

## THE DINNER PARTY

There isn't really a reason for the dinner party. Sean got promoted recently but that was three weeks ago; Sasha won a big campaign for Hermes but that was a month ago. Leanne had been in touch to mention that she was away soon with work and it seemed like a good idea to Francesca to arrange a dinner for them all. They all happened to be either travelling to or from the south of France at the same time, so Sean had suggested they use their house in the country, and it's late summer, so the plan is to have the dinner outside, in the large garden which is beautifully tended, and which has extensive views of some relatively anonymous though picturesque looking hills. The skies are clear in the south of France— the night sky is so clear and they're so far from the city that later purples and blues become visible and to some degree you can discern what appear to be galaxies. Everything seemed to make sense.

Francesca is re-arranging the flowers on the table; she had left the careful presentation entirely down to the housekeeper who is really pretty good at flower arranging. Francesca touches the left side and they sort of fall a little out of place. She re-arranges the left side and the right side falls out of place. She nervously begins to fiddle with the right hand side and carefully tries not to affect the left hand side. The left hand side falls apart and Francesca sighs and accidentally catches her housekeeper's attention. The housekeeper is washing up some cutlery and is gazing out the window absently. She sees the ruined flower arrangement and puts down the cutlery and heads off outside to try to fix it.

Francesca sighs again and moves off to check her make-up indoors, and picks up a glass of white wine from the table. Sean comes down the stairs wearing a light coloured linen suit and a pale blue shirt and Francesca, in a flowing expensive looking dark blue sort of summer dress watches him as moves over towards her. Sean puts his arm around her.

'...you're ok honey?'

Francesca sort of freezes a little as Sean's arm lightly rests on her back but taking a sip of wine she relaxes and swallows hard and tells herself to keep it together. Sean is looking good, she admits to herself. She's also looking good - her makeup is immaculate with heavy eyeliner perfectly applied, and her immensely low-carb low fat water replacement diet means she's leaner than ever.

'I can't wait to see Ralph and Sasha, it's been sooooo long hasn't it; at least two months. Though I did see Sasha in Milan a while ago, before she got the new campaign,'

'It's been a while yeah – I'm looking forward to seeing Alfie and Leanne too – we haven't seen them for six months or more. I'm not exactly sure what to make of Alfie's 'finding God' but if it's helping him be a bit more stable and a bit less... not *violent*, but angry, then that's a good thing to me. Bless your sister Leanne, she's a saint.'

The housekeeper is back in the kitchen and is helping the chef who's been hired just for the evening. The preparation for the three course meal, of pumpkin soup with white sesame oil and a single slice of organic handmade sour-dough bread, followed by locally sourced fillet steak with butternut squash and carrots, followed by a chocolate soufflé, all has gone to plan and it's all smelling pretty amazing and the chef is quietly pleased. The chef brought some of his own personal goat's cheese with him, and he's planning on serving it later with some hand-roasted nuts. Each course has been carefully paired with various vintage wines, all

French – white (a '46), then red (a '54), then white (a '76) again. There's champagne on ice for when the guests arrive; everything is ready and he gets on very well with the housekeeper.

There's the distant sound of a sports car and a crunch of gravel as the car slows and stops outside the house, which is at the end of a half kilometre of thin road lined with thin trees. Francesca moves to the front door, which is situated in the main atrium, a large tasteful understated faux-rustic space minimally decorated, and opens the door with aplomb.

'Sasha, you look INCREDIBLE!'

And Sasha smiles and returns the compliment and it's neither sincere nor insincere and the two women hug lightly. Ralph steps in through the door behind Sasha and hands Francesca a bottle of expensive wine before complimenting her on her outfit and how slim she is, kissing her on her cheek. Sean appears in view from around the corner and the two men greet each other with a variety of generic masculine phrases.

All four people head to the back garden where the sun is beginning a slow descent to the horizon; it's still warm and it's still light approaching twilight; the hills further in the distance have an amazing looking blue haze in front of them. The housekeeper comes out to light the candles which are dotted around the garden. The small swimming pool is clean and the water matches the colour of Sean's notably 'on trend' asymmetrical shirt.

Sasha is tall and willowy and sashays her way around the table to admire the view. Francesca stands alongside her and hands her a glass of champagne which the housekeeper has poured for each of them.

'Working for Hermes must be nice then? You did the main shoot with David, right?'

'Yes, it was just freaking amay-zing. He's such an *artist*' drawls Sasha. Sasha lights up a cigarette – she doesn't really enjoy smoking but it really helps to contain her appetite and although the cigarettes are slowly killing her, they're zero calories, which is the most important thing.

Sean, who's within hearing range, slightly winces at the word 'freaking' because it's just not very cool, Francesca doesn't register it nor mind. Francesca wouldn't mind that kind of thing normally in any case, but tonight she's taken a couple of high strength dihydrocodeine painkillers that she picked up in the local pharmacy and they've done a decent job of softening her tension. She makes a mental note to mention this to her therapist back in London. And suddenly she's dreaming of her therapist, the one man she feels really *gets her*, and she casts her mind back to a recent afternoon spent in bed with him, both lightly drunk and the sun streaming in to the hotel room, and then she snaps back to reality as her husband Sean says,

'That sounds like another car – must be Alfie and Leanne. I wonder if they brought their son, Channing with them? They were undecided yesterday,' and he heads off to the front door, motioning to the others to stay where they are.

Alfie and Leanne haven't been to the house before, and in fact Sean doesn't really know Alfie that well. The main detail which has been shared by Francesca is that he's been married twice before, and that he's ten years older than Leanne and that he recently 'found God', or at least an approximation of Him, and this has helped significantly in calming him down.

The first and only time that Sean met Alfie he had asked him about his previous marriages;

'My first wife was an actress – mainly soap operas and low budget features - and well, she killed herself. It took me a long time to get over that and I ended up sort of addicted to coke. I remarried, and my second wife, she was a model, and an heiress to a fortune from the family coat-hanger business, of all things. And then, she killed herself too. When the police found me, two weeks after her death, I was dressed in women's clothes in a burnt out car on a deserted industrial estate. It took me a long time to get over that too. And then I met Leanne and she's not an actress or a model, she's a fashion editor and I find myself really hoping she doesn't kill herself – I mean, if nothing else, that would *not* reflect well on me, would it,'

Sean had made a point of not raising his eyebrows and sort of nodded thoughtfully; it didn't seem like a joke, and there wasn't really much he felt he could say so he said nothing, and they turned the conversation to Francesca and how different Francesca and Leanne were even though they were sisters.

Leanne is pretty just like her sister but has been prone to weight gain her entire life and since giving birth she has retained what she euphemistically and optimistically calls 'baby-weight'. Tonight she's wearing a sort of V-necked jumper and a pencil skirt. The jumper would look great on someone slim, but it really only serves to highlight her sort of round 'apple' shape. Leanne's therapist has been trying to convince her it's all in her head and a couple of mums in the mums group have kindly suggested the same, and she reassures herself that she has more to worry about now, with Channing, even though she has a nanny to cover off the more mundane aspects of motherhood for her.

'Ah, hello there!' beams Sean, and they greet each other and Alfie talks about how amazing the house is, and how peaceful and remote the location is, and how nice it is to be there and Sean later swears he heard Alfie say 'Peace Be With You' when he shook his hand but at the time it went unnoticed.

'Don't you look great!' lies Sean to Leanne, and she returns the compliment, and they briefly hug lightly.

Sean has never really felt one way or another about Leanne, though he had been mildly impressed by her a few years ago while round at her flat, picking her up for an evening with her sister in a restaurant, he had been absently flicking through a pile of her post when he found a scrap of paper tucked underneath some envelopes with the words '*reasons I hate myself and everyone else*' followed by a list of names, including his own. There were no comments next to any names, though a small star next to Sasha's name. Sean had never found out more and had quickly replaced the envelopes and had never mentioned it, but for some reason this deranged note resonated and he found himself giving her a good degree of latitude and would from time to time defend her when her sister Francesca would demean, belittle or criticise her in private.

Sean ushers the couple toward the patio outside, and they collect a glass of champagne and Sean says 'So, no Channing then?' and Leanne grimaces and says 'There was an *incident* at his playschool involving Channing and two other children, it was all very unpleasant so Channing is with his nanny for now, while he and the child psychiatrist figure out more about his true motivations towards the two other children... and while they re-assess his medication. I mean, the medication is very mild and we also use a homeopathic treatment, but they're reviewing that, together, which I think is great. The doctor has a first rate reputation. I must say, we go through nannies at a rate of knots though, Channing is often moody and theatrical, although it's the violent behaviour which causes the most unpleasantness; I mean, he's not even *four years old* until his birthday in October....'

Alfie cuts in and continues '...we're hoping his recent Christening will help to centre him and make him more mindful towards the other children. Of course, Leanne's therapist is helping Leanne to develop the parenting skills necessary to form a well-balanced and socially adjusted child, and Leanne's therapist is very pleased with the results so far, isn't she, Le?'

And Leanne looks happy for a moment and a sort of slightly mangled proud smile flickers across her heavily made up face.

The others get up to greet the newly arrived couple and Sasha and Francesca both lie to Leanne, telling her she looks just great, though neither of them can quite muster the audacity to suggest she's lost weight, as it's evident she hasn't. Leanne mentions the Hermes campaign and says she saw Sasha in a rival magazine giving an interview where she had described her favourite possession in the world as being her 'sense of wonder at the world and her sense of one-ness with all people' before going on to describe her collection of Cavalli scarves and the several hundred pairs of shoes she owns, and Leanne laughs, asking did Hermes mind not being mentioned and Sasha says she loves Hermes scarves just as much and no-one mentions the vapidness of the comments standing in stark contrast to her comment in the interview proclaiming the importance of retaining a simple sense of wonder at the world.

Leanne re-iterates the story about Channing adding in a detail about how the two girl's mothers had threatened to press charges but that the principal at the international school they attend had suggested that it

go on file but requested that the police should be left out of it, describing it as unfortunate, but that they should bear in mind the boy was still only 3 years old.

'The christening will definitely help,' says Alfie apropos of nothing at all and Sean rolls his eyes very slightly and at the time no-one thinks of what the chances of finding himself a third suicidal wife are but later all of them reflect on this.

Sean comments that Sasha looked amazing in the photos, he saw them too.

'They didn't need to photoshop them at all, I'm guessing!'

'I think they made my nipples darker,' says Sasha.

Sean's eyes dart over Sasha's body – she's wearing a sort of one piece trouser suit with a big slashed V down the front, and several impulses flash through Sean's mind.

Ralph notices this and remembers a recent conversation with Sasha, based on some internet magazine article he'd read which recommended that couples need to ensure they're 'sexually connected' with one another in order to have a better chance of being successful. Some months ago, Ralph had found a small vibrator which Sasha had half hidden and had been pretty horrified and secretly sort of turned on, and had mentioned it to Sasha and she'd said she only used it while she was away from him, on photo shoots and had done her best to reassure him, not realising the magnitude of Ralph's insecurities.

Later that week, Ralph had asked her about her wildest fantasies, in a bid to 'sexually connect'. Sasha had paused for a second and said 'It's complicated...'. Longer pause. '...It's probably best if you don't ask' and every muscle in Ralph's body had tensed and he felt physically ill and terrified and secretly even more turned on and he hadn't wanted to press the matter further and Sasha hadn't returned the question and with a genuine unassuming nonchalance caused mainly by her general self-centredness she'd continued to prepare dinner. Sean smirks and looks darkly at Sasha and pulls his shoulders back imperceptibly and his shirt rides up slightly revealing a chiselled lower stomach and Sasha subliminally notices this, and in response she pushes her chest out very slightly and pouts a little without thinking anything.

The dihydrocodeine begins to wash over Francesca and she softly drifts off to thoughts of the sunlit hotel room and her latest therapist and the scene had lasted almost an hour, and was so different from sex with Sean, and although her therapist wasn't as well toned, the mood overall was more serious and at the time she had felt as though it was possibly the end of the world or at least close to it.

'...I mean, my nipples are quite dark but not *that* dark...' says Sasha huskily, lighting another cigarette.

Alfie says, to no-one in particular, 'Since I stopped my medication my dreams are so vivid it's *in-sane*,

Leanne looks at the ground, unsure as to how this has come up. She knows recently he's been having bad dreams about being found wearing women's clothes, each night the same dream, predominantly since he stopped taking Prozac: she feels this is really not the time or place for any more information to be shared. Alfie notices how slim Sasha and Francesca are and how Leanne compares and to counter this feeling quietly mutters a quick two line prayer that he's picked up from a prayer book.

No one wants to hear about Alfie's lurid dreams and they are all happy when the housekeeper taps Francesca on the shoulder and tells her that it's time for the starter to be served. They move towards the circular table, set for six. The clean white table cloth, which was ironed by the housekeeper a few hours ago, is crisp, and the sun is mid-way to setting, causing a beautiful orange glow, warmly casting a soft light on everyone's face; the wineglasses sparkle and the highly polished cutlery against the backdrop of the green of the amazingly well tended garden give everything an expensive 'put together' sort of look. Sasha's cheekbones take on an extra dramatic edge, Francesca also looks great, and everyone looks more tan than they are. Alfie is aware that Leanne is looking sort of rounded by comparison and finishes his second glass of champagne.

The housekeeper and the chef serve the soup, Sasha whispers something to the housekeeper and her slice of bread is taken away. The housekeeper pours generous glasses of the white wine which is crisp and clean and chilled and dry and the chef praises and compliments the local pumpkins, and the guests begin to relax and things begin to get lightly muddled. For Francesca, the drink coupled with the medicine is a nice if slightly heady mix and she is lightly swaying without really realising it.

Halfway through the soup, Ralph launches into a story; something he heard from an old friend he bumped into recently in the business class lounge at an airport.

'So this friend of mine, well – actually a friend of my boss's – he's abroad, running late to catch a flight; grabs a taxi and so on. At the airport and he realises he's still got a gram of cocaine and a small bag of marijuana with him. The funny thing is, he realises this literally 25 seconds before he goes through airport security. You know how you do that – like you're there at the metal detectors and you're thinking to yourself 'I haven't got any knives have I?' Even though you would *never* have a knife, because why *would* you have a knife with you?'

and Sean politely sort of laughs before Ralph continues,

'...So he's stood before the metal detectors and he's flooded with adrenaline because it's far too late to do anything with the drugs apart from just keep them in his pocket and hope for the best. I mean, the security guards are basically watching him. So he's thinking, fucking face it, here we go, bracing himself for it. He's repeating in his mind a line from the film, Easy Rider.

A pause; Ralph mimics the line, drawling gently '*It's okay Billy, everything's okay*'.

'And he's trying to stay calm though his heart is fucking racing. So he does the usual bullshit, taking off his belt, laughing and joking with the guards as best as he can about how busy it is and how much longer do they have on their shifts left. He's standing in his socks and the guy nods to come through the detector gate. There's no beep – why would there be, it's not a *drugs* detector, right?'

And he pauses for light effect, and some of the women snigger a little.

'So the guard wants to give him a pat down, gestures for him to come and stand still in front of him. The guy has this kind of wand and uses it to check for knives or whatever, and then he checks his waistband and looks up at this guy and nods to say 'ok'. So the waves of relief wash – no *flood* - over him and he can't believe he's got away with it, and more to the point, he gets to keep the drugs that he'd forgotten about. He's putting on his belt, with no shoes on, and out of nowhere a loud fire alarm starts up and cuts through the quiet busy noise. And all of a sudden the security guys are herding everyone – including my Dad's friend - hanging around the machines towards a particular corner of the security area and the alarm is on for 30 seconds before it stops and the guards are a little annoyed and are muttering. So this guy heads back to the machine and someone says it was just a drill and the guards are like 'Ok folks, back through please'. And the guy says, nervously but as calm as possible, '...But we've already been through...?' and the guards are like 'You don't need to do your bags or anything but you're going to have to re-do the metal detector' and they're all genuinely sorry to hold everyone up but of course, they have no idea why anyone would be nervous or anxious about going through again. So my friend's heartrate goes through the fucking roof again and he comes back through the detector all clear but it's a different guard who's going to search him and this guard sort of squints and waves the wand – nothing - and digs his hands deep into the guys pockets, pulls up the two bags of drugs and my friend almost fucking faints. AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!'

And the guests laugh, even though it's not really funny, apart from the fact that it describes a situation that everyone can sort of relate to in some way, and everyone's pleased that it didn't happen to them.

'...And they drag him off to the police station in the airport and the guy gets a huge fine and a two day stay in the airport cells!'

And everyone laughs again,

'...And my friend goes, right at the end of the story he's telling me this – he goes 'and obviously they took the fucking drugs too... what a cunt!'

And everyone laughs some more, and the candles are adding to the soft light and the housekeeper has been keenly topping up everyone's glasses and the mood is low-key and everyone's relaxed and Sean leans over to Francesca and says quietly 'I love you' and Francesca looks at Sean, straight in the eyes and says fucking *nothing*.

The mix of medicine, champagne, wine and sun have led to Francesca feeling detached and a little unhinged as well as a little wild, having lost some of her inhibitions. Sean squeezes her hand, and repeats 'I love you'.

Francesca's eyes roll a little and she says quietly and slowly, 'I... don't... like you' and reaches for her glass, taking a big mouthful of wine.

Sean feels a pang of pain shoot across his body and it's like he's just been winded, closes his eyes and sees mountains falling into the sea, moody dark shapes against a moody dark background.

Francesca's hand feels limp, possibly dead in his, and he pulls away; she barely notices.

The housekeeper returns with a couple of bottles of red wine and begins to pour out into the second glasses on the table, in preparation for the entrees. The long stemmed glasses are just *begging* to be knocked over by someone a little drunk and a little clumsy and Alfie is busy noticing how much better looking Sasha is than anyone else at the dinner party and then a still vision from his recurring nightmare screams into his head and he almost physically recoils and this sense of motion becomes an actual real nudge, and the glass wobbles and before someone can grab it, it topples over and smashes and the red wine pisses all over the table cloth and some of it falls onto Francesca's dress and somewhat out of character Francesca stands up and screams 'You fucking idiot! Fuck, man!'

Alfie says 'Peace be with you, God bless those who are calm in the face of panic' and Leanne rolls her eyes in the half dark and Sean's fist clenches a little in a small fit of some kind of misguided aggressive loyalty.

Francesca stands there gasping at the broken glass and the red wine slowly making its way snakelike over the tablecloth and she reaches out to pick up what's left of the glass, and some of the fractured glass falls as she's collecting it and it just nicks her a tiny bit and a little blood emerges to form a small drop and she yelps and the housekeeper is trying to mop up the remaining wine and press a napkin to the tiny cut, as well as to calm Francesca down and Francesca says 'You stupid prick, this is all your fault, you clumsy fuck!' and Alfie says 'Watch your language now, I mean it! For the Lord sayeth...' and Sean stands up and everything stops for a second and he yells 'I swear it man, you say 'God bless you' one more fucking time and I'll fucking swing for you I swear it man!'

As the words come out of his mouth he knows this is a massive overreaction and he immediately sits down crumpled and he says 'Hey man, I'm really sorry, I'm just.. you know, she's... you know ...cut and everything and the wine and you know...' and Alfie is ok with this because after all, he did break the glass and he's supposed to be religious now. And the mood settles back down and Sean heads to the toilet and that relieves some of the pressure on the atmosphere.

Alfie says sort of softly 'Everything ends badly,'

But the way it comes out, it has an overwhelmingly looming brooding sort of quality and Leanne isn't entirely sure what this relates to, and Sasha decides to just ignore it and asks some questions about Leanne's magazine work and Leanne gives some answers and later on no-one can remember either the questions or the answers.

The main course is served and the chef is particularly proud of his work, it looks great and the meat is just pretty much perfect: no real surprise, but still.

By this time, Sean has swaggered back from the toilets where he did a couple of lines of coke and spent a few minutes looking into the mirror admiring his reflection and repeating the lines 'but don't care but don't care but don't care' over and over. Before leaving he sneered at himself in the mirror and said 'don't be a cunt, you cunt' and laughed. And he tells himself to sober up. Sean is feeling pretty 'big' by the time he gets back to the table, and has undone an extra button to show off his chest muscles a little more.

Sean wanders over to Alfie and offers him his hand and says 'Sorry man' and Alfie's cool and while he was away the conversation turned to the environment and Sasha began describing the work she's doing for a charity, for an upcoming ad campaign to raise awareness of a particular type of cancer that's affecting trees, and he sits down just as Sasha is saying,

'The environment is just so important... it's just critical that we all do what we can,'

And there's a pause and people are eating, and Alfie says,

'Aren't you on planes like every two days? And don't those fashion shoots use a ton of electricity and I mean, I'm only guessing but I presume they can be a little wasteful,' and to try to take the edge off this statement which sounds a little more challenging than he intended it to be, he meekly adds the French phrase, '...n'est pas?' to the end of it.

Leanne is quite pleased that someone's taken Sasha down a notch or two, and Sasha raises an eyebrow archly and her cheekbones look razor sharp and Alfie feels a tug of regret at ever having pointed out this gaping inconsistency in her thinking, but there's nothing can be done about it and the point just hangs in the air.

Sean seems oblivious to all of this and begins jabbering away about people who say one thing but do another and he's swearing a little because it's barbed and it's not really related to the environment at all: the attack is aimed at Francesca but he missed the context while he was away from the table and all of a sudden Sasha starts to cry a little and suddenly looks like a 13 year old and she's softly sobbing as Ralph puts his arm around her and Sean's apologising, again, and in hushed tones Francesca is asking Sean if he's been doing drugs and what did they agree about doing drugs, and in front of these people – their *guests* - at a dinner party? And Sasha is crying while Alfie is feeling incredibly guilty because it's sort of his fault really but Sasha's dress has kind of fallen open and one of her breasts is basically on display and Alfie's turned on but also ashamed of what he said at the same time which is a weird mix and he repeats his prayer mantra and looks up at the sky where the pinks and purples of the milky way can be made out and Sean hisses back at Francesca,

'I've already told you I'll be *whoever you fucking want me to be*'.

A beat, while the guests regroup and gather themselves and they all focus on the main course and someone comments on the quality of the steak and someone else comments on the soft tone of the wine and they're all treading on ice a little bit. A few minutes pass, and they're talking about the weather and about Channing and how he's doing at school, and then a complaint about how inconvenient it is when the nanny gets sick and how fucking thoughtless it is to get sick right in the middle of a school holiday, not even to wait until it's during term time, and Leanne says,

'For the shoot you did Sasha I thought the orange Givenchy shawl maybe didn't suit you as much as the blue Marc Jacobs cardigan' and Sasha crumples and is immediately in floods of tears again and Ralph looks up as if to say '*really?*' to Leanne and Leanne blushes but doesn't exactly feel that guilty because *so what?*

The housekeeper comes to take away the plates for the main course and Sasha says it's fine to take hers away even though she barely touched it, and someone jokes about how she shouldn't be allowed dessert because she didn't finish, and for a second the guests all hold their breath but after what seems like an eternity Sasha gets the joke and laughs a quiet sort of defeated bell-like laugh.

Sasha lights up another cigarette to help pull herself together. Sean and Ralph stand up and talk about business related things and Leanne checks her phone to check in with the nanny and to make sure Channing is ok. The mood regains a sense of balance and Sean engages Alfie in the conversation, making a point of

appearing impressed by Alfie's business knowledge. Sean winks at Ralph and disappears off to the toilet again and Francesca's face takes on a darker edge but she stays where she is.

The housekeeper begins pouring out more wine and that's the signal for dessert, so everyone sits back down and the chef arrives and as he's preparing the dish Sean turns back up and he's muttering to himself quietly and he looks more dishevelled than when he disappeared: the collar on his shirt seems to be somehow bigger, and another button has been undone, meaning the shirt is pretty much wide open, showing off his waxed tan chest. As the guests settle in to enjoy the dessert, Alfie says,

'Sometimes I'm walking under a tall building and I think to myself what would happen if some masonry was to fall on top of me and kill me.'

And Sean laughs as though this is the funniest thing he's ever heard. The other guests are not laughing – most of them think the comment isn't especially funny. Sean realises that he's the only one laughing and gradually manages to calm himself down.

Alfie says,

'And I think to myself, it's enough just to know the Lord will protect me,'

And Sean snorts and sighs and says 'Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck' and it takes on an animal kind of quality towards the end and he says it sort of quietly but loudly enough for everyone to hear, and then he stares at Alfie with a peculiar sort of look for a few seconds before flicking his eyes to Francesca, then to Sasha, then to his dessert.

Leanne promised herself she would not eat the dessert as she's more than a little self-conscious. She moves the dessert around on her plate for a minute or two and the decision making process is almost *visible* and eventually she starts to take small spoonfuls and her eyes sort of light up guiltily. Alfie notices but isn't in the mood for commenting about how outstanding the dessert is, and isn't even in the mood for making eye contact with his wife, so he drinks some more wine.

Sean says to Sasha, in front of everyone,

'You looked really fucking hot in that campaign for Lanvin a couple of years ago,'

Sasha has recovered her composure and although her eyes flick over to Francesca, she has always enjoyed this kind of attention. Ralph sort of nervously runs his hands through his hair and squints a little but if you're going to get married to a girl who wears trouser suits slashed to the waist and gets paid to have her photograph taken then you're going to need to be able to deal with this kind of thing. Sean says,

'What was the name of that guy you were seeing when you did that campaign? He had a fucking whiny voice, and he sort of simpered around you... didn't you live with him for a while?'

Immediately Ralph is tense. But the stranger thing is that Sasha seems to be engaging with Sean in this weird sort of flirting as though there was no one else there. Sasha says,

'He was incredibly rich, and he was amazing in bed, so...'

And she blushes slightly but is still relatively unaware that her husband is sat next to her.

'I'm also rich, but I'm just terrible in bed...' says Sean with a grin. Francesca has a sudden flashback to Sean, pumped up, having sex with her for 90 minutes, wild as hell but totally removed from the situation, and how sore she had felt after it, and how Sean was the kind of person who was really cold after sex, just disappearing off on his own, preferring to smoke a joint and make coffee, apologising later and promising next time it would be different.



Sasha says 'Maybe you just need someone to teach you...' and later, Ralph swears she actually purred like a cat.

Ralph coughs fairly loudly and cuts into the conversation 'Well I'm sure Francesca can deal with it!'

Sasha's face falls a little as she realises the spotlight has just been dimmed.

Sean says 'What was that guy's name anyway?' but this is roundly ignored by everyone and Alfie says

'Old relationships always feel like just that: old,'

Leanne says 'What do you mean?'

Alfie says 'It's like you're a different person, the old you, and you did a bunch of old things and the old you... wasn't like the new you, the you now, the new you now... right?' and he runs out of steam and looks up at Leanne to smile and shrug. Francesca's been quietly drinking and took another heavy duty pain-relief pill after the main course and it's kicking in and a wave of numbness grows and breaks 'I think I preferred the old Leanne... she was fucking skinnier that's for sure!!'

And the guests snigger inwardly but no-one wants to make eye contact with anyone, except Francesca who is staring directly at Leanne who has dropped her spoon into the dessert bowl and looks dejected but she's not the kind of woman to just roll over and break down and she snarls,

'Fuck you,'

And Francesca snorts ironically and picks up her glass and laughs a little.

'It's Channing I feel sorry for,' she drawls.

And everyone wants to sink deeper into their chairs and Leanne gulps loudly but holds it together and Ralph says,

'Did someone say there was a special cheese course? I've been looking forward to it all night,'

The housekeeper has been hanging around the table for a few minutes and Ralph catches her eye as he says this and she nods and says she'll be back in a second, and she'd like everyone to have a final small drink of a locally made fortified wine.

Sean says 'fucking... *fortified wine*' for no reason other than to fill the silence.

Ralph says 'Recently Sasha and I have been playing Scrabble online, you know – when she's away on a shoot, and I forgot how much I like it! When I was at Cambridge we would play from time to time and get stoned on Moroccan hashish AHAAHHAHA!'

And Sean says aggressively,

'Who won? I mean, who won last time you played?'

And Sasha proudly exclaims, truthfully,

'Contrary to what you would expect from a model, it's was me, and it's usually me!'

And Sean laughs and looks up and and says with malice,

'He's letting you win – you do realise that don't you?'

And he looks up around the group for approval. And Sasha looks hurt and Ralph isn't smiling anymore but says nothing.

Alfie says,

'Oh Sean, you were asking before, and you know, business is good, it's looking like it'll be a terrific year – but I did want to ask you about who handles your tax and accounting?'

Sean rolls his eyes and fake-yawns and says,

'Could you be more fucking boring? It's no wonder your first two wives...'

And the comment dissolves into silence and Alfie grips Leanne's hand tightly and Sean has a wild look in his eyes.

Alfie says sadly 'Ohhhh... God bless you Sean'

And the guests swear later there was an actual snapping sound but no-one's really clear whether this is really the case and Sean stands up and kind of weirdly karate chops Alfie's neck and Alfie's eyes close and he crumples and passes out.

Francesca is on her feet dashing over to check on Alfie and screams and then shouts

'What have you done, you *IDIOT!!!*'

And Sean is pacing agitatedly and skulking around a little bit further away from the collapsed figure and Sasha gets some water in a jug from the pool which is near the table and splashes some lightly onto Alfie's face and this seems to help as Alfie starts to stir a little bit but Leanne is already indoors dialling for an ambulance with the housekeeper's help and Alfie seems very woozy; dizzy. Leanne returns to the table and Alfie says,

'Back when I was at university, it was a rowing club and an equestrian club and the French moved in... the tax structure was we all did the cha-cha-cha and I keep telling them I don't know why I'm wearing women's clothes or whose car it was.'

And Leanne laughs lightly and sweetly because she's just happy he seems ok, relatively speaking.

There's a chaise longue near to the table and they help Alfie over to it and Sean tries to come over and he's saying gruffly,

'Hey, I'm really sorry man...'

But Francesca pushes him away and says 'Not now, not now,'

And all of a sudden the night is very cold and a freezing wind comes out of nowhere and the guests are standing around the chaise longue and the housekeeper brings out a couple of blankets one for Alfie and another for Sasha and one for Leanne, and Francesca has put a jacket on and Sasha says it looks cute and they're all just waiting for the ambulance pretty much in still silence except for Alfie who is occasionally murmuring things about women's clothes and taxes and dance moves and is describing how things are spinning, and Leanne, who's holding his hand and soothing his arm and cooing nice words to keep him calm, and Sean who is still pacing agitatedly.

The chef stands at the window and looks out at the ruined mise-en-scene; the stained tablecloth, the tearstained dishevelled guests clad in blankets and sighs. A distant siren sound can be heard and there's a few flashes of red light through the gates to the garden which silhouette the group for a second and as the party disintegrates and Alfie is transferred to a stretcher people mutter goodbyes and 'thanks-for-having-us's, 'speak soon's and the chef re-wraps the goats cheese and puts it in the refrigerator.