

# Making Hay

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Suzanna stood back from her handiwork and eyed it objectively. The frustrating thing was that she knew perfectly well half of the food she'd prepared wouldn't be touched. The women it was destined for were all bound to be on a diet: Parmesan shortbread with roasted cherry tomatoes and feta cheese would be mentally converted into points and instantly dismissed as having far too high a fat content. Perhaps she should stick a little flag into each canapé indicating its calorie count? She popped one into her own mouth defiantly and gave it her approval: the base was crisp and buttery, the tomato roasted in a low oven overnight to a rich depth, the tiny sprig of rosemary offsetting the combination perfectly. Satisfied that the price she was charging was worth it, she was just about to snap the lid on the last container ready to transfer them to her car when the doorbell rang.

Damn. Her schedule was tight enough, and she had to have a shower yet. Her hair was lank and her skin oily from the fug she'd created in her tiny kitchen. She flew into the hallway, where baskets of snowy-white cloths and napkins were waiting, and opened the door.

'Katie?' Suzanna frowned in puzzlement. 'Why aren't you at work?'

Her oldest friend stood on the doorstep, looking stricken. It was eleven o'clock; normally by now Katie would have done what was for most people a full day's work. Suzanna had never really got to the bottom of what exactly it was she did - something to do with environmental law - but it was certainly more high-flying than running an upmarket catering company, and made her a great deal more money. Suzanna secretly marvelled at the fact she was still allowed to be Katie's friend. But she knew she always would be. They'd been through so much together. And it was obvious Katie had some kind of a crisis now. She'd double-parked her BMW outside, recklessly abandoning it to the whims of the Twickenham traffic wardens.

'Suzanna.' Katie, who never cried, threw her long, rangy arms round Suzanna's neck and sobbed. 'I had to tell you first.'

All sorts of things ran through Suzanna's head. Breast cancer? The sack? Dead parent?

'What is it?'

Katie looked at her. Tears had soaked the understated pearl grey silk of her Nicole Fahri blouse. She'd have to go and change if she was going into work. Though she was bound to have a rail of suitable clothes at the office.

Katie managed the revelation in a whisper.

'I'm pregnant.'

For a moment, Suzanna felt emotionally winded, and it was all she could do not to step back with the shock. She'd prepared herself hundreds of times for this eventuality, but it was one of those things you could never really be ready for. Despite her inner turmoil, she managed a bright smile.

'That's fantastic. I'm so proud of you.'

She gave her friend a huge hug, hanging on as if to give her reassurance, but really in order to compose herself, to shut her eyes tight for a moment to squeeze back the tears. Katie was crying even more than ever, but laughing at the same time.

'I thought you'd be upset. I was so worried . . .'

'Don't be silly. You're my best friend. I'm thrilled,' Suzanna lied.

Katie wiped her face.

'Will you be godmum?' she croaked.

'I'd be livid if you didn't ask. Of course I will.'

'Thank God. I haven't slept all night. As soon I found out, I wanted to tell you. And I couldn't just phone . . .'

Suzanna squeezed her friend's hand reassuringly, then looked at her watch.

'I'm going to have to kick you out, I'm afraid. I'm doing a lunch for Sybilla.'

Katie wrinkled her nose.

'Do us all a favour. Stick arsenic in her Kir Royale.'

Suzanna laughed. 'I'm not killing her off till I get paid. You know how tight she is despite her squillions.'

Suzanna, Katie and Sybilla had all met in Oxford, where they'd shared a grotty little terraced house in Jericho. Katie had been in her third year of law at the university, Sybilla was at the Oxford and County secretarial college and Suzanna was waitressing at Browns and cooking at lunchtimes in a smart-ish restaurant. They'd lived together for a year, fighting over clothes, men and whose food was whose in the fridge, before going their separate ways. Suzanna had bumped into Sybilla in Richmond High Street nearly ten years later, to find that she'd bagged herself a millionaire and a much-coveted house on Richmond Hill, where she lived with her two children, Hamish and Aurelia, a Filipino housekeeper and a Czech au pair. Katie and Suzanna had always kept in touch, but Katie refused to have anything too much to do with Sybilla nowadays, considering her vain, lazy, shallow and tight-fisted - which of course she was. Suzanna, however, maintained their friendship because Sybilla did a lot of entertaining but couldn't cook for toffee. She knew Sybilla only used her company, Decadent Dining, because she expected a hefty discount. Which she duly gave her, after hiking up the quote in the first place. They had an unspoken agreement that they would pretend not to know each other when Suzanna catered for her: it meant the boundaries didn't blur and kept their relationship businesslike. They both preferred it that way: The thought of socializing with Sybilla's friends filled Suzanna with horror and Sybilla didn't really like to be seen fraternizing with staff. Today was her birthday lunch, her thirtieth, she'd reminded Suzanna breathily, so

she wanted it to be special, though she didn't actually want anyone to know she was thirty so no candles.

When Katie had gone, Suzanna took a deep breath. She looked at her watch: eleven thirty-five. Absolutely no time to have a nervous breakdown. She sped up the stairs and hurled herself in and out of the shower, then opened the armoire on the landing where her freshly washed and ironed work clothes were neatly stacked. A lunch party dictated casual, so she chose a white T-shirt off one pile, black jeans off another and a monogrammed chef's apron off a third. She had crisp white blouses and black velvet skirts for more formal occasions. Her black suede loafers went with either option. The key was to look smart and discreet, but definitely not sexy - men inevitably made passes at the catering staff after they'd had a few, and the last thing they needed was a hint of leg or cleavage to encourage them.

She hung her head upside down and dried her hair quickly. Her long, straight, dark brown hair might be boring, but it was thick, shiny and obedient, and she twisted it deftly into a plait that would stop the ends dangling in the pesto. She sat at her dressing table for a moment, gazing in the mirror, wondering if what she felt showed in her reflection. She decided not: she'd become adept at disguising her feelings. The face that stared back at her was serene and impassive. A blank canvas. Her eyes were a sludgy greeny-brown, like the mossy flat stones at the bottom of a river. Deep chocolate brown freckles were scattered across the bridge of her nose, as if applied carefully by a child doing a drawing. The skin underneath was porcelain pale; her generous mouth punctuated by a single dimple in her right cheek when she smiled — though there was no evidence of that now. Suzanna didn't feel like smiling; she wanted to hurl herself on to the bed and cry her eyes out. But business was business and Sybilla was unquestionably one of her best clients. Swiftly, she applied a flick of charcoal grey eyeliner to her upper lids, a slick of matt pinky-beige lipstick to her mouth, then popped two drops of Bach's Rescue Remedy on to her tongue, praying it would get her through the next few hours.

Sybilla answered the door looking fresh as a daisy in baby-pink Chanel, which set off her baby-blond hair and her baby-blue eyes. Suzanna was ushered into the kitchen, thirty grand's worth of bespoke beech and stainless steel that she now knew her way round better than Sybilla, who seemed oblivious to its charms. They exchanged ritual kisses - the only indication that they were friends. Suzanna instinctively put up a hand to brush off the sugary lipstick mark she knew would be left on her cheek.

'Happy birthday.'

'Don't! God! Thirty! I don't look it, do I?'

'No,' said Suzanna truthfully. She looked thirty-four, which was what she was. Sybilla seemed to have forgotten that thirteen years ago, together with Katie, they'd celebrated her twenty-first in the little house they'd shared. They'd lined up twenty-one of Mr Kipling's French Fancies, each with a candle stuck in it, and drunk four litre-bottles of Lambrusco between them. Suzanna distinctly remembered holding back Sybilla's hair while she was sick, but she wasn't going to remind her. Instead, she hustled her out of the way, not wanting her inane babble to distract her while she plated up.

She laid out the food on huge white serving dishes and put them on the dining table, while the gaggle of stick insects that made up Sybilla's closest friends swigged champagne in the

drawing room. She'd devised a pretty, girly menu: her own modern-day version of coronation chicken, with lime and coriander and Greek yogurt, followed by a sinful concoction of white chocolate and raspberries which she hoped wouldn't go to waste. Hopefully after a few drinks the stick insects would all lose their willpower and dig in. There was nothing Suzanna loved more than seeing people enjoying her food. She wasn't called Decadent Dining for nothing.

Half an hour later, the stick insects had helped themselves then carried their plates - their tiny wrists barely supporting the weight - out into Sybilla's exquisite conservatory. Their jaws worked furiously, but no one really ate; they just talked. As ever, Sybilla managed to turn the conversation round to herself with a shock announcement.

'I'm preggers again.'

'Oh my God!' There was a collective gasp of sympathy.

'Bloody Piers just can't keep it in his trousers.' Sybilla lit a cigarette, with total disregard for both her foetus and the fact that some other guests were still pretending to eat.

'You should send him for the snip.'

'It's a bit late, isn't it? Talk about shutting the barn door.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Get rid, of course. I'm not going through that nightmare again. Aurelia was bad enough, but Hamish . . .' Sybilla shuddered at the memory. 'No, I've made up my mind. I'm booked in for next Friday. I can be in and out by lunch - it's quicker than having your highlights done.'

She smiled brilliantly, but the smile faded as she realized Suzanna was standing behind her, hands trembling as she gripped the sides of a porcelain plate bearing a selection of tiny petits fours.

Suddenly the plate fell to the floor, smashing and scattering tiny crumbs of meringue and pate sucre all over the Fired Earth tiles.

'Suzanna - I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were there.'

'Obviously. Otherwise you wouldn't have discussed infanticide in so casual a manner.'

'I'm sorry. I'd never have said anything if I'd realized.' Sybilla paused, before plunging recklessly on. Champagne made her more tactless and insensitive man ever. 'But actually - I would have thought you'd have got over it by now.'

'What?'

'It's been more than a year -'

'Fourteen months, three weeks and two days,' Suzanna informed her flatly. The rest of the room was silent, as wide eyes set in Botoxed foreheads watched the drama unfold.

'I mean, I know it was awful - ghastly - and you'll never really get over it. But -'

Sybilla paused, in order to find the right words. Suzanna fought the urge to shake her hard, until her bulging, baby-blue eyes popped out of her head.

'Life goes on, Suzanna.'

Suzanna gave her a long, level stare while she decided what to do. Slap her. Stab her. In the end she just walked out.

Sybilla turned back to her friends defensively.

'Someone had to tell her.'

They all nodded wisely in unison. None of them had a clue what was going on.

'She had a baby. About two years ago. It - he - died when he was six months old.' Sybilla couldn't actually bring herself to say the words out loud so she mouthed them exaggeratedly. 'Cot Death.'

Everyone recoiled in synchronized shock. Sybilla looked round at them defiantly.

'But I was right. Life does go on. Doesn't it?'

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