



CELIA WALDEN

"Offers the reader a touching insight into George Best the man—and the media circus that made him."

—*The Economist*

Babysitting George

THE LAST DAYS
OF A SOCCER ICON

BLOOMSBURY

BABYSITTING
GEORGE

The Last Days of a Soccer Icon

Celia Walden

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To my brothers, Oliver and Frank

‘We’re all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.’

– Oscar Wilde

Contents

A Note to the Reader

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Acknowledgements

A Note on the Author

A Note to the Reader

In the ten years I've worked as a journalist, no job has marked me more than the first I was sent on: the job of babysitting George Best. At the time, I remember thinking that the car chases with the paparazzi, hasty back-door exits and blonde mistresses involved were the stuff of films; that it would be impossible to explain the warped relationship between the press and celebrities to anyone outside the media.

Now, years later, I have tried to do just that. This isn't a football book, nor is it a biography charting the rise and fall of one of Britain's best-loved sportsmen. *Babysitting George* is a personal memoir of the scorching summer of 2003 based on the fragmented encounters of a naïve young journalist with a dying star. Our conversations have been replicated as faithfully as possible from memory, notes and tapes, as have the events of that period. For clarity the various people I reported to have been collectively referred to as 'my boss' or 'the boss'. I hope that the picture of George that emerges is as fond one. It is certainly intended to be.

Celia Walden

Prologue

It doesn't take long for the jokes to start. Not in the newsroom of a national paper.

'You heard the one about George Best? He's in an airport with the Man U team, right? It's 1974 and he sees an ad saying "Drink Canada Dry". So he gets on a plane and does just that.'

Setting a half-sucked lollipop down beside his keyboard, the reporter to my left barks out a laugh that stops abruptly as he plugs the thing back in his mouth. A titter starts up behind me, from the direction of the subs, and runs like a Mexican wave the length of their desk.

'So they decide to cremate him . . .' comes a voice from the direction of Sport. 'It takes three weeks to put out the flames.'

Somewhere, a work experience embarks on the threadbare Miss World anecdote, its punch line ('Where did it all go wrong?') drowned out by groans of derision.

Next, cackles from Features and a rising refrain of, 'Go on, mate' prompt the picture editor to stand up and tighten an imaginary tie. ' "I've got good news and bad news," says the doctor to George Best. "The bad news is that you've only got an hour to live. The good news is that it's happy hour." '

For the first time since I heard the news of his death, two hours ago, I smile. George would have liked that one.

Chapter One

The summer of 2003 – the George Best summer to me – was everything a great British summer should be. Those sharpened shadows on the bed sheets, the sunlight tickling your foot awake from beneath the blinds.

That Sunday in late July, the sun's lazy promise had a mocking quality. The three-year relationship that had lingered too long after university had ended two months earlier. There had been something poignant about the break-up, but nothing romantic about the regrets that continued to sneak up on me on good days and bad. Shaking off thoughts of him, I had pushed aside the sheets and stood at the open window with a glass of water, breathing in the stillness of the garden. It was the kind of stillness that was destined not to last.

It took my mobile phone, vibrating itself off the bedside table with a clatter, to shatter the early morning torpor.

'Celia?' My boss's voice brought a tightening in my gut. 'You've seen the papers, right?'

I always forgot. As a journalist, I was expected to leap out of bed at daybreak and plough my way through the national press. There was a pause as I failed to answer.

'It's entirely predictable, of course. I knew, we all fucking knew, that when we signed him up to do that column the whole thing would blow up in our faces. And now it's a right mess. I need someone out there to keep an eye on him.'

With no idea who he was talking about, I prayed for a clue.

'How bad is it?' I asked in a suitably world-weary tone.

'As bad as it gets. He's fallen off the wagon and Alex has left him again. He's currently in Malaga drinking his way through Sliema, with reporters from every newspaper but ours in tow. It's only a matter of time before he decides to turn one of them into his boozing partner and gives them the exclusive he is contractually obliged to reserve for us. I need you on the next plane out.'

George Best. He was talking about George Best – the drunken, clapped-out, old footballer. Best had a ghostwritten, jauntily upbeat Sunday column in our paper reflecting his life after a controversial liver transplant. With little interest in footballers or alcoholics and still less curiosity for the travails of an alcoholic former footballer, I had never read it.

'You're far from ideal,' my boss was saying, 'you're too young and far too inexperienced – but he's a ghost, David, is in the States and right now you're the only one I can spare. We've booked you on the plane at midday and a room next to his at the Crowne Plaza. Pack, take a cab to Gatwick, find him and talk to him, get some idea of his mental state and for God's sake make sure he doesn't talk to any other reporters. Any questions?'

'How long will I be there?'

'Couple of days at most. We'll send a text confirming your travel arrangements and his agent's details – he will have warned George that you're on your way. When you do find him, don't let him out of your sight and whatever you do, don't have a drink with him, however persuasive he is. Keep your phone on at all times. We'll be calling in on the hour until you find him. And Celia? Take care.'

There is something appealing about being able to pack up and leave in less than an hour. But as I stared at the liquid sheen of the M25, the stirrings of excitement gave way to a mild panic. Other than the obvious, I knew nothing about George Best's life either before or since he stopped playing. I could

do some Internet research at the other end, but for now, I needed a quick debrief. Andrew – my phone a-friend who knows everything about everything – snorted derisively.

‘Hardly a football nut, are you? Why are they sending you? I suppose they think he’ll open up to a woman more easily. He likes his girls, Celia. A right playboy. Huge sex symbol. A few years back you would have liked him.’

Andrew gave me the low-down on George’s brief, astonishing career: his genius on the field, the first ‘rock star’ sportsman, the appeal to women, the whole cult of George Best – the ‘Fifth Beatle’. He had touched the lives of everyone, it seemed, but me. This legendary status, followed by his long fall into disgrace, had kept people’s appalled attention. Many felt they had a stake in his reconstruction.

By the time I was on the plane, I had read up on George. Here was a man who had been revered for his prowess on the field as well as for his personal charm and magnetic appeal. Even after his career faltered, the mercenary transfers to clubs such as the Los Angeles Aztecs and the Brisbane Lions did little to diminish his status. For some reason, we still loved him. What he endorsed, sold. We couldn’t detach ourselves from his sex life and didn’t think any less of him for steering clear of the troubled politics of his native Northern Ireland. Even his alcoholism, apparently, was lovable: his repeated attempts at recovery continued to evoke mass sympathy.

To date, my eighteen months as a journalist hadn’t yielded much in the way of professional satisfaction. My time had largely been spent researching articles for my seniors, ambitions lulled by the gasp and wheeze of the photocopier. Once, a few months previously, I had been called into the feature editor’s office and handed my first commission: interviewing a blind piano tuner who had regained her sight after falling down the stairs; the piece never made it into the paper. Now, faced with someone who gave every appearance of having been eviscerated by his own celebrity, and whose face – swollen by drink and self-indulgence – peered from the page on my lap into the camera as though attempting to find something lost there, I realised how easy it would be to fail. There was a logistical problem, for a start: how do you find someone who doesn’t want to be found?

‘I need you to babysit him,’ my boss had said. ‘If he won’t talk, fine. Just don’t let him talk to anyone else.’

I knew the term; I’d heard it used in scathing tones by reporters who rightly considered themselves above the menial role of shadowing a celebrity, whistleblower or politician’s lover for days or sometimes weeks, in order to guarantee an exclusive or until their public value expired. The idea of babysitting George certainly wasn’t beneath me, but I did wonder how, exactly, I would set about it. Surely it assumed a level of submission on his part? Something George, by the looks of things, would be unlikely to provide.

As the taxi drove me down a shoreline studded with fast food outlets, floodlights illuminating two watchtowers in the distance, I remembered my boss’s final command: ‘Call me tonight, as soon as you’ve found him. I want to know what kind of state he’s in.’ I wondered optimistically whether this hour George might not simply be found in the hotel bar.

Pushing through the revolving doors into the marble-floored lobby of the Crowne Plaza, I realised immediately why this would be unlikely. The reception was blockaded by journalists posing as holidaymakers. There were a few exceptions: one couple, a grizzling baby in a pushchair at their feet might be genuine. But the middle-aged Brit chatting to a member of staff by the lifts was certainly a hack, as were the groups of men on either side of me, wearing far too many clothes for the stifling temperature, hands clamped around their mobiles and their Marlboros. One voice, the brutal English

diction jarring, as it so often does abroad, elevated itself above the others.

~~‘Let’s go through what we’ve got, yeah? Some good pictures of him by the pool, and Alex leaving for the airport – that’s it at the mo . . . And we have no idea where he’s hiding out now – that’s about the size of it . . .’~~

Conscious, abruptly, of its volume, the voice suspended itself in mid-sentence. A sign – unseen by me – prompted the group to turn and give my clothing and hand luggage a suspicious once-over. There can’t be many female holidaymakers in their early twenties who choose to stay at the Crowne Plaza alone. Silence gave way to an equally audible, hostile whisper: ‘So? What do we reckon?’

‘Don’t know. Never seen her before.’

‘Love?’

I had moved away, joining the queue at the front desk. But it was too late.

‘Excuse me, love.’

The words, reiterated with emphasis, had every semblance of courtesy, but the face was devoid of sympathy.

‘You got a light?’

‘No, sorry, I don’t smoke.’

‘Good for you.’

There was a pause as, moving forward, I realigned myself with the queue.

‘You here on holiday?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fair dos. Well you have a good time soaking up that sunshine.’

He was grinning now, having ascertained that I was, as he suspected, here for the same purpose as he was.

A knock on George’s door yielded nothing, and I wandered out into the still-warm evening air. The streets of Sliema were thick with curdled smells and stag-nighters. Slighter, darker-skinned locals could be seen picking their way home with swift steps, past the cinnamon-scented churros sellers, eyes averted from a city which had long ago ceased to be their own. The surroundings, not picturesque enough to redeem themselves under its vulgar assault, did nothing to lift my spirits and I wondered why George would choose Sliema, out of anywhere in the world, as the place to heal an ailing marriage.

Using the biographical details I had read up on, I tried to calculate what George’s frame of mind might be. Here was a man who had gone from the isolated, sectarian community of Northern Ireland to international stardom over the course of his formative years. A man whose fame had become unmanageable for him – as well as for his once teetotal mother, Ann, who had succumbed to alcoholism at forty-four. Things had degenerated still further after his mother’s death, a decade later. Exactly a year ago, this same man had been given a new lease of life by a dangerous (and, if you believed the press, ill-deserved) liver transplant. Yet something had prompted him, along with everything invested in that revival, to self-combust. Within twelve months, the fifty-seven-year-old had started drinking heavily again and cheated on his wife.

If the newspaper clippings on the Internet were anything to go by, George’s latest degeneration could be charted back to one night in early July. The former footballer had reportedly left his £2 million pound renovated barn in Lower Kingswood, Surrey, and headed straight to a nearby pub, The

Chequers. There he'd ordered a glass of wine, and embarked on a week-long binge. Alex – the former Virgin airhostess left dead-eyed by her tumultuous eight-year marriage – had, at first, refused to forgive her husband this spree, packing her bags and posting the key to their home in a small, padded envelope to 'George Best c/o The Chequers'. But in an article dated two weeks ago (illustrated with a stoic-faced picture of Alex and the headline 'I'll Stand by My Man') she had declared that she was willing to give the marriage another try. George, apparently, didn't just fall off the wagon in style; he had made up in style. A week after the relapse, Alex had awoken to find a BMW tied up with a pink ribbon in the driveway, two tickets to Malta tucked beneath the windscreen wiper. In one grandiose gesture George had reclaimed his wife and his life.

The other woman had come as a complete surprise to both of them: Alex for obvious reasons, George because he couldn't remember her or, indeed, much of that lost week's carousing. Naturally, her claims had scotched any plans of reconciliation. I couldn't help but picture the scene: the two of them gradually breaking ground as they lounged by the pool by day and dined in local seaside restaurants by night, only to awake that Sunday to the front-page headline: 'George's Sly Kisses, Cuddles and a Dirty Weekend in London'.

In the clipping, Paula Shapland, a twenty-five-year-old, crop-haired taxi firm receptionist with an indelible lip-liner, stared bolshily at the camera, trying in one muddied look to encapsulate both the wronged woman and temptress. She would have been paid in the region of £10,000, I guessed, to describe their liaison with that breathless prudishness that characterises the kiss and tell. Describing the former footballer as 'relentless', she claimed to have been both 'flattered and shocked' by the 'seduction' which she had finally given in to in woodland behind George's local. Most lamentably for Alex, Paula's confessions included the allegation that suffering, perhaps, from pre-coital delusion George had promised to divorce his wife and proposed a life of luxury by his side. She had left the woodland tryst ruffled but proud, her head filled with hazy notions of a new life as Mrs Best.

This verbal treachery had been the final straw for Alex: she had abdicated Malta, and the marriage the night before.

'I've sent him packing,' she had tearfully told one reporter on arrival at Gatwick. 'I'm so hurt I can't stop crying, but I'm glad it's over. George is a very sick man and I've given him enough of my life. If he doesn't want to change, nobody can make him.'

Remembering the tension in my boss's voice, I saw this tangled knot of human failings from the newspaper's point of view: the whole shambolic scenario was manna.

Having scoured the fast food outlets and bars along the seafront fruitlessly, I climbed back up the hill into the old town, leaving behind the scrambled syncopation of the shore. There, I searched through brasserie-style restaurants – warmly lit with curled wooden pews – without finding any sign of George. My earlier pluck had given way to embarrassment, but I braved one last place, a casino where the screen idols lining the furry walls were pockmarked with condensation and the wooden furniture impregnated with grime.

'Excuse me, has . . . has George Best been in here?'

My question provoked either mild amusement or a violent interest: 'Is he here? Why? Where is he staying?'

At the mere mention of his name, every man or woman of every nationality – even those far too young to have witnessed his heyday – reacted as though some precious pollen, impregnated with his greatness, had been released into the atmosphere. My father's attempt on the phone, earlier that day, to describe the colossal nature of his fame hadn't begun to approximate the reality. But, when the sunburnt Scot, slumped at the roulette table, repeated my question in three shades of incredulity

friends, encouraging them to 'Get a load of her', I decided to give up hope. George had been eluding journalists since before I was born – I had never stood a chance.

Throughout the two-hour search, my phone had whirred listlessly in my pocket – an answerphone message from the office I didn't have the courage either to listen to or delete. Back outside, pounding Maltese dance music safely reduced to an underwater beat, I looked at my watch: ten-fifteen. If I were an old Irish drunk, fleeing the paparazzi and craving a taste of home, where would I go? As I laughed to myself at the impossibility of that leap, the words of a friend of George's floated back to me from one of the cuttings: 'To him the pub is like his front room – that's one of the reasons he finds it so hard to stop drinking.'

'Do you speak English?' I shouted out to the humming local sweeping up broken glass outside a bar across the street. 'Do you know if there's an Irish pub in Sliema at all?'

Sucking a cut on his forefinger, he looked up at me. 'Irish, no; English, yes,' he replied in a heavy accent. 'You see the Crowne Plaza Hotel?'

I nodded.

'Behind it.'

I smiled. 'Thank you.'

The Lady Di was a sliver of a building, faux Tudor, squelched in between a corner shop and a derelict estate agent. Above its harlequin stained-glass windows, washing lines hung in great rumpled garlands the length of the street. I climbed three shallow steps and pushed open the door with trepidation. Aside from the barman, there were three people in the pub: two Maltese teenagers playing table football at the corner – and George.

Such was the potency of his image that I recognised him from his back alone. A slight, sullen figure, George sat on a stool at the bar, head bowed towards his wine in an attitude of semi-religious beatitude. Later, I understood that communion: it was the moment of release after the battle – the endless, lonely battle. It was the instant the inner torment was silenced. Back then, the man before me meant nothing more than a mission accomplished. I was relieved to have found him, yes, but disappointed too. This grey-haired old man in sun-bleached swimming shorts, wasted brown calves, neatly crossed and surrendered in the slope of his shoulders: this was George Best?

Laying down a plate of cheese and crackers before George without saying a word, the barman hovered, just in case the footballing legend two feet away decided to speak. I glanced at the boys at the corner, twisting and propelling their plastic figures back and forth: both appeared to be concentrating, but something in the tense angling of their bodies told me that they were aware of George's presence; that it was dictating every movement.

It took a few days with George, one of the most famous figures I am ever likely to meet, to understand that there were three kinds of reaction to fame. Those reluctant to defer to anything as vulgar as celebrity would put on a show of indifference until, weakened by a drink or two, resolve would be replaced by a craven sycophancy. Many of his older male fans were single-minded in their adulation, their sole desire being to discuss every goal George had ever scored, evoke every triumph as though reliving those highlights in the presence of the man who had achieved them was the sharpest pleasure imaginable. And then there were the women. Less contrived in their approach, young or old, lower, middle or upper class, they would gravitate to him as if drawn by a force of nature. For them his celebrity was all, and the belief that the gilt might rub off on them ran so deep that they would ignore any amount of rudeness or drunkenness. Paula Shapland's avid, opportunistic face; the trace of coquettishness in Alex's involuntary half-smile as she arrived home, genuinely broken, to be greeted

by the country's paparazzi; George's celebrity had the capacity to rot everything close to it, puncture and deflate all that was real.

Dropping my bag down at my feet and slipping on to the stool beside him, I said quietly, 'George?'

Chapter Two

He didn't look up.

'George,' I tried again, faltering this time and unsure how to play my role. 'I've been sent by the paper to check up on you, make sure you're OK.'

Nothing.

I tried again. 'I'm the reporter your agent told you about. But I'm not here to bother you, just to help out any way I can.'

The barman, taking me for a fan, shot me an antagonistic look.

Remembering my boss's warning never to be seen drinking with him, and above all, never to buy him a drink, I sat on the next bar stool but one, ordered a Coke and sipped it slowly, conscious that George had hunched defensively over what I could see now was white wine spritzer – again, disappointment, when I had expected vodka, whisky, a drunk of Richard Harris-like theatricality. Minutes passed as I waited for him to turn, out of politeness at least, towards me. He didn't.

'Can't you just leave me alone?' When he did speak, the words were spoken in one long exhalation.

Maybe it was the tiredness, or a sudden realisation of how absurdly my day had turned out, but rather than take offence, I began to laugh.

'Seriously,' he looked briefly at me, his eyes flashes of hostility, 'Will you just leave me alone – the lot of you?'

Marvelling at how familiar a face I had never set eyes on before could be, it took me a moment to answer. Those bristled eyebrows, the slack grey cheeks and dimples on his cheeks and chin were instantly recognisable as fast food logos. And the scar, like the crease a sheet leaves on a face after deep sleep, which ran above his left eyebrow – fifty-two stitches from a famous car accident a decade ago. Relevant or not, they were there, embedded in my psyche. But pictures hadn't done George's eyes justice: they were dimmed, I was sure, by drink, time and the adulation of others, but of such a light vital blue that they seemed to conspire against the rest of his features to welcome and befriend. They had, with the sentimental language the famous tend to provoke, been described as 'dancing eyes', but time had stilled them, replacing their natural mirth with a wary arrogance. Around his nose and mouth, beneath a three-day stubble, the skin was parchment-thin, mapped with spidery blood vessels. And the lips – something happens to a person's mouth with celebrity: that narcissistic curl suggesting the erosion of any natural, instinctive responses.

'Did you hear me?' He had registered that I was still there. 'I'm asking nicely. Now can you please please go away?'

It wasn't just that I was a journalist, I reasoned, taking in the freshly topped-up glass of wine on the bar; it was that I had interrupted a moment of ritualistic pleasure. People talk about enjoying a drink but whether many of us have ever enjoyed one like George has is doubtful. Not for him was the bare habit of the methylated spirits drinker. George, I came to understand, felt for alcohol what the glutton feels for food: it hijacked every one of his senses. More than once, during our subsequent time together, I would see his mouth fill with saliva at the prospect or memory of it, with a reaction as involuntary and primitive as a dog's. Then, when that bottle or glass arrived – a harmless social prop to most of us – he would finger the stem of it tenderly, with the sensual appreciation of the blind postponing the pleasure for as long as he was able. That night, I began to understand the lifelong hold drink had over him. If he crossed to the other side of the room, separated from his drink for even

moment, I would catch him throwing fleeting glances in its direction, semi-regret, semi-anticipation like two lovers separated by the crowd at a party. Drink, George later admitted to me, brought with none of the jumble, none of the pressures or demands of human beings.

‘Do you mind if I just sit here, George? If I promise not to say anything?’ I was surprised to hear myself say the words out loud. ‘It’s taken me all night to find you.’

But I began to talk, because there was nothing else for it, because I hadn’t had a conversation with anyone in six hours and was as unimpressed by him as he was by me. After a few minutes of ignoring my chatter, George’s shoulder blades melted into the slouched green hump of his back. He turned, and we surveyed each other with mutual indifference.

‘You said your piece?’

Picking up a piece of cheese, he examined it critically before replacing it on its cracker.

I had one shot at this. ‘Look, I know that the last thing you want is for me to be here right now, but there must be at least thirty British journalists out here – all wanting the story. If I go back . . .’

He held a hand up, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘The story? I love the way you lot speak. The story as you put it, is my life, the end of my marriage. And let me guess – I’m the villain here, right?’

‘No,’ I stammered, amazed that this was even in doubt, but aware also that on some level – perhaps because it was about him – George had begun to enjoy the conversation. ‘Your column’s one of the most read things in the newspaper. People look up to you: they want to believe the best. You should see the letters we get . . .’

All of this was true, and having now read a dozen or so of his most recent columns, I could understand why. They weren’t, as I’d imagined, about reliving a heyday which few beneath the age of forty could remember. They were the confessions of a flawed genius whose constant attempts to bring himself back from the brink drew the reader in. What brought them back in their millions, week after week, was the certainty that he would fail.

‘They love me, but they want to tear me to shreds, right?’

I paused. I had wrongly assumed that guilt and self-blame would be the major part of this equation.

‘Right,’ I said hesitantly. ‘But I – we – are not looking to tear you to shreds, George. You’re one of ours. I’m here because we want to make sure that people know what you’ve been going through. Because the truth of it, not the lies the others have been printing.’ I doubted they were lies, but I seemed to be getting through to him. I cleared my throat. ‘It’s important that you use the paper to put forward your side of the story.’

It was easy, in the beginning, to sound convincing because I believed that I was protecting him from himself. Later, when the passive babysitting I had been assigned to do had turned into a more straightforward reporting job, and I would recount his drunken rants to the news desk, I became less sure. Still, that night, when I didn’t yet know him, our relationship appeared uncomplicated to me and mercifully, short-lived.

‘Look, I’m not here to pester you,’ I went on. ‘We understand that this is a tough time for you. Actually,’ I had a hunch this might amuse him, ‘they call it “babysitting”. Technically, all I’m here to do is mind you. And then at some point,’ I ventured as casually as I could, taking another sip of Coke, ‘if you were happy to, you and your ghostwriter could talk through some ideas for your next column.’

‘You’re here to *babysit* me?’ His tone was different, softer than a leer but challenging and ironic. It was the first time he had addressed me in the way a man does a young girl, and I remembered the potted sexual past I had mugged up on: the estimated thousand women he’d slept with; the four – and not seven – Miss Worlds (‘It was only four,’ he used to joke. ‘I didn’t turn up for the other three.’ ‘I’m a lucky man, aren’t I? You look like you still need a babysitter yourself . . .’

‘I’m older than I look,’ I replied, succeeding only in sounding defensive, immature – and a little afraid, something I hadn’t known I was until that moment. ‘The main thing is that I’m on your side,’ I persevered, anxious to reassert control. ‘You’re the paper’s star columnist and they’ve promised to support you through this. So you can relax.’

And when he did, with a bitter laugh and a shake of the head, I was surprised to find that he was good company. Alert and quick-witted, arrogant but self-deprecating, George wasn’t, as I had expected, a natural loner. In fact it was this innate sociability which had, by the time I met him, rendered his only two surviving states impossible. Abstinence meant giving up the very conviviality he drank for, while alcoholism was driving him deeper and deeper into loneliness.

I counted nine white wine spritzers that night, each one savoured slowly, not downed in one, as I had naïvely imagined. Eventually, one of the Maltese youths plucked up the courage to come over and ask for his autograph. Using the barman’s pen, which skated about on the back of a flyer advertising a local gym, George obliged, but it had broken the sense of anonymity, and shortly afterwards he got up and began to shuffle towards the door.

‘Hey,’ I grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair and went after him. ‘Wait for me. I thought we had an understanding.’ I added a little laugh, to diffuse that last sentence of its imperiousness. He stopped outside the pub, a single streetlight waxing his complexion.

‘An understanding? Piss off. Do whatever you like – I’m going back to my hotel.’

Following at a discreet distance, I took in the slight shoulders and torso that dwindled into fragile legs, like the top-heavy doodles of a child. At my age, these legs had brought him great glory; now though he was younger than my father – he looked like a dead man walking.

‘I’ve found him,’ I whispered into my phone triumphantly. ‘He’s right here. What should I do?’

‘What kind of a state is he in?’

I looked up at George’s unapologetic back, the scored white lines across his sunburnt neck.

‘It’s hard to tell. Drunk, obviously, but not as out of control as I’d thought he’d be. He’s heading back to the hotel now, so hopefully he’ll go straight to bed.’

‘Right,’ my boss sounded sceptical. ‘Stay with him, OK? Do not let him out of your sight for a second. Have you seen any other journalists?’

I snorted. ‘Yes – the hotel’s crawling with them.’

I heard the tension in his breath rise a notch.

‘Has he spoken to any of them?’

‘No. I double-checked – and he was tricky enough with me, so we’re safe there.’

‘Thank God for that. Still, you could be in for a long night, I’m afraid. If people ask you, try and fudge the journalist thing, will you? Say you’re a friend or a PA or something. Nobody knows you,’ he added, more to himself than me, ‘so it should be fine. But when he’s ready to turn in, I want you to escort him right back to his hotel room and pull the door shut behind him, OK? I’m counting on you. Don’t mess this up.’

I wasn’t listening. George had pushed through the hotel’s revolving doors and was heading left towards the bar where four of the journalists I had spotted in the lobby earlier were playing pool.

‘Celia?’

‘Yes.’

‘Remember what I said: you are not at any point to pay for his drink or have one with him, OK? You can drink the whole minibar dry once you’re back in your room, I don’t give a damn, but remember what I said: do not be seen boozing with him. It would compromise the paper, right?’

With that, he hung up.

Jovial, wincingly insincere cries of ‘George’ greeted Best’s entrance to the reception. Joining him at the bar, I touched his elbow gently.

‘George, listen, it’s late, why don’t we just call it a night and go to bed?’

Raising an eyebrow, he leaned in so close that I could make out the black and white sprinkle of his stubble, the odd russet shoot pushing through, smell the tartness of his breath – and a base note something sour that his pores seemed to secrete.

‘I’m not sure I’m that kind of man.’ He pushed his mouth out into an absurd moue and cocked his head to one side. ‘You young girls are pretty direct these days, aren’t you?’

Catching the exchange, one of the journalists broke into a mocking laugh.

‘George, come on. You gonna be bossed about by a girl?’ He put a hand theatrically to his chest. ‘You’re breaking my heart, mate. Come and have a drink with us.’

‘Yeah, George, come on,’ heckled another. ‘We’ve just bought a bottle of champers.’

Enjoying his audience, George began to smile. It was a demonic smile, setting off that dimpled little boy look, in which the sweetness had fermented into something cruel.

‘George . . .’

But he was already holding out a champagne glass to be filled, and I had no choice but to join him at their table and perch, as casually as I could, on a nearby stool. If confidences did start being exchanged, what was I to do – reach out and gag him?

‘His minder, are you?’

The taller of the two journalists was trying to distract me, while the other began to quiz George about Alex, asking him whether his marriage was over.

‘No,’ I stammered. ‘I’m just keeping an eye out for him – that’s all.’

‘Sure you are.’ The journalist turned to George, ‘So, do you and your friend fancy a game of pool?’

‘She’s here to babysit me,’ George slurred.

‘Is she now?’ the two journalists smiled at one another.

‘I mean do I look like a baby to you? Do I?’ Pushing down on his knees, he raised himself with some effort. ‘Let’s have that game then.’

‘OK,’ I stood up.

George looked scornfully in my direction. ‘Girls can’t play pool.’

‘Oh yes they can.’ My bravado rang false, but it was the only way to stay with him.

An hour later, we were on our third game, and my vision was skewed with tiredness. George, to my relief, had become taciturn and monosyllabic, eyes overlaid with a vitreous film nothing could permeate. By now every journalist in the bar had seized any opportunity they could to casually question him, but their efforts – apart from one aborted outburst about Alex – were largely wasted.

‘George,’ I whispered in his ear, ‘let’s head off, eh?’

Surprised by the meekness of his response, I escorted him out of the bar. Once in the lift, George perked up, while I sank down, hollow-limbed, on the banquette.

‘You could come back to my room, for a nightcap, you know . . .’ He said it without conviction, as a matter of course.

I couldn’t help but smile. ‘So this is the charm they talk about. No, I don’t think so, George.’ I paused. ‘Aren’t you knackered? I am.’

‘Fair enough.’ Unused to being rebuffed, he attempted a smile, his brows sinking into a frown, eyes reduced to shadowy hollows in the electric orange light.

We were outside his room now. Following my boss’s instructions, I waited as he fumbled with the

plastic key-card, knowing I was only free to go once I'd seen that door shut behind him.

~~'You're sure you won't come in?'~~ The lightness in his tone was gone, his expression anything but inviting now. 'Last time I'll ask.'

'George, I'm . . .'

Before I'd had a chance to finish he had pushed me clumsily against the doorframe, threading a knuckle between my legs. When I tried to move my head to one side, he gripped my jaw with his right hand and advanced a grim face towards mine.

'Christ, George,' I disengaged myself with a jolt and he slumped against the doorframe. 'What are you playing at?'

I wasn't scared – he was too far gone to be threatening – but the brush of stubble and tang of his breath snapped whatever it was that had kept me strong all day. I wondered, wearied by the thought, whether this was what it was going to be like between us: him lunging, me fending him off.

'George, you need to get some sleep. We both do.' The door slammed shut in response, and I paused a moment before calling out, 'Tell me if you need anything, won't you? I'm right next door.'

An hour later, roused from an instant, dreamless sleep by the clean smack of a palm against my door, I regretted those words.

'Let me in . . .'

Recognising the whimper as belonging to George, I put my eye to the spy hole. Clad in one of the hotel's white towelling dressing gowns, his features magnified into a grotesque caricature, he stared through the door with such intensity that I felt sure he could see me. He must have drunk more since I'd left him, I realised as I climbed back into bed, and I resolved to confiscate the key to his minibar the next morning.

For the second day running, I awoke to my boss's voice. The conviction that, on some very basic level, this was wrong, coupled with the bleary realisation that the alarm clock had failed to go off, hit me in quick succession.

'Well, that's just great, isn't it.'

I wasn't sure whether it was a question.

'Morning – what's going on?'

'What's going on is that somehow George has managed to give a full interview to another paper in which he claims to have enjoyed a recent threesome.' I heard the angry rustling of a paper. '“I'm not in love with my wife any more and I want to drink – it's got nothing to do with anyone else.”'

'Don't,' I managed feebly. 'Please. He swore to me that he hadn't spoken to a soul since Alex left. I honestly don't know how that happened . . . It must have been the night before I got here.'

George's early morning visit floated back to me, with the nebulous quality of a bad dream. Had he been going to warn me? 'Let me speak to him and call you back.'

'Don't bother calling back,' my boss snapped. 'Just stick to him like glue from now on, and find out if he's blabbed to anyone else, right? Oh, and until we're able to get his ghostwriter to talk to him, you can at least try to find out what his immediate plans are. Keep us ahead of the game.'

I lay immobile for a moment. What was I doing here? Top British football managers had failed to keep George in order and in the short space of time that I had known him, he had already lied to me with a chilling ease. The only thing this job was likely to prove was that I was too green for a challenge like this one.

Remembering that I'd ordered all the English papers when I checked in the night before, I opened my door to find them there, hanging ponderously from my doorknob in a raffia bag. Whatever I

expected, it was worse: gory details about the state of his marriage, health and unaffected sexual prowess were laid out in all their squalid splendour on pages 2, 3 and 4.

I showered, dressed and knocked on George's door, feeling murderous. My first lesson, learned the previous night, had been about my charge's relationship with alcohol. That morning I learned my second: that it was impossible to stay angry with George for long. Though out of keeping with an alcoholic's temperament, a Pavlovian optimism was his default mood, so that no matter what atrocities he had committed the night before, he was always sweetly upbeat in the mornings. Today, I seemed to believe, was the start of a brand-new life.

This went some way to explain why, despite his eventful night, George opened the door looking fresh and alert, the earnestness of his smile forcing me to swallow the recriminations rising in my throat.

'How's my sitter?'

A piece of fluff from the hotel towel, caught in the bristle of his stubble, grated like a deliberate ploy to disarm, and I checked the impulse to brush it off.

'Not so good, George.' I paused, uncomfortable at the intimacy of our surroundings. 'Why didn't you tell me that you'd spoken to that reporter the night before I got here? You said that you'd kept well clear of any journalists. After everything we discussed, couldn't you at least have warned me?'

'Oh, you mean Kate?'

I shrugged. 'Whoever, George – yes, Kate.'

I looked for some twitch of contrition or apology in his face, just as I had the day before when we were discussing Alex, but found nothing.

'Did she tell you?'

I couldn't believe it; he was smiling.

'Pretty little thing, isn't she? Anyway she turns up here, bold as brass, with a bottle of champagne. I let her in 'cause I quite fancied a little nightcap . . . Oh, and would you believe it?'

The vanity in his expression, unchecked, was embarrassing. I had often wondered whether fame because of the sexual possibilities it afforded – corrupted men more deeply than it did women. He was proof. But there was something else: it was (I suspected then, and found out for sure later) all fib. The champagne and the visit were no doubt at his suggestion. But after years of being lusted after, George couldn't understand that the days of women not having an ulterior motive were gone.

'She was all over me. The woman was all over me, but I didn't sleep with her. We had a drink, a chat.' He examined me for a reaction. 'A kiss and a fumble, and then she left. Did you see her downstairs this morning?' He winked. 'Have a girly chat?'

I laid the paper silently down on the bed.

'That little b—' he began to stammer, picking it up. 'She'd said she . . .' Any residual anger evaporated before George's genuine bafflement and the surprising discovery that, sober, he was reluctant to swear in front of me. 'She said it was all off the record; said she was my number one fan . . .' Aware now how gullible he sounded, he peered up at me, the gurgling source of a laugh in his throat. 'I never said any of this.'

I didn't yet know him, but I was convinced he was lying.

'But you think it's funny?'

'Not really – the stuff about Alex isn't going to help. Not that things with my lovely wife could be made much worse.' He paused. 'I used to enjoy getting drunk and reading about what I'd done in the papers. You could relive the fun of it all, you know? But then people started just making stuff up, taking me for a fool just because I was drunk.' His face darkened. 'That I don't like.'

Pushing swollen ankles – branches of veins straining up against their purplish brown surface – into the cushioned mouths of his trainers, he began to lace them silently, throwing the occasional, no sheepish, glance, my way. I felt a bubble of dislike for this wreck of a man rise in my throat and bur into nothing.

‘Look, I’m sorry about that girl. Got you into trouble, did I? Or are we a bit jealous?’ he added, with what he imagined was a rakish smile.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation, and the lack of correlation between the way George saw himself and the poignant reality – but also with relief. My charge was as spoilt and vainglorious as my research had suggested he might be – but there was a humour and self-awareness there that would make the job bearable. And I felt that he was getting used to me too: the testy manner of the night before had been replaced by a natural warmth, as if he were caught between tolerating my presence and enjoying it. Again it occurred to me that he was not a man who liked to be alone for long.

‘Have you had anything to eat?’ he grinned, relieved too that his misdemeanours seemed to have been forgotten. ‘Fancy having breakfast with George Best?’

‘George?’

‘Yes?’

‘I can’t believe you just referred to yourself in the third person.’

The restaurant was a high-ceilinged affair with a vicious air-conditioning system and walls the color of tinned mushrooms. I spotted a posse of journalists immediately, loading themselves up with fried breakfasts, pausing only to register George’s arrival, and guided him to the table furthest away, overlooking the pool.

‘What’s in the bag?’ I asked.

He had set it down on the chair beside him: a Sainsbury’s carrier bag I recognised from the night before.

‘My sweeties; my pills. There are quite a lot of them.’

He opened the plastic bag wide for me to see. There were packets of them, labels dense with directions and precautions, while others – blue, green, purple and white – were jumbled loosely amongst their sets of crumpled instructions.

I lowered my voice. ‘What do they all do?’

‘Well, the important ones, the Antabuse tablets, have been sewn into my stomach lining. I know weird, right? But those green ones there? They’re for my new liver, the pink ones are for the depression caused by the green ones – and so it goes on.’

‘But last night, George – how could you drink that much, with the Antabuse pellets in your stomach? I mean?’

He drew himself up tall with mock pride. ‘Well, you may not know this, but I have something of a history with alcohol.’

‘You do?’

‘Oh yes,’ he replied, deadpan. ‘So they don’t quite incapacitate me as they should, which really amazed the doctors, I can tell you. That said, they do make me throw up, oh, every ten minutes or so. Not great. You might’ve noticed me going to the toilet quite a bit last night.’

I had, but had thought nothing of it.

‘Yeah,’ his surface expression was jokey now; the one beneath it unreadable. ‘That, I’m afraid, is my punishment. Right,’ he opened the menu with a flourish, ‘what are we having?’

I asked for toast and jam; he ordered Coco Pops.

‘Coco Pops?’ I repeated when the waiter had left.

‘Love them,’ he said, helping me, then himself, to some tea. ‘My mum never had sweets in the house when I was a child; now you’re allowed them for breakfast. Coco Pops and Frosties,’ he added guilelessly, stirring half a sugar cube into his cup. ‘I can’t get enough of them.’

My notion that alcoholics were not interested in food was discarded, along with the other preconceptions – the preference for hard liquor, cranky mornings and dull conversation.

Being deprived of sweets and chocolate when he was growing up was only one reason for George’s sweet tooth. Alcohol, I found out later, caused his blood sugar levels to fluctuate dramatically, which meant that during the brief periods when George wasn’t drinking, he would Hoover up Snickers bars and Jelly Babies with the hungerless greed of a young boy, shedding their wrappers in his wake.

We ate in silence, thinking our separate thoughts as we gazed at the mothers and children setting up their paraphernalia near the shallow end of the pool.

‘How do you not get upset, George, when someone betrays you like that girl did?’

I doubted she had ‘betrayed’ him (George was a lot of things, but not naïve), still, I was intrigued to know how much journalists had the power, if at all, to permeate his world.

Chewing on a piece of my toast, he pondered.

‘I guess it still upsets me,’ he said finally. ‘People think that you don’t feel things when you become well-known. Of course you do, but it doesn’t linger, and it doesn’t . . .’ He stirred half a spoonful of sugar into his fresh tea. ‘I suppose it doesn’t matter like it used to. When I started out, you lot decided I was God. I remember first seeing the word “godlike” written in a paper about me. I didn’t know how to handle it at all – how could I?’ He rubbed hard with his knuckles at the stubble that was a day or two away from becoming a beard, lowering his eyes so that I could make out the leafy blue stencils on his lids. ‘But when the press decided to turn against me, that – the quickness of the change, I mean – that I did have trouble with.’

There was no real equivalent to the fickle nature of the media in life, he explained, and I was surprised by the meditative nature of his tone. Even in personal relationships, he pointed out with reason, you never saw the same about turn, from worship to the desire to smash that person up.

‘Celebrities,’ he perfected a mock bow at the table, ‘like myself, will tell you they always hated the press. That’s just not true. When they’re nice about you, when all you read is compliments, people comparing you to a Beatle, to a film star you grew up idolising . . .’ he looked up at the ceiling and let him wallow, for a minute, in the memories. ‘That feels so good that you start to depend on it, you know? Start to forget the other things you have going for you. I was just a boy when I left Belfast to join Manchester United, and praise from you lot,’ he gestured smilingly at me with his chin, ‘pretty quickly took the place of my own parents’ approval.’ He shook his head. ‘That front page became a barometer of how well I was doing – and not just on the pitch. Then what happens is that you start to perform for them, provoke them, you know, like a kid.’

He began to laugh: an Irish laugh which seemed to find the humour even in sad things, and I wondered why he was talking in the past tense, as if he weren’t still performing and provoking ‘us lot’ now.

‘It got worse and worse, the stuff they would say about me. Once,’ his eyes widened, ‘years ago, a newspaper piece appeared saying that I’d had underage sex with a girl.’

It was strange, sitting across the breakfast table from a man and having no idea whether something that would damn him so completely was true or not. Like everyone, I had caught friends and acquaintances telling me white lies over the years, observed with interest the twitching foot beneath the table and inability to keep eye contact, reassured by the notion that if you look closely enough it

possible to guess whether a person is telling the truth. Looking at George now told me nothing. Was he capable of having underage sex with a girl? From the fragments of character I had assembled in the past twenty-four hours, anything was possible.

‘She was a child,’ he was looking beyond me, beyond the journalists sticking it out at their table their breakfasts long ago finished. ‘The whole thing was made up, of course, so I sued the paper for a hundred grand and they settled out of court. Now,’ he flicked back an imaginary quiff in a gesture of insouciance, ‘there’s not much left that either hurts or surprises me any more, which is a blessing, I suppose.’

After breakfast George made no objection to me joining him by the pool, making salacious jokes about the bikini he hoped I’d be wearing and the gossip we might fuel, but it was clear that something had tainted his mood. Was he annoyed with himself for having been honest with me – or was the candour part of his shtick? It was hard to tell.

We’d settled on neighbouring sunloungers at a discreet corner of the pool. I’d wanted to revive our earlier banter, but he’d promptly pulled a thriller from his bag.

‘I didn’t have you down as a bookworm,’ I said without thinking.

‘Why?’ he asked, using his hand as a sun visor. ‘Because I’m famous?’

I thought about it, lining up my preconceptions about celebrities. My assumption was that they were mostly damaged philanderers who, because of an all-consuming narcissism, were incapable of non-self-serving interests. The characters you read about in newspapers and magazines tended to confirm this, while those challenging this conviction weren’t, by definition, widely written about.

‘Yeah – maybe.’ I observed him for signs of offence and found none. ‘You want to know what a lot of people think? That famous people just sit around being famous.’

‘And some of them do,’ he nodded, retrieving a pair of Raybans from his back pocket. ‘It’s a full-time job, isn’t it? But I wonder . . . Do you really think that because I’m a footballer, I’m thick?’

I noted the present tense.

‘First of all, I never said *thick* – that was your word, and not what I meant at all. And second of all, I know nothing about football, as you’ve probably guessed, so the lot of you could be Einsteins . . . Are you?’

He fell silent, and I couldn’t read the expression behind his glasses.

‘I think it’s fair to say that sportsmen aren’t always the sharpest knives in the drawer,’ he said eventually. ‘People liked to say that it was me who would make those jokes about Gazza . . .’

‘Which jokes?’

‘You know: me telling him that his IQ was less than the number on his shirt, and then him asking “What’s an IQ?” That sort of thing.’

I laughed. Having initially drawn parallels between George and Gascoigne – whose descent into alcoholism and depression was charted weekly in the news – I was intrigued to know what the relationship was.

‘Are you two friends?’

‘I’ve always had a lot of respect for him.’ His tone had changed: this wasn’t something he wanted to discuss. ‘But people like to describe us in the same sentence, when in fact we’re two different people who both happen to play football and have problems.’

I wanted to probe more deeply, but George was back to the point he was making.

‘So look: I’ve met some very clever players (and some damned stupid journalists, incidentally), but I guess it’s true that some of the lads really do have their brains in their feet, hands or wherever. The

again, what use is being clever to them, really?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I would use books to escape on long coach journeys or fill in the time at hotels, but do you think anyone’s really going to care what I think? I can have a conversation about anything you like but people only ever want to talk to me about football.’

I wondered, fleetingly, whether that thwarted intelligence had anything to do with his alcoholism, whether he felt guilty about the one natural gift – obscured by his looks and talents on the pitch – that he had never made full use of.

‘I suppose I didn’t think you’d be someone who finds it easy to relax either.’

Putting his book down he looked across at me with an amused expression.

‘All these ideas you have about me – where do they come from? I’d got the distinct impression and correct me if I’m wrong here – that you haven’t exactly followed my career trajectory . . .’

‘Maybe not, but I’ve done my research.’

‘Your research?’ His laughter put me at ease, gave me the reassuring sense that we were building something, talking like this. ‘My problem is that relaxing means one thing to me, but I do like reading. I wasn’t great at school, but I always got good marks in English and Mensa tell me I’ve got an IQ of 158.’ I smiled at the detail. ‘You, on the other hand, don’t find it easy to relax, do you?’

‘What do you base that on?’

‘No book – not even a girly magazine – no suntan cream, and a full set of clothing.’

He gestured at the T-shirt and jeans shorts I was still wearing, and I looked down at the denim sticking to my thighs, and wondered what was making me too self-conscious to take them off.

‘Is it me, or is it your colleagues,’ he gestured at a group of young men settling directly opposite me on the other side of the pool, ‘that’s making you so shy?’

For an old drunk, he noticed things.

‘Honestly? I’m not sure. I’m here to work, you know, so . . .’

‘Bet you were a regular little head girl at school. Or were you busy chasing boys?’

I swatted a fly off my foot.

‘Neither really . . .’

‘So why are you lying there, fully clothed, in the baking sun? Get into your swimsuit and enjoy the weather.’

‘I was going to but now you’ve built it up too much,’ I smirked. ‘Anyway, I’m going to go and get us some iced water in a minute,’ I lied.

‘Bollocks,’ he said, closing his eyes. ‘You’re worried about what the other journos will think. Or you think I might pounce when I see the wonders you’re hiding under that lot. Then again, there’s always the third possibility: that you’re covered in thick, black hair. Which one is it?’

Resigned, I pulled off my T-shirt and shorts, as he took it all in through one lizard-like eye. He was right about the other journalists; increasingly hard to recognise in their semi-nudity, I was sure they were everywhere. Meanwhile, with the tape in my Dictaphone still blank, I had nothing to tell the office.

‘You can do my back if you like,’ came George’s stifled murmur from his prone position on the lounge.

‘Can I? Thanks, George.’

I heard him smile.

‘Well if you’re going to babysit you may as well make yourself useful.’

The skin was still taut across his shoulders, pulled tightly across the narrow, muscled width of his

frame, but lower down, towards his back, where the flesh was more feminine, it had begun to slacken and jaundice in the manner of a man some two decades older. Having feared I might find the a repugnant after last night's lunge – this morning, he appeared to be a different person – I was relieved to feel just a slight awkwardness, a consciousness that the movements should be brisk and businesslike.

‘Not too high a factor, is it? I don't usually wear cream and I want a good tan – this is the start of the fight-back,’ he whispered, his voice slack with sleep. ‘I'm telling you . . .’

I wiped my hands on a towel and lay back. Now might be a good time to call the office, plan my next move.

Just under an hour later, I awoke to find George on his feet, sinews clenched.

‘What the . . . ? Look at that!’ I followed his trembling finger in the direction of a faceless woman on the other side of the pool, hidden behind her copy of the *Daily Mirror*. George was on the cover, mouth open in a battle cry, presumably hurling abuse at the photographer. ‘Best Loses It’ read the headline.

‘Oh, yes.’

I hadn't shown him that one, it being more of a picture story than anything else.

‘I've had enough of this – do I look like I'm losing it to you? Do I?’

‘We've known each other for less than twenty-four hours, George,’ I joked, conscious now that my humour could diffuse his rages, and wondering whether I might be able to turn this outburst to my advantage. ‘And right now, you do look like you're losing it. Sit down.’

He did.

‘Look,’ I baited, lowering my voice. ‘You were right about people wanting to tear you down.’

‘They want to, but they won't,’ he muttered, settling back down with a shaking jaw. ‘What am I? A national sport or something? And as for that girl who set me up for the papers . . .’

I looked around. Most of the tourists had disappeared for lunch, but the journalists were still there. Aside from the shrieks of delight and dismay from toddlers in the shallows, the pool area had descended into a sun-induced torpor; that Irish accent would carry.

‘I don't like to call that Paula woman what she really is,’ he went on, adopting the moralistic tone I had used to describe the female journalist who had come to his hotel room, ‘because I have always been one to respect women, and I've dealt with a fair few of them in my time who were a lot brassier than she was, I can tell you.’ He turned a hard face towards me. ‘But she wasn't a lady.’

Not much respect there, then.

‘These women nowadays,’ he leaned forward, impassioned, ‘they're something else.’

‘All of them, George?’ I couldn't help myself. ‘Are women really worse behaved around celebrities than they were forty years ago, in the swinging sixties and seventies?’

‘Miles worse. You should see these girls: they come and talk to me or knock on my hotel room door and ask if they can come in, only it's not like it was before because they always end up squealing. The cow in my local was hired by the press to set me up, I know she was, and she'll get her comeuppance.’

There he was, through some warped sense of gentlemanly courtesy, holding back on the word ‘bitch’ again, yet his sentences were packed with equally misogynistic references. I had thought, only a few hours earlier, that there was something touching, untainted, about his adoration of women, but perhaps that too had soured.

‘There are people I know, in London,’ he was saying, ‘who could sort that girl out. They've done it before when I've been double-crossed.’

Both curious and embarrassed by these sub-Mafioso threats, I turned towards him. ‘What are you

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