

## **CHAPTER ONE**

Bald men have sex. Stevie was willing to bet her next three free weekends that bald women didn't.

She glared at the follicly-challenged Porsche driver on her left as he revved his engine, ready to carve her up the minute the lights changed. It was a common phallacy - she chose the word advisedly - that baldness in men was due to an excess of that virile male hormone, testosterone. But no-one went round claiming bald women were sexy little nymphets underneath their wigs, did they? Men and women spoke a different language. In Stevie's experience, men of a certain age and income who were fat, old, or ugly were invariably described as substantial, distinguished or rugged. Women who were fat, old or ugly were invariably described as fat, old or ugly.

The Porsche driver leered and blew her a kiss. Stevie upped her glare to full beam. Typical. How come she never got stuck in a traffic jam next to Tom Cruise? It was her own fault for ending up next to a Porsche. She was currently working on the theory that a man's fuckability was inversely proportional to the value of the car he was driving. Extensive research on her part suggested that the most favoured habitat of Homo Fanciable was a beaten-up, two-tone Volkswagen Beetle with its wing-mirrors missing. In these days of nineties austerity, they were hardly ever found anywhere near the wheel of a fully-insured, kosher-MOTed, M-reg sports car.

Stevie couldn't help feeling cheated. In 1987, the year she'd finally turned sixteen and been able to take advantage of all the gorgeous, rich young men cluttering up wine bars everywhere she'd looked, the entire country had been plunged into world-wide recession. Overnight the wine bars had been turned back into Co-Ops and the filofaxes repossessed. In 1995 the only men left propping up

the bars were maudlin drunks weeping into their Frascati over their negative equity and alimony payments.

The lights changed to green. The only vehicle able to move was the paperboy's BMX. Stevie glanced at her watch. If she'd known they were going to dismantle the A264 again she'd have stayed in bed an extra twenty minutes and avoided the rush hour. She might even have had time to put her make-up on after she'd put her contact lenses in, rather than before. She flipped the sun visor down to check herself in the mirror. She couldn't in all honour give herself more than four out of ten this morning, not after last night. 'House-white' was not a word she wanted to hear ever again. At least she hadn't outlined her eyes with scarlet lip-pencil by mistake, like she'd done last Friday. She'd looked like a rabbit with myxomatosis all day, and no-one had said a word. It was only when she'd collected Jack from nursery school that afternoon and seen his painfully accurate painting of his nanny that she'd realised what she'd done. No wonder his teacher had looked at her so strangely.

She jumped as a car beeped impatiently behind her. Before she had a chance to coax Damien into first gear, the Porsche driver on her left had pulled sharply across her lane of traffic and shot past her, gesturing rudely in her direction. Stevie stuck her tongue out at him. May your clutch forever disengage. She remembered his leer and swiftly amended that to crutch.

Her thoughts were still occupied with boiling wax and sharpened knives when she swung Damien into Bronwyn and Robin's gravel drive ten minutes later. She braked suddenly as she came bumper to bumper with the local florist's van. Bronwyn and Robin must have made it up, then. She wondered how much it had cost him this time.

The florist gestured for Stevie to move backwards, unaware of the information which Stevie and four nervous driving examiners shared regarding her ability to perform certain mandatory reversing manoeuvres. Stevie studiously examined her bitten nails. The two vehicles faced each other for

