



Some of this is true.

Ros Taylor is a real person, though this isn't her real name.

In retelling her story I have inevitably had to reshape it –
without, I hope, changing the bits that really matter.

As Picasso said, all art is a lie that tells a greater truth.

Part One

Ros

The needle hovers over the soft vulnerable skin in the crook of my elbow. I feel the tiny sting as it skewers me, then a deeper, subcutaneous ache as it pushes inside the vein.

‘Almost done,’ the doctor murmurs, loosening the tourniquet.

She's solid and professional, her grey hair pulled back in a bun. When she pulls the needle out, a tiny red berry swells from the puncture. She presses a pad of cotton wool on it and places my finger on top to hold it there while she tears a strip of tape from a dispenser.

This isn't happening.

She measures the blood from the syringe into three different phials. Their tops are colour coded; purple, grey and red. On the red topped tube are the words: ‘ATTENTION. Serological samples only. This tube contains no anticoagulants. For DNA use purple jar.’

The doctor picks up her clipboard. ‘Do you have any allergies, Ros?’

My mouth forms the word *No*. It must be almost inaudible but it seems to be enough.

‘Are you currently taking any prescription drugs?’

No.

‘Have you taken any non-prescription drugs in the last forty-eight hours?’

No.

‘Is there any possibility that you might be pregnant?’

Oh God no -

‘If you're worried, Alice can take you to the clinic later to get a morning-after pill,’ the doctor says gently. ‘For now, I just need to know if you could have been pregnant before the assault.’

I shake my head.

‘When was your last consensual sexual activity?’ My confusion must show because she adds, ‘We have to know this. It may affect the tests.’

‘About six months ago,’ I whisper.

‘And your last period?’

A thick fog is gusting through my brain. ‘I can't remember. Sorry. It'll come back to me.’

‘Don't worry. You can let Alice know later.’ She makes a note. ‘Have you urinated, defecated, or rinsed your mouth or hands since the attack?’

‘I think so. I can't remember. I went to the loo. That was when I found -’ Images crash through the fog. I close my eyes and force myself to breathe.

‘It's all right,’ she says quietly. ‘You don't have to talk about that yet.’ She pulls out another form. ‘I'd like to examine you now, Ros. My report will be used by the police as evidence, and it will also help me see what medical treatment you need. But I won't examine you unless you give your consent and you can ask me to stop, or to pause, at any time. If you're all right with that, I'll need you to sign this to say that you agree.’

She hands me the form. At the top are the words ‘Declaration of Consent to Medical Examination for Non-treatment Purposes.’ I have to sign twice, once where it says that I give my consent to examination and the taking of forensic samples, and once where it says that the doctor has explained what the form means. When I take the pen from her my hand shakes and my signature – a weird, unfamiliar calligraphy, like a loop of stray hair - veers erratically off the dotted lines. It belongs to someone else, some other Ros Taylor. Someone to whom nightmares happen. Not me.

The Rape Suite is on the seventh floor of a tall police station just off the Edgware Road. Its double-glazed windows look down at a queue of traffic, inching along the Westway flyover in the morning sunshine. The main part of the suite is like a hotel room, or perhaps the waiting room of a private

osteopath. There are bland Scandinavian sofas, a cheap wooden coffee table and an incongruous stack of magazines. Beyond this are two other rooms. One is the doctor's, with an adjustable couch and shelves piled high with medical paraphernalia, where my examination is happening. The other door leads to a shower room. When the examination is over I will be allowed to help myself to towels, clean clothes and a range of toiletries. Alice has told me about the toiletries. They are a recent addition, one which Alice is rather proud of.

Alice is a sergeant, although she doesn't wear a uniform. According to the leaflet I have been given she is also my designated chaperone, whatever that means. If I had written it I would have tried to find a better word.

'Chaperone' conjures up visions of debutantes and dances, kisses snatched behind fluttering fans, men in breeches and girls in bonnets; not this cold, scientific drama of serological samples and blood tests. The leaflet also says, in the vague, soothing way that characterises all of its fifty four pages, 'Your chaperone has received special training to deal with this type of matter.'

Sergeant Alice speaks very slowly and quietly, which is presumably what she was taught in her special training. She wears a knee-length straight skirt, as round as a barrel. In any other circumstances I would probably have had nothing in common with her at all, but as it is I find myself pathetically grateful for her presence.

The doctor has put on see-through plastic gloves and is cleaning under my fingernails with short wooden toothpicks, a different one for each nail. She asks me to open my mouth and she rubs my gums vigorously with a thing like a large cotton bud. Then she plucks half a dozen hairs from my scalp, gripping them with tweezers close to the skin.

'We have to get the root,' she explains when I wince. 'It's for the DNA tests.'

Everything – the cotton buds, spatulas and hairs - goes inside separate white envelopes with FORENSIC SPECIMEN – KEEP REFRIGERATED written across the front. Each time she seals an envelope she picks up a biro in her plastic-gloved hand and carefully writes out my name, her name, which is Dr Philippa Matthieson, Forensic Medical Examiner, a crime number, a description of the contents and the date. It takes forever, for which I am grateful. My whole body feels heavy, as if I am filled with glue, the way you feel after a ten-mile walk or a car crash.

She wants to know if I colour my hair.

‘Um, sometimes, yes.’

‘What with?’

I start to tell her, then stop, confused. For some reason I can't remember.

‘It doesn't matter. The lab will know.’

I spit into yet another tube and blow my nose on a sterile tissue. The tissue is folded up, like something valuable, and put into a paper envelope. I give the doctor my shoes, which she puts into a large paper bag. Then she unfolds a square of brown paper and asks me to stand on it. She kneels down and draws an outline around my feet.

‘Were these the clothes you were wearing?’

Standing up has made me dizzy and I reach out to the wall for support.

‘No.’

‘We'll need them anyway, I'm afraid.’

As if in a dream I start to undress. Alice tactfully withdraws. The doctor takes my clothes, folds them, and puts them into large paper bags. Like a shop assistant, I think. ‘Just put the receipt in the bag.’ Have I said that out loud? Evidently I have. She is looking at me with a quizzical expression on her face.

'Sorry,' I mutter. 'I don't know why I said that.'

'You're probably a bit confused. It's quite normal.'

'I've got the weirdest headache. Like I'm drunk and hungover at the same time.'

'Have you taken anything for it?'

'No.'

'I'll give you something. It'll have to be later, I'm afraid, when all the tests are done.'

I take everything else off and am given a towel in exchange. 'Have you been away?' she asks. I understand from the tone of voice she uses that this is not part of the medical questionnaire but small talk designed to put me at my ease, prompted by the contrast between my pale hips and the rest of me.

'Sardinia. We got back last week.'

'Sardinia's lovely. We went there two years ago.' She points at my stomach. 'I'd better have that, I think.'

I reach down and work the clip that holds the stud in my belly button. I want to tell her that I'm not really the kind of person who pierces her navel. I suddenly feel irrationally guilty and embarrassed about it, as if a piece of metal in my midriff could somehow be to blame. Jo made me, I want to say - which is true: she'd decided we had to get matching ones done for our holiday, and before I could change my mind she'd found somewhere, a place behind Marshall Street run by a camp Australian with bleached hair who'd laughed at Jo's jokes and, when we almost got cold feet, offered to show us his own Prince Albert.

Jo. Trailing admirers and lovesick puppies in her wake. *Jo*. Oh God.

'Would you pop up on the couch for me, Ros?'

She examines me carefully, palpating my skin, occasionally asking me if a spot is tender. I can see faint bruises on my arms underneath my tan. The doctor marks the position of each one on a diagram fixed to her clipboard.

‘Is there anywhere else that hurts?’

‘On my back. I think there's a cut.’

‘OK. Turn over and I'll take a look.’

I can feel her breath on my skin as she examines my shoulder blades. ‘I'll mark it on the traumagram, but we'll need some photographs of this,’ she says at last. She calls Alice and speaks to her quietly through the door.

There's a long wait while Sergeant Alice goes to find the photographer. I already know, because I've read it in the leaflet, that the police photographer has also received special training to deal with people like me. I rest my head on my arms. The doctor rearranges the towel over me. Bizarrely, I doze off. I dimly become aware that the photographer has arrived and is asking me politely if it's all right to take photographs. I don't answer. I know from the leaflet that they have to ask my permission at every stage. They want me to know that it is my body, that my consent matters to them. But I don't want to make decisions any more. I want to close my eyes and let it all wash over me without any of it touching my hammering brain.

‘Go ahead,’ I heard the doctor say quietly.

Flash-whirr. Flash-whirr. I open my eyes and see a Polaroid sticking out its tongue.

‘Is it bad?’ I ask.

The photographer starts to say something but the doctor interrupts. ‘Let's get the exam over. Perhaps Alice can show you the photographs later.’

When the others have gone she puts a dressing on my back. Then she closes the blinds and examines me with an ultra-violet torch, like the Woods lights we use at work to examine the surface of paintings. In the strange purple half-

light it is less hard for me to open my legs when she asks me to. She spends a lot of time peering between my thighs and around my breasts. When she has turned the overhead lights back on she takes a pad, moistens it with distilled water, and wipes it carefully and thoroughly over my thighs and crotch.

'I need to comb your pubis for forensic traces,' she says. 'It may be a little uncomfortable.' She presses a wooden comb against my stomach, just above my pubic hair. I can feel the teeth raking me, hard, the way a schoolgirl rakes a horse with hard steel combs and curry brushes. For a moment I drift off again into a sort of woozy fantasy in which I am somewhere else altogether. The doctor puts the comb into yet another envelope and seals it.

'I'll need to take some hairs as well. You can do it yourself if you'd rather.'

I just want to get this over with. 'You do it.'

She plucks six pubic hairs, holding each one up to the light to make sure it has a root.

'I'm going to give you an internal now. If it's too painful, just tell me and we'll stop until you feel better.'

There are portable stirrups on a trolley, which she wheels up to the couch. I put my feet where she wants them and try to stare at the ceiling as she gets to work.

'I'm afraid I can't use lubricant for this,' she says apologetically. 'It contaminates the swabs.' She tips some clear liquid from a bottle labelled Saline Solution BP into her gloved palm. 'This might help.'

Despite the Saline Solution her fingers hurt, pushing me this way and that. 'Try to breathe normally,' she instructs, putting her other hand on my stomach and pushing down gently. I force myself to exhale.

'I've nearly finished,' she says. And finally, 'That's done.'

Afterwards there's a similar procedure for my anus, which is mercifully briefer. 'That's the exam over,' she says at last. She rolls off her gloves.

'Did I pass?' Why am I making these terrible jokes?

The doctor says quietly, 'You did very well, Ros. You're a very brave young woman.' There's a pedal bin in the corner and she drops the used gloves into it. 'You can go and shower now.' She hands me another towel, and I swing my feet down onto the floor. For a moment, as I come upright, a sudden gust of dizziness make me groan. The doctor quickly puts her arm round me and guides me back to a lying position. I close my eyes.

'I'll put a rush on those bloods,' I hear her mutter. 'Ros, stay there until you feel better.'

Eventually I force myself up. As I pass Alice in the sofa room she looks up from a magazine. 'All right?' I nod. 'Use anything you want in there. It's all provided. And help yourself to toiletries.'

Alice's toiletries are all from Superdrug. There is a fruit theme. Apple shampoo. Lemon skin scrub. Orange soap. There is no mirror. I shower quickly, the water stinging the cuts on my back. At one point in the examination the doctor used a blue dye on my bruises and I watch as it rinses off me onto the floor. I am not here, I think again. I am not in a Rape Suite. I am not in a shower washing Saline Solution out of my crotch. I can't be.

Then suddenly everything that has happened is crashing back into my brain, a loop of film on fast-forward, and this time I can't push the images away. I'd been holding them off for the examination because I'd had to, but now it's over I'm in free-fall. I stumble out of the shower, howling, crying so hard I can't actually breathe, sucking in great clots of air that stick in my throat, retching and crying and choking at the same time.

Alice comes and gets me out. She is gentle and reassuring and careful as she wraps me in a towel and leads me to one of the sofas.

'I'm sorry,' I say between bouts of crying.

'Don't be silly,' she says. 'Was it because of the shower - ?'

I nod. 'The shower. Yes. That was where I found Jo.'

Later, when I'm calm enough, Alice finds me a pair of tracksuit trousers and a T-shirt. The doctor comes out of her office.

'Ros, there are a couple of things I need to tell you. Don't worry if you can't take it all in now, Alice can explain it again later. First, from what I've seen I think it's very likely you've been drugged. I've asked the lab to be as quick as they can with the blood tests but in the meantime, don't drive a car and get plenty of rest until you're feeling more normal. I'd also suggest that you don't take any sleeping pills for a few days. Secondly, we'll test the bloods for sexually transmitted diseases, but that's to establish if any were present prior to the attack. Anything you picked up from the rape itself may not show up for several weeks. I'm sending you to a specialist clinic for some antibiotics, just in case. In the meantime, don't have unprotected sex. I know you probably won't be feeling like that anyway but I have to mention it. I'm also recommending a hepatitis vaccination. Even if he used protection, the cuts on your back could become infected from his sweat.'

My back. I remember the pictures. 'Can I see what he did now?'

She hesitates. 'It won't leave a scar, I'm pretty sure of that. The cuts aren't deep and they were done with a very sharp knife.'

She takes the Polaroids out of her pocket and hands them, not to me but to Alice, who says carefully, 'Ros, this may be upsetting for you.'

'I'm already upset.'

'I understand, but what I'm trying to say is... it's important to remember that you're not just a victim. You're a survivor.' She hands me the first Polaroid.

I don't recognise the person in the photograph at first. She is dark-skinned, her tanned back bisected by the faintest of bikini lines. Just above this line - almost as if it has been used as a guide - someone has written something on the surface of the photograph.

And then I look closer, and I see that the writing is not actually on the Polaroid: the writing is on my back, etched with the point of a knife in my skin. And it is not, strictly speaking, writing, but a series of numbers, separated by slashes.

11/7/1

'It's the date,' Alice says softly. 'It's yesterday's date.'

On my back, as casually as a bored teenager might carve graffiti into a tree, the man who raped me and killed my best friend has carved the date of his attack into my skin.

‘So what's the damage?’

Jo, still in her pyjamas, her duvet pulled round her shoulders like a thick white cape, perched on our battlescarred old sofa and yawned before she answered. I was already dressed for work, though I hadn't even thought about doing any clearing up.

‘Natalie finally split up with Jedd. Lou split up with Ajay but got off with Paul. Some lovesick puppy took a dodgy e and put his fist through the bathroom mirror. On the plus side, Ian from upstairs came to complain about the noise and got off with one of Paula's South African friends.’

‘Bless.’

Jo extricated a packet of Marlboro Lights from the debris on the floor and inspected it hopefully. It was empty. ‘All in all, a pretty successful party. More relationships consummated than destroyed.’ She yawned again. ‘Do something for me?’

‘Depends. I'm already late.’

‘If I tidy up, will you phone the office?’

I made a face.

‘Please? If I bring you the phone?’ Still clutching the duvet round her, she crawled over to me and laid the cordless phone in my lap. ‘Pretty please? Look, I'll dial the number for you...’ She pushed some buttons and held the phone towards me.

‘Oh, all right then,’ I said, laughing despite myself. ‘Now shush. I need to sound serious. Peter Longworth please,’ I said into the phone. ‘Any particular preference?’ I asked Jo. ‘Malaria? Dysentery? Nervous exhaustion?’

‘Something gastric.’

‘Peter Longworth speaking.’

‘Oh Peter, hi. It's Ros – Ros Taylor. Jo's flatmate?’

'Oh, yes. How are you, Ros?' Jo's boss looked like Action Man - chiselled jaw, deep black eyebrows, beautiful chiaroscuro stubble - but was actually not very bright. He also took himself very, very seriously. The two facts were not unconnected.

'Well, that's it - *I'm* fine, but Jo isn't *I'm* afraid. She must have picked up a stomach thing because she's been throwing up all night. She's asleep now but a few hours ago she asked me to phone you and explain that she may not be in today. She's projectile vomiting, so it's probably just a bug,' I added helpfully. 'I'm sure she'll be fine tomorrow.'

'Oh. Hang on. Let me grab her diary.' There was the sound of papers being moved around. 'Well, she's only got one meeting so I guess I can cover that for her,' he said grudgingly. 'Tell her from me I hope she feels better soon.'

'I'll definitely pass that on,' I promised. 'But don't worry, I'm sure it's nothing serious. I mean, I wouldn't send flowers or anything. Not yet.' There was a squawk of laughter beside me from Jo. She stuck the corner of the duvet into her mouth.

'Right. Well, thanks for letting me know.'

'Bye,' I said breezily and rang off. 'You so owe me,' I told Jo.

'Flowers - God, Ros, you are *evil*. What did he say when you mentioned flowers?' Jo's boss had been through a brief phase of pursuing her himself. For about a fortnight bunches of roses had turned up every time she sold an ad or made a presentation.

'He sort of went silent.'

'Think he believed you?'

'Of course.'

Jo took off the duvet and went to get dressed. 'There was a bloke in my bed last night,' I called after her.

'Lucky you. Who was he?'

'Some random friend of Paula's, I think. Sound asleep and snoring.'

Jo reappeared with her toothbrush in her mouth. 'Good body?' she said through a mouthful of foam, her eyes glinting.

'How should I know?'

'You mean you didn't check him out?'

'Er, no. I woke him up and chucked him out. It took forever, actually. He kept mumbling something about having to rescue the bears. I think he was still half-asleep.'

'Poor puppy.' She vanished again. I heard her voice calling, 'You won't believe this, but someone's stolen my mascara.'

'Why is it always the girls who steal things?'

'Ha. What makes you think it was a girl?' When she came back she was holding two cigarettes, one of which she gave to me. 'Here. I just remembered. I hid these last night. For emergencies.'

I was far too late to stop and have a cigarette. I put it in my mouth and leaned towards her lighter. 'Did Gerry turn up?'

'Uh-uh. But I wasn't expecting him to. Parties aren't really his thing.'

'What time did you get to bed?'

'Late. I got off with Leonardo di Caprio.'

'Bloody hell.' I knew which young man she was talking about. He wasn't actually a dead ringer for the actor, but there had definitely been a resemblance. 'Define 'got off with?'

'More than a snog, less than a shag. Would I be unfaithful to Gerry?'

'It would hardly be unfair if you were,' I said tartly. 'Given that Gerry is, presumably, still sleeping with his wife.'

'Only in the middle of her menstrual cycle. It does something to her hormones, apparently.'

'I don't know why you're so chirpy,' I said. It had been two a.m. before I got to bed myself, and the pumping dance music had woken me up a couple of times after that. Our relentless partying was definitely incompatible with a nine-to-five job.

'Will you do something for me? Since you're going into work anyway?'

'Like what?'

'Drop these off at Boots.' She gave me two films. 'They're the holiday photos.'

'Okay. I'll get them on same day and pick them up tonight.'

'Brill. And I'll get a video. Girl's night in?'

'Definitely. No booze, no fags, early night.'

'Better get some wine and ciggies as well then. But I do promise I'll have tidied up.'

I walked to Finchley Road tube station. The carriage I squeezed into was packed and silent and already too hot. Even with the windows open there was only a slight breeze, and the air that came in was still fetid from the day before. The metal poles were buttery from other people's hands but there was nothing else to hang on to. My face was jammed up against a grey suit that smelt of old newspapers. I tried to edge away but found my legs knocking against those of a seated passenger, a young man in shorts and a scruffy denim shirt. His own legs were spread wide apart, aggressively colonising as much space as possible. Propped on his lap was some magazine, FHM or Arena or whatever. A TV bimbo was on all fours in her bra and knickers, apparently trying to smack her own bum. Without lifting his head from the magazine, he slid his eyes upwards to stare at the gap between my top and my skirt, which, as I was reaching up to hold onto the bar above my head, was exposing rather more flesh than usual. I felt a mixture of annoyance and appreciation. On the one hand, he was an odious little creep who had no right to ogle me just because I was forced to stand up. On the other hand, my stomach was tanned and flatter than usual after my holiday and it was nice to know that I was marginally more exciting than a self-flagellating Channel 5 starlet. For a brief moment I actually pictured myself as a pole dancer,

twirling around the chrome bar at the end of the carriage. But only for a moment. The carriage was hot and sweaty and silent. I looked at the adverts and tried not to think.

According to an e-mail that went round, a team of hygiene specialists recently removed a row of seats from a London Underground carriage for analysis. They were meant to have found four types of hair sample (human, mouse, rat, dog); seven types of insect (mostly fleas, mostly alive); vomit; human urine; human excrement; rodent urine; rodent excrement; human semen and, when the seats were taken apart, the remains of six dead mice and a previously undiscovered fungus. The e-mail was later shown to be a hoax but the point was that everyone believed it.

At Bond Street the carriage cleared and the young man got out. I sat down where he'd been. The seat was still hot with his body heat but at least I could stretch out my legs.

At Charing Cross I walked through the subway to St Martins-in-the-Fields and then up the road to the staff entrance of the National Gallery. The lab where I worked was on the very top floor of the administration block, in Orange Street. The windows looked out over the top of the new Sainsbury extension towards South Africa House; if I stuck my head right up to the glass I could just see the back of Nelson's head, streaked with grey where pigeons had shat on him.

Seven of us worked in the department, but as the job involved checking archives, interviewing scholars and working with conservation specialists as well as lab work, it was rare for all of us to be there at any one time. The room was dominated by the lightbox, an enclosed booth with lights inside that could be switched from ultraviolet to daylight blue.

As no one else was in yet I took my shirt off before putting on my lab coat. It was made of polyester and clung to my skin but at least with no shirt I

would stay reasonably cool. I turned on my computer and made a cup of Nescafe, more to postpone starting work than because I wanted one. Then I stepped inside the lightbox. At that time it held three paintings, all strangely small and naked-looking without their frames, like tortoises stripped of their shells. I started to fluoresce the surface of the one I was working on with a hand-held UV bar.

Under the intense ultraviolet the image on the canvas – a study of a Polynesian nude – vanished, replaced by a landscape in which tiny fibres and even individual brushstrokes stood out like glowing white-hot wires. Highlights jumping off the surface made the painting look as if it had been scoured with a fluorescent Brillo pad. I was looking for any foreign materials trapped in the paint, particularly fibres from the artist's brush. If I found some and they were synthetic rather than sable, it was a pretty sure bet that the painting wasn't a Gauguin. It seems incredible that a forger would be so stupid as to use a modern nylon-based brush to fake a painting meant to date from the nineteenth century, but in fact most forgers were usually careless. They relied on fooling the so-called experts, who rarely carried out detailed checks, rather than a scientist.

Officially I was the Laboratory Support Assistant to the Science and Conservation Facility, but in practice I was part of a team known throughout the building as the Drewe Crew, after John Drewe, the most successful forger of the twentieth century. Drewe was remarkable, not least because he couldn't even paint. He recruited an artist who was advertising his services in the small ads section of *Private Eye*, and paid him a hundred and fifty pounds a time to knock off paintings in the style of the Post-Impressionists and Modernists. Then he contacted several important institutions – the V&A, the Courtauld Institute, the Tate – and, posing as an academic with links to a mysterious but extremely generous art foundation, asked if he could come and do some research in their archives. Once inside, he added his fakes to the

list of genuine works. When he wanted to sell the forgery, a prospective buyer would be invited to contact the institution directly to have it authenticated. Faced with a letter from the Cortauld testifying to a painting's provenance, even the country's foremost experts ignored the evidence of their own eyes and agreed. Deception is perception, as Drewe said somewhat smugly at his trial. He never spent much time or money on making his fakes stand up to scrutiny. He and his copyist just mixed together ordinary household emulsion with KY jelly to make a cheap and cheerful approximation of the 'slip' that genuine oil paints had. Because people wanted to believe the paintings were real, they ended up convincing themselves.

No one knew how many forgeries Drewe created, but it was certainly several hundreds. The scam had only been uncovered because his wife discovered he was having an affair and went to the police out of spite.

In scientific terms, my job was pretty undemanding. By the time a picture was brought up to the lab, the false papers would have already been uncovered and the painting pronounced suspect by a committee of art experts. All we had to do was to find some trace evidence which, when sent off for analysis by a specialist lab, would confirm or contradict their point of view. But it was more interesting than working for a manufacturing company or putting colours in processed food, which is what most of my contemporaries from Oxford were doing. I had one friend who was part of a sixteen-person team responsible for making sure that wherever it was made in the world, a certain fizzy drink was always exactly the same shade of black. Apparently when it comes out of the machines it's actually a lurid green, and in certain countries where they skimp on black dye you can occasionally still discern a faint green tinge to it. Too much dye, on the other hand, would stain the drinkers' teeth. She claimed it was actually rather fascinating.

As I had expected, there were dozens of brush fibres caught inside the paint. I prised three or four out with the tip of a scalpel and prepared a dry mount for the specialist lab in America that did our microscopics. Then I turned the overhead back on, my eyes aching from the UV light.

When I came out of the lightbox I found Alex, my boss, sitting at his table examining the back of a frame. He was wearing the LumiView, a head-mounted binocular microscope that made whoever wore it look like a cartoon vivisectionist. 'Hi Al,' I said brightly.

He grunted a greeting. A lugubrious Hungarian, Alex liked to pretend that he was permanently depressed by his job. In fact, as I knew perfectly well, he liked nothing better than to take some masterpiece that had been praised by the art historians and prove that it was a fake. In this, I suppose, he was essentially on the side of the forgers, who often seemed to be motivated by a desire to get one up on the art establishment as much as by money.

'How was your holiday?' he wanted to know. I hadn't seen him since I'd got back.

'Great. Two weeks lying on a beach doing nothing. Perfect, in fact.'

He swung round and inspected me moodily over the top of the LumiView. 'If you were any browner, you'd look like her.' He gestured at the painting I was holding, where my fake-Gauguin maiden bared her slim breasts at the viewer.

'So what's the gossip? Anything new?'

'Nothing ever happens here. It's a museum, and we are its exhibits.'

'You're cheerful, then. Must be the weather.' Outside, the sun sparkled on the huge fountains in Trafalgar Square.

'That's where we should be,' he said, following my gaze. 'Well, you, anyway. Out there. Being painted by great artists while you're still young and beautiful. Not helping to mummify the dead ones. Get out while you can,

Ros.' He leaned forward conspiratorially and hissed, 'Don't let them curate you.'

'I'll bear it in mind,' I promised, and he laughed to show me that he hadn't really meant it. My phone rang, and I crossed to my desk to answer it.

'Is that, um, Ros?' The voice at the other end was male and hesitant.

'Yes.'

'It's Nathan.'

'Hello Nathan,' I said, trying to remember who Nathan was.

'From the party. Friend of Jo's?'

'Oh – *Nathan*. Hi.' I remembered him now. He had cornered me in the kitchen and talked for half an hour about how superficial conversations at parties were. Unfortunately, in his own case he had been right.

'So I was wondering – uh, I was really interested in what you were saying.' Which was strange, because as far as I could recall I'd said nothing more interesting than 'yes', 'no', and 'hmm'. 'I was wondering if we could carry on the conversation over a drink sometime.'

A voice inside my head instantly said 'No,' but for some reason I heard my real voice saying politely, 'Well, okay.'

'Great. Are you free tonight?'

Oh, God. I'd meant, maybe in two or three weeks time, and then I'd find an excuse to bring along some other people too. I said cautiously, 'Actually, I'm busy this evening.'

'Another night, then. Tomorrow?'

I eased into reverse gear. 'I'm afraid tomorrow's not great either.'

'Well, I'll obviously have to work round you, then.' There was just the faintest hint of annoyance in his voice. 'Tell me a day, and I'll make sure I'm free.'

'I'm not sure. I haven't got my diary with me at the moment.'

There was a pause, and then he said doggedly, 'But this is your work number, isn't it? You must have a diary there somewhere.'

'I'm not at my desk. This call's been transferred to another room.' I was absolutely certain now that I didn't want to see Nathan for a drink. He was way too pushy.

'I'll pick a day, then, and you can phone me back and move it if you're busy.' Not *cancel it*, I noticed, but *move it*. 'Saturday? I'll book a table somewhere.'

Whoa, I thought. I'd half-agreed to a drink, and now I was being bullied into accepting dinner. 'That might be a bit difficult. I'm seeing my boyfriend on Saturday.' Which was probably not hugely tactful of me, because although it was the clearest possible way of saying that he was wasting his time, if he backed off now it would imply he'd only called me because he thought I was single.

Why was there no easy, acceptable way to say 'I'll happily meet up with you for a drink. But I'm sorry, I don't fancy you'?

'Oh, right.' There was a long pause. That's the end of it, I thought. Then he said, 'I was told you weren't going out with anyone at the moment.'

Oh, for God's sake. 'Maybe whoever told you didn't know.'

'Who is it?'

'Sorry?'

'Who's the lucky bloke?'

'Nathan, I have to go now. People are waiting for me.'

'Will you phone me back?'

'Maybe.' No, that was stupid. He'd already made it clear that he wasn't going to be fobbed off with maybes. 'I'll think about it. Perhaps later in the year.'

'Bitch.'

'What?'

'You heard.'

There was short silence. Then I said, as politely as I could manage, 'Well, I'm glad we didn't go to the trouble of meeting up to have this conversation, Nathan. That would have really pissed me off. Goodbye.'

'No, wait. I'm sorry.'

He started to apologise at greater length, something about how I had to understand that it was very difficult for him making a phone call like this - 'cold calling', he called it, as if I was someone he was trying to sell a marketing plan to - but I cut him short. 'Forget it. Goodbye.' I put the phone down. 'Twat,' I said furiously to no one in particular.

Jo would have handled it better. She could be blunt to the point of rudeness with people she didn't want to see. But although she was better than me at saying no, she said it less than I did. When the phone rang at two o'clock in the morning it was inevitably for her. 'Just one of my lovesick puppies,' she'd say, taking the phone to bed with her, the puppy in question usually turning out to have been calling from some hotel bar in another time zone, drunk at his company's expense. I led a quiet and rather celibate life by comparison. I sighed.

Alex glanced in my direction but said nothing. I pulled out the Gauguin's file, though in fact I was too furious to work. Then the phone rang again.

'Ros Taylor,' I said cautiously, praying it wasn't Nathan.

'Ros, it's Gerry.'

'Hi Gerry,' I said, relieved. 'How are you?'

'Good. How was the party?'

'It was fun. Shame you couldn't be there.'

'Couldn't get away, I'm afraid. Listen, I was just wondering if Jo's all right. Her office says she's ill and she's not answering her mobile.'

‘Oh, she's fine. She's probably just got some music on. She decided to take a day off work and – ‘ I shot a glance at Alex – ‘she's run out of holiday, if you know what I mean.’

Gerry laughed. ‘You mean she got you to pull a sickie for her?’

‘That's it.’

‘Okay. Maybe I'll drop by and see her later.’

Which meant I'd better not get back to the flat too early, or I'd walk in on the two of them sprawled post-coitally across the living room.

I should explain about Gerry – aka The Mysterious Gerry, The Part-Time Boyfriend, The Elusive Gerry, etc etc. Because Gerry was actually about fifteen years older than Jo and I, and married. With kids, a second home in Tuscany, the whole shebang. He was also good looking, charming, self assured; oh, and rich, not of course that it was ever a factor in Jo's decision to see him. It wasn't as if they went out together much, after all.

She actually met Gerry through me – amongst other things, he has a modern art collection which is worth a fortune, and when the National helped him win a court case against an unscrupulous dealer who was knowingly selling on fakes, he invited all of the lab staff to a celebration party at the Saatchi Gallery. I was the only one in my department who wanted to go, so I took Jo along too, and the next day he called her. I think at the time Jo just thought it was going to be a quick fling, but it quickly became more than that, and soon I found myself in the slightly awkward position of living in the middle of a Grand Passion. I was, to say the least, a bit surprised by all this, but Jo is Jo and knew what she was doing. Coming home to the flat after the two of them had sneaked off for an afternoon was like coming back to a war zone – things would be broken, champagne bottles and ashtrays would be scattered around, bedclothes would be strewn in unlikely places, and the whole flat would reek of sex and Gerry's cigars. On one occasion drops of candlewax had been scattered around the bathroom, coagulating in the carpet

like hard little burrs. Another time I came home and found Jo in a dressing gown, sprawled lethargically across the sofa, with one of Gerry's ties still fastened round her wrist like some exotic, trailing bracelet.

It soon became clear what the glue was that kept them together. She told me, quite early on, that the sex was absolutely fantastic. Then, a couple of weeks later, when I came back and found that the curtain rail in the living room was broken – the curtain rail, for God's sake: I mean, just how exactly do you break a curtain rail during sex? – she asked me, rather wistfully, whether I had ever had sex which was overwhelming, which was almost too much. I said I hadn't. In fact, that sort of sex didn't sound like something I could even imagine, let alone enjoy.

It had been going on for about five months - about as long as any of Jo's boyfriends had ever lasted. They had been going to go on holiday together, but then he couldn't get away at the last minute, so I went instead. When we were in Italy Jo told me that in some ways she was actually rather relieved. After all, you couldn't have sex all the time, and two whole weeks with Gerry might have been rather exhausting. I tried to drop gentle hints that it might be time to dump him and find a proper boyfriend, and she seemed to be agreeing with me. But I was careful not to push her. There was a side to Jo that didn't appreciate being given advice on men by me. All the time we'd known each other, it had been the other way round.

Jo and I met at Oxford - she was doing a two-year secretarial course and being pursued by a series of expensive young men who were inordinately serious about things like beagling and tractor-ploughing competitions. She'd already been a rep for a travel company and had worked in a bar: the secretarial course was her family's last-ditch attempt to establish her in some kind of career. I was just starting a doctorate in long-chain complex polymers, an area of inorganic chemistry so mindnumbingly obtuse that even my supervisor

couldn't be bothered to find out what I was meant to be doing. We met through Simon Cutter, an arrogant history postgraduate I'd gone out with a few times who unceremoniously dumped me because, he said, he'd met someone more interesting - by which I assumed, rightly as it turned out, he actually meant more attractive. That was Jo. I subsequently got chatting to her at a party and the next day she turned up at my house with a bottle of vodka to continue the conversation. It turned out she'd just come from dumping Simon herself, partly because he was terrible in bed - she was refreshingly merciless with the details - and partly because she liked me more and realised that after what he'd said to me, she would have to choose between us. As she said, in Oxford men were two a penny but girlfriends were thin on the ground. It was the beginning of a friendship that had so far survived four years and God knows how many boyfriends. We were very different - she was tall, blonde, curvy and extrovert, every man's Playboy fantasy, I was slight and dark and, I suppose, more serious. Her other friends were all arts graduates, by whom I was considered something of a freak. It was a universal truth amongst arts students at Oxford that all so-called Northern Chemists, as anyone doing a science degree was referred to, were spotty, unwashed and physically repugnant. I soon lost track of the number of times I heard the words, 'You don't look like a scientist,' or the even less original 'What happened to the spots?' When we first came to London we shared a house with two other girls in Putney and then, when the tenancy agreement collapsed in some strange quasi-legal row over who did what proportion of the cleaning, got a flat together in an area variously described as South Hampstead, Kilburn or Camden, depending on who was doing the describing. By this stage Jo had graduated from being a secretary in a trendy advertising agency to being a fully-fledged account executive, and I - the one with the degree and the doctorate - was a mere lab technician. On the other hand, I was handling Caravaggios and Titians on a daily basis, I worked in

the heart of the West End, my work was undemanding, reasonably well paid and appreciated by my bosses, and life was too good the way it was to worry about what I'd be doing in five years time.

I wrote out the form requesting analysis of the brush fibres I'd found, by which time it was one o'clock. There was a Pret a Manger on the Strand, so I put my shirt back on and walked across Trafalgar Square to get some lunch. It was baking hot. People were sitting on the edges of the fountains, eating their sandwiches with their legs dipped into the water. Tourists were buying bags of seed for the pigeons and taking pictures of each other with the birds festooned across their arms. Apparently the bird food contained a contraceptive to stop the birds breeding, but there were still hundreds of them strutting round the square.

I got a salad box and sat down on a bench to eat it. The flagstones acted like a giant sun reflector, bouncing heat and light in all directions. Exhaust fumes shimmered from the backs of buses as they crawled round the congested traffic lanes. Some girls nearby had taken off their tops and were sunning themselves in their bras. I didn't go quite that far, but I undid my shirt buttons and put my sunglasses on. My phone beeped but it was only a text message from Jo to say could I bring back some wine.

As I walked back across the square I noticed two young black men moving diagonally across my path. They were overdressed for the weather – baggy jeans, sweat tops with hoods; one was actually wearing a parka. As they came closer one of them said, very politely, 'Excuse me, miss.'

You get a kind of radar, living in London, and if it had been later in the day or if it hadn't been such fantastic weather I would probably have pretended not to hear them. As it was I allowed my head to turn slightly, although I didn't stop or answer.

Big mistake. I should never have looked at them.

The one who had spoken said, 'Got the time, yeah?'

I wasn't wearing a watch. I said 'Sorry. No watch.' I shrugged apologetically, as if to say it couldn't be helped, and kept on walking.

The second one said, 'Cool, cool. Got a phone?'

I hesitated and said, 'Nope.' Second mistake.

The first one gave a kind of roll of the shoulders, an exaggerated gesture of disappointment. 'But we seen it. We seen the phone, you know?'

'You want my number?' the second one demanded. 'Hey, put my number in yo' phone. Where's yo' phone? Show me the phone, come on.'

'Yeah, give us your phone,' the first one said, holding out his hand and grinning.

They seemed altogether too amiable to be mugging me. 'I'd rather not,' I said primly.

Suddenly they were up close, right in my face. 'Why you lie to me?' the first one said.

The second one dipped his hand into his parka and came out with a small knife, its blade already out. 'Don't report us, sister. We're just jacking the phone.'

I put my hand in my pocket and reluctantly took out my mobile. The first one grabbed it. 'Sweet.' He was smiling again. 'Don' get stressed now,' he said flirtatiously. 'People get jacked, you know what I'm saying?'

'I'm fine,' I said. For some bizarre reason we were all smiling at each other as the first guy inspected the phone before slipping it into a pocket.

'Got any money?' the second one wanted to know.

'You've already got my phone,' I pointed out.

'Yeah, allow her, man,' the first one said. 'Come on.' And they sauntered off happily without a backward glance. I looked around. Half a dozen people had been watching us incuriously. 'They stole my phone,' I said to no one in particular. 'Those bastards just stole my phone.' No one moved.

They were all too busy sunning themselves, though one or two people looked vaguely concerned. The two thieves reached the road and stepped out into the traffic.

‘Are you ok?’ a girl sitting on one of the fountains wanted to know.

‘I think so.’

She nodded, as if that meant everything was all right. I stood and watched the two young men disappear in the direction of Lower Regent Street. Then I went back to work.

I called the police from the office and eventually spoke to a bored voice at West End Central police station. He asked me the make and model number of the phone. I could remember the make, just, but I had no idea what model it was. The voice sighed. He told me I could come in and make a statement if I liked but if all I wanted was to claim the phone on my insurance he could give me a CAD number which would prove I had reported it as stolen. ‘Fine,’ I said, and hung up. I called Orange and told them not to charge me for any more calls. Then I went back to work. It was a funny thing but when I thought about it I had actually been more shaken up by Nathan calling me a bitch than I had been about being phonejacked in broad daylight in the middle of Trafalgar Square.

‘Why don't you call your own number?’ Alex said. ‘Maybe they'll answer, and you could offer them money for it.’

‘Oh God. Would you do it for me?’

He dialled the number for me and listened for a while. ‘No answer,’ he said, shrugging. ‘It's probably been sold on by now.’

‘No one did anything,’ I said. ‘That's what's really freaking me. About a dozen people watched it all happen and no one did a thing.’

‘There was a knife, though?’

‘Well, yes. One of them had a knife. But it was tiny.’

He spread his arms. 'So someone should get stabbed for a phone? You're sensible, you did the right thing. Why don't you go home now and relax, try to forget it?'

He sounded like the phoneyjackers. Just relax. But it was still a beautiful day and the sun was still shining. If I went home I could perch on our tiny patio with a cold drink in my hand. And I'd finish my tube journey before the hideous afternoon rush-hour. 'Maybe I will,' I said.

He nodded. 'See you tomorrow then. And look, don't worry if you're late. Just come in when you feel like it.'

I put my stuff away and took the stairs down to the ground floor. I walked outside but instead of walking into the bright reflected glare of Trafalgar Square I'm walking into mist, a thick enveloping freezing fog, like something that had just rolled in off the sea, shrouding London in white.

Mist fills the Tube. Mist fills the streets. Mist fills my head.

Mist rolls across my memory, blanking everything out. All I can see, for the rest of the day, is mist.

I can remember nothing after I walked out of the National Gallery at around three p.m. The rest of the day - the break-in, the rapes, the murder - is a blank.

Sorry.