my nose with my sleeve and re-read the list, inserting the real answers where the misplaced expectations had been.

Love life – Married law-school sweetheart David at 23. Divorced at 30. Boyfriend of two years, Mark, has asked me to move in with him.

Holidays – The Lake District or Cornwall (never been to Florence).

Career – Made redundant from my first job at a big Manchester law firm. Now a solicitor with small family-owned company Barnes and Co., on rota as duty solicitor for Rochdale Magistrates' Court dealing with a succession of career criminals and small-time crooks.

Looks – Filled out a bit (boobs did at least make it to an A cup), shoulder-length hair with fair highlights. Flick gone.

Financial status – Solvent but no savings or expectations of a pay rise.

Living – In a poky two-bed back-to-back Victorian terrace. Did end up in West Yorkshire but about to move into soulless new-build in a Lancashire cul-de-sac.

Children – None. Bit of luck bearing in mind the divorce.

Best friend – Fiona, one of the clerks at Rochdale Magistrates' Court. Lost touch with Frankie more than 17 years ago.

Interests – Gardening (have my own allotment),

Linda Green

swimming (proper front crawl in the fast lane, not gossipy breaststroke without getting your hair wet), law (though I haven't even made Rochdale a better place, let alone the world). Went off United and football in general when all the money and prima donnas came in and ruined the game. Resigned from the Labour Party after Iraq invasion, without ever volunteering for leafleting duties, let alone running for election.

Are you happy?

I stopped abruptly at the last question, imagining for a moment what my fifteen-year-old self would have thought had she known the truth back then. How disillusioned and disappointed she would have been to see what had become of her. I knew that, compared to most of my classmates, I'd done all right for myself. But all right had never been good enough for me. I'd wanted the moon and stars. I'd even got close enough to touch them before plummeting back down to earth with an almighty bump. And suddenly I felt cheated by the consolation-prize life I had instead. I realised things had gone badly off course. But maybe I still had time to put that right. Maybe I wasn't past the 'use-by' date for dreams.

Monday, 22 July 1985

As far as me and Frankie were concerned, it was nothing short of a crime. A crime which would shock the nation. A crime against humanity even.

We watched the gold BMW sweep through the gates of the training ground and park in the far corner as usual. We saw the familiar designer-tracksuited figure emerge, Rolex glistening in the bright morning sunlight.

It was only as he turned and began to stroll towards us, the other fans parting before him like that thing with Moses and the waves in the Bible, that we caught sight of it. And the full enormity of the situation became clear.

‘Oh, shit,’ Frankie groaned. ‘Matt’s had a perm.’

We smiled politely in Matt Goodyear’s direction as he glided swiftly past us into the clubhouse, the mass of tight curls sticking to his head like scrunched-up pieces of tissue paper on a school collage. And then we waited, bracing ourselves for the inevitable reaction.

‘Bloody hell, it’s Kevin Keegan.’ Gibbo’s Welsh accent was the first voice we heard through the open dressing-room window above the predictable howls of laughter from Matt’s teammates.

Frankie slumped on the low wall outside the dressing room, biting what was left of her scarlet-painted nails and scuffing the toe of her stiletto repeatedly against the wall.

I stood next to her, marvelling at the way she could still stick her boobs out even when she was slouching, while racking my brain for something to say that would make her feel better. When my grandad had died, my mum had

Linda Green

tried to soften the blow by pointing out that I did at least have another grandfather. I didn't think the same tactic would work here, though. What with Matt only having the one head.

'Maybe he did it for a dare, or for charity or something.'

I knew that twenty-eight year olds didn't do things for a dare. And I couldn't think of a single famous person who'd had a perm as a way of raising money for charity. They were much more likely to organise a big open-air pop concert and invite people like Sting and George Michael. It was less embarrassing that way.

Frankie gave me one of her looks.

'He's not Bob Geldof, you know. He hasn't done it to feed all the kids in Ethiopia.'

'I was only trying to make you feel better.'

'Well don't bother. I may as well get used to him being a laughing stock. The Arsenal fans are gonna love this, aren't they? "Can you hear us, Matt Goodyear, you sad bastard with your girlie hair?" That's what they'll sing, you know. That's what John Motson will try and talk over on *Match of the Day*.'

'So why do you think he had it done?'

'It's obvious, innit? Jane made him do it. The fat-arsed cow.'

Frankie reckoned everything was Matt's wife's fault. If Russia ever nuked Potters Bar, she'd try to pin that one on her as well.

'Why would Jane want Matt to be a laughing stock?'

'Cos she's jealous of all the attention he's been getting, you spaz. She can't stand the competition, can she? Thought she'd try and put his admirers off.'

'So have you gone off him, then?'

Frankie thought about it for a moment, pursing her full scarlet lips as she did so.

'Nah, it'll take more than a perm,' she said, tossing her own dark mane of long straight hair.

Things I Wish I'd Known

'You said you'd go off Simon Le Bon if he ever had a perm,' I pointed out.

'Yeah, well. His legs aren't as good as Matt's, are they?'

'How do you know?'

Frankie gave a dramatic sigh.

'I just know, OK?'

I hated it when Frankie gave answers like that, acting as if she had some kind of inside information – which I knew she didn't. We waited in silence outside the clubhouse for five more minutes, until at last we heard the rasping sounds of studs hitting concrete. First one, then two and finally dozens of football boots pounded over the rough path to the dry, stubbly grass beyond.

This was it. The moment we had been waiting for. The real start of our school summer holidays. United, pride of north London, were coming out to play.

The tight blue shorts, the bulging, tanned thighs, the tantalising glimpse of chest hair beneath the silky sheen of their football shirts, I took it all in, my eyes straining to absorb every detail. If Michael Rodd off *Screen Test* had appeared and started asking me questions about the clip of footage I'd just seen, I'd have got every one right. Even the bonus question about who was the only player in a long-sleeved shirt. I took a deep breath, closing my eyes. Breathing in memories I could treasure for ever, instead of ones that kept me awake at night.

'This,' whispered Frankie, 'has got to be the best place on earth.'

I nodded, still unable to believe that such a place existed. It was our first time at the training ground. Someone had told Frankie's dad that they let fans in to watch on Mondays and Wednesdays. For free as well, so my mum couldn't say we couldn't afford it. And there weren't going to be fans from any other club here, so she couldn't say there was going to be any trouble. Football hooligans weren't interested in watching players warming up and practising their half-volleys. Even my mum knew that.

Linda Green

We found a good vantage point on the grass banking at the side of the pitch, high enough that we could see over the crowds of fans, mostly little boys with bored-looking mums in tow, who were jostling for the best position on the touchline. The squad jogged off around the training ground, the first-team players still winding Matt up, the younger ones smirking, not daring to join in the banter but clearly smug in the knowledge that even an England star could commit a style faux pas of such monumental proportions.

I watched Matt as he jogged round, intermittently twisting and stretching from side to side. He'd been my favourite United player since I was twelve. Not because I fancied him (he looked a bit like Tony Hadley out of Spandau Ballet; I was more of a Martin Kemp kind of girl myself), but simply because he was our best player. He wasn't my favourite any more though. Not since we'd signed Andy Pailes last season, and I'd realised that I had no wish to idolise a man who stared up at me from my cornflakes box every morning. I wasn't a kid any more. I didn't want a superstar I had to share with everyone else. I wanted a precious but as yet undiscovered gemstone. One that I could claim as my very own.

Seconds later Andy jogged past, the sunlight catching the small gold ring in his left ear. I double-checked the hair but it was still the same – thick, dark, slightly spiky and not a curl in sight. I smiled to myself, happy that I had unearthed a rare thing of genuine beauty.

As Andy edged nearer – so near that I could see the beads of sweat forming on his forehead – the corners of my mouth crept upwards and somewhere inside me a vice tightened around my internal organs. My heart was pounding. Seriously pounding, as if it might burst right out of my ribcage. For a second I thought I was having a heart attack, until I realised that was unlikely, what with me being a skinny fifteen-year-old vegetarian and my mum having switched from butter to Flora. No, my

Things I Wish I'd Known

pounding heart could mean only one thing. I was in love. Big time.

Having never been in love before (fancying Jason Pike at school for six months before he'd started going out with Angela Sutcliffe didn't count, as I was only thirteen at the time; that was just kids' stuff), I wanted to keep it to myself for a little while longer. But I blew it by going bright red as Andy jogged past me. Frankie never missed these things; she was much too sharp for that.

'You fancy him, don't you? You fancy Andy Pailes,' she said, the collection of thin metal bangles on her wrist tinkling against each other as she waved her arms around.

'Shut up, will you,' I pleaded, glancing at the other fans who were milling around below us. I didn't want a public announcement. This was a very private thing.

'So is it his bum or his legs?'

I sighed, wondering how I'd ended up with a best friend who didn't know the meaning of the word subtle.

'I think he's different, that's all. There's something intriguing about him.'

'Something intriguing about him,' mimicked Frankie. 'What the hell's that s'posed to mean? You either fancy the pants off him or you don't.'

'Some of us like to go a bit deeper than that.'

'Bollocks. It's all right to admit you fancy him, you know. He's a good-looking bloke.'

'D'you think so?' I asked.

'Nah, but you obviously do. So now we've got that sorted out, you can tell me all about it.'

Frankie dragged me over to a quiet spot on the grassy bank, away from all the kids, and, with one eye still firmly on Matt, began bombarding me with questions about Andy. At first I tried to be coy, giving knowing smiles rather than detailed information as I fiddled with the badge on my canvas bag (it had one red arrow pointing in the opposite direction to lots of black arrows. I'd bought it

Linda Green

so it looked as if being different to everyone else was a conscious decision I'd made, rather than an unfortunate turn of fate).

Eventually, under duress and in danger of losing Frankie's interest altogether, I was forced to admit I didn't know much about Andy at all.

'He's an enigma,' I explained with the same flourish of the left hand that I'd seen an art critic on a late-night BBC2 programme give when he'd used the term. The silence that followed confirmed my hunch that Frankie wouldn't want to reveal her own ignorance by asking what the word actually meant. Which was just as well, as I wasn't altogether sure myself.

'Haven't you even found a fact file on him?' asked Frankie. As far as she was concerned, fact files were the football fan's equivalent of Letts revision notes. They told you all the key stuff you wanted to know without the need for hours of research.

'Give us a chance, will you? He's only been at United a few months.'

'You mean he ain't famous enough to have one done on him.'

I didn't bother rising to the bait. Sometimes arguing with Frankie was so easy it wasn't any fun.

'Look, do you want to know anything about him or not?' I said.

'Go on, I'm listening.'

'Well, he's twenty-two, is from a place called Pontesomething in Yorkshire, started out at Huddersfield Town, played for the England under twenty-one team, signed for Leeds and had been there two years when we signed him.'

'Yeah, yeah. Very interesting. But has he got a girlfriend?' asked Frankie.

'Er, I don't know.'

Frankie gave another sigh.

'OK, let's see,' she said, pushing her shades up for a

Things I Wish I'd Known

second and squinting in the bright sunlight to get a better look at Andy. 'I reckon you might be in there. He looks single to me.'

'Oh, and you can tell, can you?'

'Come on, who would go out with a guy who looks like someone out of Echo and the Bunnymen? He doesn't look like a proper footballer at all.'

'Just 'cos he hasn't got highlights and a poncey haircut, it doesn't mean he can't play football.'

'I know. All I'm saying is he's not exactly in the Matt Goodyear mould, is he?' I was going to point out that at least that meant I wouldn't find a plastic Andy Pailes in my cornflakes, when I thought better of it. Frankie was having a tough day, what with the perm and that.

'Well no, but there's room for all tastes, isn't there?'

'Absolutely. So let's work this out: he's twenty-two and you're fourteen . . .'

'Fifteen, thank you,' I said, annoyed that four months into my sixteenth year, Frankie still had to be reminded.

'OK, but that's still at least a seven-year age gap. Might be stretching it a bit.'

'Oh, like the twelve years between you and Matt isn't, you mean?'

'Course not. It's different for me, innit? I don't look . . .'

Frankie's voice trailed off as I shifted from my crossed-leg position and stretched out my long legs in a desperate but ultimately futile attempt to look less like a *Blue Peter* viewer. She didn't need to finish the sentence. The brutal truth was that I did still look like a fourteen year old. Not even my heavily hair-sprayed flick (which looked so much more grown-up than my old straight-cut fringe) could distract from the stick-insect body poking out from beneath my pedal-pushers and tea-bag tank-top.

Whereas Frankie, while only eighteen months older than me, could easily pass for nineteen, thanks to her Mediterranean looks and page-three-girl figure. Sometimes I liked having a best friend who could put Samantha Fox

Linda Green

in the shade. Other times I worried that hanging out with Frankie didn't do me any favours. No one noticed the foothills next to Mount Everest, did they?

'Cheer up,' said Frankie, having finally noticed my bleak expression. 'Maybe this will be the year it will all kick in for you. You've got to get boobs sometime, you know.'

I wasn't so sure. Having been blessed with hormones that had forgotten the necessity for me to grow out in the right places as well as up, I was beginning to wonder if I would ever graduate from junior bras. It bothered me a lot. Every time I saw the AA sticker inside Mum's car I thought about it. And sometimes even when I changed the double-A batteries in my radio.

'Yeah, like never,' I said, turning to face Frankie.

'Hey, don't get down about it. I wouldn't mind a few of your inches in height.'

'At least you can wear high heels to make up for it. I don't fancy trying to pad my bra out. Do you remember that scene in *Little House on the Prairie*? The one where Laura Ingalls stuffed oranges down her top and they fell out in class? That would be me, that would.'

'Maybe you're gonna be one of those late bloomers,' said Frankie. 'Today a tall, skinny kid, tomorrow a catwalk model.'

'Yeah, right. And Maggie Thatcher will run off with Ken Livingstone. Dream on. Anyway, I don't wanna be a model, I want to be a lawyer, thank you.'

'Oh, whatever. I was only trying to help. But you shouldn't let it get to you. Forget about it for the summer holidays. That's what I'm gonna do. Forget about my O-level results and starting college and all the crap at home. All I'm gonna think about this summer is United.'

I liked the idea but wasn't sure that it would work for me. A lot of things that worked for Frankie didn't work for me. Like rah-rah skirts, for example. Frankie looked fantastic in hers, whereas I looked like an anaemic twiglet wearing a lampshade.

Things I Wish I'd Known

'It's all right for you. You haven't got anything to worry about.'

'Yes I have,' said Frankie. 'My family are one big problem.'

'At least you've got one. I can't remember the last time I even saw my dad.'

'There you go then. You're halfway to forgetting about him already.'

I wasn't convinced but I was prepared to give it a go.

'OK, but we'll have to come up here a lot if it's gonna work. Practically live here, I mean. I want to feel like one of the team.'

'And I wanna feel up one of the team,' Frankie replied with a smirk. She said stuff like that all the time, but I wasn't sure she actually meant it. She'd never had a boyfriend. I hadn't either but that was because I didn't look like Frankie. She didn't have an excuse.

When training was over we waited outside in the players' car park. It seemed to be where everyone else was gathering, autograph books at the ready.

'Come on,' said Frankie, striding over to Matt's car. 'I'm gonna have a look inside, see if I can find out what bands he's into at the moment.' She ran her hands over the BMW's sleek bodywork before stooping to peer inside, pressing her nose against the warm glass and cupping her hands around her eyes to get a better look.

'You can't do that,' I told her. 'It looks like you're trying to break in or something.'

'I'm checking out his tapes, that's all. I wanna see what he's got; maybe I could comment on his superb taste in music.'

'I doubt it,' I said, peering inside the window as my curiosity got the better of me. 'There's a *Kids from Fame* tape in there for a start.'

'You bitch, I don't believe you,' said Frankie before her eyes settled on the offending cassette, tucked neatly away beside Elton John, the Eagles and Bread. All footballers

Linda Green

over the age of twenty-seven seemed to list Bread as one of their favourite groups. I didn't have a clue who they were; I'd certainly never seen them on *Top of the Pops*. I wondered if they'd done the music to the Hovis advert.

'Well it must be Jane's,' said Frankie. 'I can't see Matt being into *Fame*. All that poxying around in leg-warmers and leotards and that Bruno guy with the awful perm . . .'

Frankie's voice trailed off as she heard the crunch of designer trainers on gravel. She spun round to see Matt standing there, looking at her with an irritated expression.

'Er, sorry, I was just, um, admiring your leather-trimmed interior,' stuttered Frankie as she shuffled out of the way, thrusting her autograph book in Matt's face, presumably in an attempt to divert his attention from the smeary fingermarks she'd left on the driver's window. Matt signed his name and drove off without another word. I was embarrassed for Frankie. But I couldn't help feeling kind of pleased as well.

'Well, you made an impression all right,' I said.

'Yeah, of a right joey.'

Before I could say anything, the dressing-room door opened and I felt myself being nudged in the direction of the approaching Andy Pailes.

I started towards him before stopping abruptly, realising that I had no idea what I was going to say. It was too late though. Andy had seen me and was waiting expectantly. I was trapped in no-man's-land, knowing that I'd look a right prat if I retreated now.

For a second my mouth seemed to be moving but nothing came out, as if I was in a foreign film where the dubbing was out of sync. When the words did come, they rushed like a torrent, catching up with my mouth and overtaking it within a sentence.

'Hi, sorry to bother you, can you sign this "To Claire" please, if you've got a second, that is, thank you very much.'

Things I Wish I'd Known

'Sure, no problem,' said Andy, taking the pen from my shaking outstretched hand. Everything after that was a bit of a blur, but somewhere along the line I registered him smiling at me, saying thank you, and handing the pen back before driving off, smiling at me again as he went.

I stood there for a second, wondering if I had imagined it all, before looking down and seeing Andy's signature in smudgy black biro in my autograph book.

The page wasn't even dry yet. But the impression, if not the ink, was indelible.

The wrought-iron garden gate clanged shut behind me, announcing my return home. Not that there was anyone waiting for me. Mum was at work, doing the catering for some sixtieth birthday party where she would no doubt be trying to force feed her Tuscan pâté vol-au-vents to a generation who, if my nan was anything to go by, remained sceptical about anything that wasn't a sausage roll.

I let myself in and wandered into the newly fitted MFI kitchen, all gleaming stainless steel and spotless white Formica surfaces (Mum seemed to have this weird idea that a film crew wanting a location for a Jif advert could drop by at any moment). I glanced at the note that had been stuck to the fridge with a 'Country Cousin' mouse magnet: 'Cheese and tomato sandwich in here for you. Eat it quick or the mouse will have it! Back about six. Eek, eek!'

Mum's attempts at humour were so embarrassing. I used to tell her it was why I never brought any friends apart from Frankie back to the house (actually, it was because I didn't have any friends apart from Frankie, but I wasn't going to tell her that).

I poured myself a glass of Kia-ora and took the clingfilm-wrapped sandwich cut into neat triangles out of the fridge. She'd even taken the crusts off for me, as if I was three years old and hadn't learnt to chew properly.

Laura Ashley offered her usual greeting as I went into

Linda Green

the living room, sniggering at me from each of the purple and blue flowers on the wallpaper, taunting me from behind the chintz curtains, and mocking me from the dark recesses of the sofa. Laura had been there the day I'd come home early from school because the heating had broken down. The day Dad had left home. She had provided the stage and the backdrop. She'd seen everything, and she'd never let me forget it. Mum had been talking recently about getting a new sofa. Something with a darker pattern, that didn't show the marks so easily. I thought it was a bit late for that.

I sat down at the square glass table (Mum liked to call that end the dining room, but it wasn't really, it was just a table), pointedly turning my back on Laura, staring instead at Torvill and Dean, poised on their knees, arms outstretched, ready to begin their Bolero routine. Mum never played the record. She said the music was too dreary. She'd only bought it to put on display at the front of the hi-fi cabinet. Because their costumes matched the colour scheme in the room.

I was halfway through my sandwich when the phone rang. I still had my mouth full when I answered it.

'Hi, Claire. It's Dad.' He only ever seemed to call when Mum was working. I wondered if he had secret access to her bookings diary or something.

'Oh, hi. What do you want?'

'I just thought I'd call for a chat, if that's all right.' It was weird, because he never usually called for a chat. He always said he was too busy at work.

'Oh, right.' I decided to play it cool, not letting him know how pleased I was he'd phoned. Like women did in movies when they really liked some bloke but didn't want to show it in case he didn't feel the same way.

'What have you been up to?' Dad asked.

'I went to United's training ground today.'

'Excellent. Looked fit and raring to go, did they? Up for the new season and all that?'

Things I Wish I'd Known

'Yep.'

'What do you reckon then? Is this the year we're going to win the league?'

'Course it is. We've got the best players in the world.'

'That's what I like to hear. Healthy optimism, eh?'

No one said anything for a bit. It was always hard to think of something to say once we'd finished with United.

'How's the old revision going? Big year you've got coming up.'

'I haven't started it yet. My mocks aren't till Christmas.'

'I know. Nothing like getting ahead though, is there?'

I didn't say anything. Dad did this really weird laugh.

'Oh well, I'd better go, I suppose. People to see, places to go. It's, er, best to call me at work if you want to get in touch. I don't get home until late these days.'

The last time I'd rung him at home a woman had answered. Dad had said it was the cleaner. Like I was really going to believe that. I hadn't wanted to know her name anyway. It was enough to know she was there.

'OK.'

'I'll see you soon then. I'll have to get you tickets for a United game one of these days, won't I?' The first time he'd said that I hadn't slept for weeks. I'd given up believing he meant it now.

'Yeah, great. Bye then.'

'Bye for now. Up the blues, eh.' He did that weird laugh again and put the phone down.

I didn't think I'd ever get used to Dad not living with us. At first he'd made the effort to see me every other Saturday. It hadn't lasted long, though. When I went veggie he said there was no point him taking me to the Wimpy any more if I wasn't going to have a burger. I didn't see why that mattered. I'd have been perfectly happy with a Knickerbocker Glory.

I went upstairs. Laura Ashley was banned from my

Linda Green

bedroom. The walls were painted in United blue, with matching United curtains, lampshade, duvet and pillowcase. Mum said it looked like a boy's room. Like that would really bother me.

I smiled up at the team poster which took pride of place above my bed. The walls were covered with pictures of the United players, cut out of *Shoot!* and *Match*. On the back of my door I had pictures of Spandau Ballet and George Michael, carefully torn out of *Smash Hits* and *Jackie* and stuck up with Blu-Tack. Although I fancied Martin Kemp (the cool one with the longish hair and the earring) I knew I didn't have a hope in hell with him. He was going out with one of the backing singers in Wham! Either Pepsi or Shirley, I could never remember which was which. I fancied George Michael as well (I used to imagine I was the rope he was holding on to in the 'Careless Whispers' video). I didn't think he had a girlfriend, so maybe I was in with a chance there.

Frankie was a Duranie, like most of the girls at school. I'd tried my best to like them. I learnt all the lyrics to 'Is There Something I Should Know?' I even wrote the line about nuclear war on my pencil case. But I lost interest when I found out Simon Le Bon hadn't meant it to be political; he'd just needed something to rhyme with 'door'.

I kicked off my trainers and flopped on to my bed, taking my autograph book out and turning immediately to Andy's page. I liked the way he'd signed his name. It wasn't one of those flashy, swirly signatures like Matt's that you couldn't read properly. It was very simple, a clear 'Andy' with a big loop on the 'y' and a little squiggle after the 's' at the end of Pailes. I traced the soft lines of his signature with my finger, holding the book up close to my face and sniffing the page as I detected the slight smell of aftershave, again very subtle, nothing flashy.

It was a nice name, Andy Pailes. Better than Claire Skidmore anyway. The other kids at school were always

Things I Wish I'd Known

taking the piss out of my surname. If I was lucky they called me 'Skidders', but more often it was 'Skidmark'.

I hoped Andy had a better nickname. All the players had nicknames, though sometimes it was quite difficult to find out what they were. According to the last fact file in *Match*, Mickey Squire didn't have one. But we knew he did and it was 'Nobber'. I guessed saying you didn't have one was like a code for it being too rude to print.

Rummaging in my bedside cabinet, I pulled out the United programme from the Nottm Forest game back in April. I hadn't been, of course. Mum said only hooligans and skinheads went to football matches. I'd considered having my head shaved and vandalising a phone box to try to further my cause but I'd decided against it in the end. She'd only have come up with another reason why I couldn't go. And now the Heysel thing had happened and the fire at Bradford, she had added getting trampled to death or burnt alive to the list of potential dangers. I couldn't see how she was ever going to let me go now.

I'd bought the programme from the end-of-season sale at the United shop, purely for the picture of Andy on the 'New Faces' page. I'd had to look through at least half a dozen programmes before finding it, scanning each page while a queue had built up behind me. I looked again at those dark brown eyes and the shy half-smile. 'Andy,' I said out loud. 'Andy, Andy, Andy, Andy, Andy.' I was quite sure now. Quite sure I'd got the right one.

'Did you have a nice time today then?' said Mum.

We were eating tea (one of her nouvelle cuisine pasta creations, with the meat left out of my portion) when she said it. It wasn't that she was genuinely interested in my day, just that she had this thing about silence at mealtimes.

'Yeah. We got loads of autographs and one of the new players actually spoke to me.'

'That's nice, love. I was wondering if you fancied going

Linda Green

swimming this week? Only I bumped into Kim's mum in town. She said Kim and Debbie are going to the lido on Wednesday afternoon. Perhaps you could go with them.'

Mum went to the same Tupperware parties as Kim and Debbie's mums and always made a point of saying what nice 'normal' girls they were. I had a sneaking regard for Kim's ability to do handsprings over the box in gym club and I admired Debbie's knack of keeping her over-the-knee socks up without the need for elastic bands, but I didn't think that was any basis for a lasting and meaningful friendship. The fact that they'd never even heard of Matt Goodyear was clearly going to be a problem. Besides which, I had no doubt that I would be an unwelcome addition to their previously cosy twosome.

'No thanks, I'm going down the training ground on Wednesday.'

'What, again? You've already been today. What do you want to go again for?'

'Because I like going there, OK?'

'I know you do, love, but it doesn't mean you have to go every day, does it?'

'You go jogging twice a week. I don't complain about that.'

'I do that to keep fit.'

'Well, it's a mile walk each way to the training ground. That keeps me fit. You'd moan if I sat about at home all day.'

'That's not the point.'

'What is the point then?' Sometimes I wished Mum would come straight out with it, instead of pretending like this.

'The point is you can't spend your entire summer holiday hanging around a bunch of footballers.'

'Why not?'

Mum sighed and tucked a stray strand of her highlighted shoulder-length hair back behind her ear. 'It's not normal.'

Things I Wish I'd Known

'Oh, so I'm a freak now, am I?'

'Why do you always have to twist everything I say, Claire?'

'Cos that's what lawyers have to do.'

'I'm not a criminal, Claire. I'm your mother.'

'Worse luck.'

Mum shook her head and did that thing with her lips which she did when I'd said something to annoy her.

'It's your father's fault, of course. He should never have got you interested in that football team.'

'You just don't like it that we share an interest,' I said.

Mum snorted. 'He doesn't share anything with you. He'd rather go in the firm's executive box with a bunch of blokes in suits than take you to a game.'

'They don't let under-sixteens in the boxes,' I said. 'Anyway, Dad has to entertain clients so he can improve his promotion prospects.' Mum snorted again, no doubt thinking about the career prospects she'd had until I came along. She'd told me I wasn't 'planned'. Which was a nice way of saying I was a mistake. The sort of mistake that had to be covered up under a loose-fitting wedding dress. Apparently, being a single mum hadn't been an option for her, not even at the end of the swinging sixties. She said the permissive society never got as far as Potters Bar. I guessed it must have stopped at Barnet – a bit like the travel zones on a Capital card.

We ate in silence for a while. I hadn't planned on telling her about Dad calling. But I was so mad about her having a go at him that it kind of came out.

'Dad rang today, actually.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'Yeah, well I'm telling you now, aren't I?'

'What did he want?'

'Said he was gonna try and get me some United tickets soon.'

'Well, don't get your hopes up. You know what happened

Linda Green

last time. He's hardly got a good track record of keeping promises, has he?

I pushed my half-eaten dinner away and got up from the table.

'Aren't you going to finish that?'

'No,' I said, heading for the door. 'Not if it means listening to you.'

I went straight up to my room, took the match programme with Andy's picture in it from under my pillow and kissed him on the lips.

Andy kisses me back. His lips are soft and velvety – just like I knew they would be.

'I came because you needed me,' he says, his brown eyes searing through me. It is like he knows me, knows everything about me, has known me all my life. I nod. My heart is about to spill over, the love bubbling out from inside me.

'I haven't got anyone, you see,' I explain. 'I'm not interested in anyone else. I only want you.' He nods. I want him to know that this isn't some silly crush. That just because I'm only fifteen it doesn't mean it's not serious.

'I'll never stop loving you,' I say. 'Not ever. This is for keeps.' He nods again. I pull him to my chest and lie there holding him until I go to sleep. Smiling in the knowledge that he is mine now. And I will never let him go.