

# Unsafe Sex

*Ruth Armstrong*

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First Edition

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# *Prologue*



How does the brain predict the future, waking up a few heartbeats before the event and waiting, full of poised certainty, for the moment to arrive? Are some events so significant that they create a backwash, an agitation so strong that the ripples force their way outwards, overlapping the division between what was and what is about to be.

The boy woke to silence which he knew wouldn't last. Silence wasn't something he felt particularly comfortable with. Often he slept with the television on, so loud it would block out the other noises. And there were plenty of other noises on the estate; shouts and snatches of harsh laughter, the smash of bottles and the throttled choke of engines left revved and running, the occasional screech of tyres, dogs barking and babies crying, the bloke down the street with the persistent, phlegmy cough. All of these were annoying but sometimes comfortingly familiar. It wasn't these noises he worried about. It wasn't because of them that he left Open University programmes droning on through the night, or black and white horror films so boring he couldn't imagine why anyone bothered to make them.

He reached for the remote control, just as the sound raw and terrible, cut through his waking consciousness, causing him to jolt violently and upset the half-full can of coke by the bedside. He'd never heard anything like it before, it was something primitive, inhuman. Yet at the same time he knew instinctively what was causing it.

Through the banisters he could see into the sitting room, but not the whole thing, just the shadows. Watching the jerky, to-ing and fro-ing of the adults' outlines it reminded him of the play he'd seen once at primary school - some giant paper puppets worked by sticks, grappling together in a parody of fighting. Not very convincing. Some of the kids had boo-ed and the teacher had told them off. He couldn't remember if he'd joined in.

It was a moment before he spotted it, the curved, obscene shape between them. One of the figures was moving repetitively, an arm raised as it swung the object - again and again. While the other staggered and swayed. Nobody would believe this he thought, as he watched the red stuff splatter across the wall.

He didn't remember going outside but they found his spewing in the gutter. Figures moved around him, lights and sirens came and went. Somewhere in the midst of it a neighbour coaxed him to his feet, a freckled-faced, copper-headed woman his mother used to call the 'red cow'. Her hands were firm but gentle as she urged him indoors. Muttering babyish words of encouragement, she guided him to a chair

at her kitchen table, where she offered him hot sweet tea, a plate of chocolate digestive biscuits. He couldn't eat but the scalding liquid in his throat was real enough to be comforting. The woman wrapped a fleecy blanket with a puppy and a kitten on it, around him, but he still couldn't stop shaking.

He told her all about it then - everything he'd seen and heard and everything that had happened in the previous weeks. He knew he could trust this sturdy woman with her lined, ruddy face and thoughtful green eyes. She said very little but she rubbed his back while he spoke. When her own child called out from upstairs she left him for only a moment, returning with a puffy-eyed infant who watched him curiously, cradled securely against its mother's breast. He cried then, seeing the baby, because this was how all mothers should be with their kids. And the woman put her hand on his head and he reached out and held the baby's warm, sturdy little foot.

A man in a green and black stripy pullover arrived, grey bags beneath his eyes, announcing himself as the duty social worker. He asked the red-haired woman to step outside for a moment. The boy hoped she would ask him to hold the baby but she didn't; he would have done anything for her in that moment, this kind woman with her auburn hair streaked with grey, escaping from the plait she'd wound it into before bedtime. Instead he found himself alone with a young policewoman, who wanted to ask him a 'few questions'. He didn't like police, didn't trust them in any way. He told her something but he wasn't sure if any of it was true. For all he knew he could have made up the whole thing.

When the policewoman left the red-head woman and the baby and the social worker came back into the room. 'We're going now,' the social worker said to him. But he didn't want to go, and he didn't want to go with him. 'I want to stay here,' he told them, but nobody seemed to be listening.

As the social worker led the boy to the car he paused a moment to look back. The woman outlined against the doorway raised a hand in farewell, but he didn't respond. As he watched, the baby cradled in her arms turned its head, wide-eyed and unknowing and the woman buried her face in the child's soft downy hair.

By the time the boy had climbed into the car, the front door was closed.

# *Part One*



# *Chapter 1*

The curtain fell to the echo of indifferent applause and the audience, cooped up for too long and aware of the uncertain weather outside, rose to its feet as one urgent, exit-focused mass. Helen swept along in the tide of jostling, anxious bodies checked a growing urge to shove her way through. She would wait for her moment then take a short-cut along an alleyway, which would bring her to a place where she stood a good chance of finding a taxi. She had wasted too much precious time today and the last thing she wanted was to shiver in-line, waiting for the volume of dithering humanity to filter through the narrow entrance into the tube station.

Earlier the sky had teased with an occasional scattering of playful snowflakes but while she'd sat, cocooned in a world of crimson plush, rosy lights and gilt-winged cherubs, a winter night had descended to camouflage the landscape. It had been snowing and then freezing in turn, so that her feet no longer knew where to trust themselves. Turning into the alleyway, which had seemed such a promising escape route, now felt risky, but impatience drove her forwards.

Half way along the narrow pavement it happened. Her feet slid out from under her and she flailed desperately, looking for something to hang onto. The walls of the shuttered buildings offered no help as her fingers scrabbled for purchase on their inhospitable surfaces. She landed hard, the impact absorbed through the blood ricocheting inside her head. Dizzy and sick Helen sat, one leg folded beneath her on the icy pavement, resisting the urge to cry; she wasn't the kind of person who cried in these situations. Maybe she could call for help but the alleyway was deserted and the snow would muffle her chances of being heard in the adjoining streets.

So it was a shock when he approached her, a shadowy male figure, towering above her as she sprawled, too dazed to try and rise. Her heart was pounding against her ribs but she fought to steady it, it was foolish to panic.

‘Are you OK?’ he said, holding out his hand to help her up.

Helen hated stupid questions. ‘No I’m not,’ she snapped, then realised this was rude. ‘Sorry – I’m a bit shaken up.’ His voice has sounded pleasant, mature, a touch old-fashioned in its cadence, nothing to make her unduly alarmed. ‘Would you mind giving me a hand?’

‘No problem,’ he said, his hand cupping her elbow as he levered her gently to her feet and, and allowing her to lean on him as she gingerly tested her balance. ‘It’s cool.’

Registering his choice of expression she tensed, her fantasy of a respectable middle-aged man shattered. What was this young man after: her wallet, her mobile phone, her body?

She had definitely been living in the backwaters far too long if every man under 25 registered as a mugger or rapist in her imagination. There was nothing about the young man’s demeanour to suggest he was anything but a helpful passer-by.

Upright now Helen could see his face. Beneath the flickering shadows created by the neon signs across the road, she made out dark eyes, thick brown hair curling to his collar, a sensitive mouth and high forehead. This face had the look of someone with compassion. ‘I’ll be fine,’ she said, flashing him a polite smile. ‘Thanks for your help.’

‘Are you OK?’ he asked a second time. ‘You went down pretty hard.’

‘Nothing hurt but my pride.’ As she said it she realised that her handbag was still on the ground, most of its contents strewn across the pavement. Bending down to pick it up, something twinged in her thigh. The pain made her catch her breath.

‘I’ll do that.’ the young man squatted with amazing agility, deftly gathering her make-up, her money and her cheque book into the bag. There was no point feeling embarrassed as he carefully picked up two tampons and slipped them into their plastic container. I wonder if you have a sister, she thought watching the confident way he did this. Or maybe a live-in girlfriend

‘Can you walk?’ he asked after handing her the bag. ‘Do you want me to get you a cab? Or call a doctor or anything?’

Walking was possible; her legs moved quite well as long as she didn’t try to bend down. ‘You know what I really need is a large drink, brandy or whisky. Can I get you one for helping me?’

She watched him hesitate and felt foolish, of course he'd have better things to do with his time. Then he nodded: 'Yeah, OK. I don't have to be up that early. Do you know somewhere round here?'

Helen shook her head, she didn't come into the West End much these days. 'Not really. Any suggestions? My name's Helen by the way. Helen Williams.' Her full name, the name she used at home, was Faraday-Williams - a combination of her husband's surname and her own, but it sounded too pompous for current circumstances and she didn't want to scare this obliging young man away.

'I'm Dominic Storr,' he proffered his hand, suddenly formal. She took it, glove meeting glove. 'There's this place round the corner, stays open late. We could try that.'

The sky was opening up again, stray flakes escaping as heralds of what was to come, but it would be churlish to call the drink off now. Instead she accepted his offer of an arm - she was still a little unsteady on her feet - and let him lead her into Soho.

As they walked he explained that he'd been visiting a friend backstage, a guy he knew was one of the stage crew. He'd just popped in for a chat but his mate was busy, so he'd decided to leave by a side-entrance, witnessing her slip on the frozen pavement.

As he spoke they were cutting through the Chinese quarter. The snow was descending more steadily now, settling on rooftops and pavements, the half-hidden scarlet and gold of sculpted dragons, gilded banners and carved shop signs so exotic and strange in an English winter.

Behind steamed-up windows and rows of barbecuing ducks turning on spits, diners and drinkers peered into the night, savouring the pleasure of being indoors but knowing it was unwise to linger. Snow always brought London to a standstill and Helen knew she should be heading for home, but in the biting chill of the night she felt her burden of anger beginning to melt. Ever since her visit, that morning to the gynaecologist, with his cold, dry hands and his total absence of humanity, she had seethed inside. She'd like to see him try to relax with his feet in stirrups, legs akimbo. And that comment about her age; she would never forgive him for that. Thirty-five was not old, thirty-five was not past it. She felt the bile rise again as she recalled those dead fish eyes behind the D&G spectacles, that pursed judgemental mouth and weakly arrogant chin. She would let it go for now because

she'd be able to deal with him when she was next in front of a computer. He wasn't the only one who could use his professional position to humiliate people.

Right now she would enjoy the euphoria that was kicking in with the relief of not being hospitalised, mugged or raped. Together with the small adventure of going for a drink with a pleasant stranger whose tall, but slightly stooped figure, provided some degree of shelter from the elements.

She estimated he was about five foot nine. As someone who only measured five two, Helen was very conscious of heights. Her husband, Christian, was six foot two, but he never stooped. Nor would Christian have considered wearing the calf-length greatcoat this young man wore, baggy and unbelted, its collar raised against the cold. Christian was a man for waxed jackets, when he bothered with any type of coat at all. More often than not he braved the elements in a patched sweater and ancient body warmer. Being blonde and weather-tanned, with the fine bones of a thoroughbred, Christian always looked perfectly dressed.

'It's down here.' Dominic indicated a side street where a row of boarded-up shops skirted an average-looking pub, clearly in need of a coat of paint. 'It's OK, not that bad really. It's the only place that isn't heaving at this time' Dominic told her, holding open the door.

She nodded, uncertain why he was so keen to reassure her. The pub was nothing worse, nor better, than many she'd frequented in her youth. Small, cheaply decorated and dimly lit but warm, quite comforting after the night outside.

As they entered a sea of male faces turned to greet them. Mostly older, bloated faces, going to seed; some young, narrow-featured, and watchful, and one or two noticeably attractive. With not another woman in sight. A gay bar, she realised, and quite a down-market one, too, and experienced a small, indefinable twinge of disappointment.

Helen bought them both drinks at the bar. Dominic wanted only a bottle of Becks but she ordered a double whisky for herself. The barman ignored her for some time, preoccupied with a flurry of young men ordering gaudy vodka mixes. Fidgeting uncomfortably with her wallet Helen wondered what she was doing in this place and what the hell was she going to talk to this boy about.

She needn't have worried. Dominic was easy company, with plenty to say for himself. He wanted to be an actor and he'd been told he had some talent. Together with a couple of friends he was getting together a small theatre company. They had an idea for a play and they were looking around for a writer. He knew it would be good, it couldn't fail; maybe they'd take it to the Edinburgh Festival. And maybe all sorts of other excellent, rather unlikely things would happen. Helen couldn't follow all the details because his voice was soft and intense. And she'd drunk the whisky too fast, its stinging warmth comforting the cold places inside her.

When she emptied her glass he offered to get them another round, but she gave him the money. He took it without a word.

Dominic hoped to study drama. He'd like to audition for RADA or Guildhall, maybe somewhere contemporary like that place on the Mile End Road, but he probably wouldn't get a grant. 'Why's that?' she asked. He looked about 20 or 21, the right age to be in adult education.

He regarded her earnestly for a moment - she sensed him making some kind of assessment but had not idea what it was about. Finally he seemed to reach a decision. He shrugged, taking a slug from the bottle, and said: 'I didn't get a proper education and I've not got any qualifications. And I don't have a proper address at the moment. You've got to have that for a grant. As a kid I was fostered or living in a children's home, I ran away from them, often. Usually I came to London, when I was old enough I came here to live.'

At the moment, he told her, he was sleeping on a friend's sofa because the flat he'd been living in had been re-possessed after the council discovered the tenant he rented it from was sub-letting. His name was on a housing list but he wasn't in any of the priority categories so he was saving up to get a place of his own.

Helen wondered what sort of job paid enough for London prices, but he was asking her a question now. What did she do for a living?

She told him she was a freelance journalist, writing for women's magazines. 'That's cool,' he said, 'Have you ever interviewed anyone famous?'

It was a standard question Helen was asked at dinner parties, and she normally replied that it wasn't what her job was about. But she didn't want to disappoint this young man whose thoughtful brown eyes and the way he tilted his head when he was listening, intrigued her. So

she dredged up some of the more famous ones, the ones he was bound to have heard of. He loved her story about the stately, ageing actress who'd admitted to losing her virginity under a pile of fur coats during her parents' drinks party at the embassy, and the day she spent with the tv chef who was so vile she could no longer watch his cookery programmes. 'But most of my work is with ordinary people,' she told him. 'That's more my thing. To be honest, their stories are usually more interesting than any celebrity's.'

Dominic nodded sagely. 'Yeah, I can imagine. There was this article in one of the papers about kids who'd grown up in care. My mate wanted me to ring the journalist and tell them my story, he thought I'd get money for it but I didn't want to.'

His gaze rested on her face, steady and expectant. The intensity of this open-hearted stranger was disconcerting - so frank and intimate, transfixing her with his confidences. She should respond, show that she empathised in some way, but what was there to say? Anything she said would sound like a platitude, so she just smiled, hoping her expression conveyed a sufficient degree of commiseration. And waited for him to continue.

Just then a mobile beeped. Dominic dug deep into the pockets of the greatcoat, extracting a tiny, silvery phone. 'Shit,' he said softly, after studying the screen.

'Something wrong?' she asked, watching him run an anxious hand through his untidy curls. My God, you're beautiful, she thought, suddenly registering the perfect tilt of his chin, the exquisite structure of his cheekbones. She hid her awkwardness in her glass; she'd almost finished her second double. Normally she held her alcohol well but tonight the shock must have weakened her head.

He was on his feet, one arm into the greatcoat. 'I've got to get a train to Streatham ... my mates have gone out to this club...Christ, is it really that late! What time do you make it?'

'It's ...' she squinted at her watch, four miniature diamonds on a square black face, an anniversary present from Christian, aesthetically pleasing but hard to tell the time by. '... About eleven, I think. No hang on - it's nearly twelve...' She was as surprised as he was, with no idea that it had got so late.

'Shit. Shit. I didn't bring out the money for a cab. How the fuck am I s'posed to get there on a night like this?'

She shrugged. ‘Are there any night buses?’

It was his turn to shrug. ‘Yeah, maybe. It’s a piece of shit, no-one told me they were going out. I don’t have a key and I’ve got this casting tomorrow morning. It’s just a part in an advert but ....Anyway, sorry to rush off. It was nice to meet you.’ He pecked her quickly on the cheek and her skin flamed at his touch.

He was almost through the door when she caught up with him. ‘You can stay the night at my place – if you want. I’ve got a flat in Battersea, it’s got quite a comfortable sofa bed...’

‘OK,’ he said, turning back to meet her gaze, his brown eyes grateful and unequivocal. ‘That would be good.’

The world outside was an alien landscape, hushed and luminous under the ethereal glow of the streetlights. Helen called a taxi firm on her mobile and they went back inside, drinking Irish coffees until their cab arrived.

Under the passage of so many tyres the roads had turned to brown slush and the driver put his foot down with a recklessness which would have caused Helen some concern if she was sober. The blanket of virgin snow had added its own finishing touches to the buildings they passed, fringing the bright shop fronts, frosting the fir trees perched on plinths and window sills, and providing luminous caps to the twinkling reindeers and fairies strung out capriciously across the streets. An easy silence hung between them. Dominic watched the sights and sounds of the capital like a child on an outing to see the Christmas lights. Helen didn’t let herself think too much, there wasn’t much to think about anyway. It was simply an act of charity from a 35 year-old woman with an indecently comfortable lifestyle to a young man who was down on his luck.

She dialled home on her mobile. Christian answered, blurry from sleep. ‘Bloody hell, Helen. What time do you call this! I thought you’d gone out on the town and got totally rat-arsed and crashed out somewhere.’ But he was good-natured as ever.

He told her that the new horse has arrived from Germany. It had reared coming off the box, catching the head groom, Lisa, on the temple with a front leg. He’d taken Lisa to casualty where three hours later she’d been passed as clear on the head x-ray but told to rest and look out for delayed signs of concussion. Instead she’d ridden two horses before doing the evening feeds. ‘There’s no reasoning with the

damn woman. I told her it was bloody stupid but she's the boss around here, no-one listens to me.'

After Lisa's heroics it seemed petty to mention a little incident with a patch of ice. And no need to mention that she was taking a strange man back to the flat, to sleep on the sofa. Christian would think she was putting herself at risk. And insist she told Dominic he couldn't stay. It would be better to explain all this in context when she was back home in Wiltshire. 'What's the weather like there?' she asked instead. 'We've got heavy snow in London.'

'Cold but no snow yet. And yes, I put Monty in an extra rug tonight because I know how you fret about him.' Monty was her horse - not one of the event horses that her husband brought on and competed with in the professional arena who would be sold if they didn't live up to expectations, or exceeded expectation, and attracted an over-the-top offer. No, Monty was never going anywhere, Monty was her baby.

'I'm sure he appreciates it. Are the dogs OK? Are they missing me?'

'For Christ's sake, woman, we're all missing you! The bed is freezing but neither of the pups will sleep with me because they're sulking at your absence... but now I'm so bloody knackered, that if I don't get some sleep soon... I've got Ben's owner paying me an early visit.'

She got the message. 'OK, sleep well then, speak to you tomorrow. Love you.'

'You too - don't spend all our money while you're there.' This was an ongoing joke. Helen, who'd grown up poor as the proverbial church mouse still found it hard to live with the idea of Christian's inherited wealth. She'd learnt to enjoy some of its pleasures, such as horses, occasional theatre trips and dinners out, but maintained a frugality around the everyday purchases, like buying cheap soap and economy toilet paper. Much, she knew, to the surprise and dismay of owners who came on visits to see their horses, often wangling an overnight stay.

Helen put her phone away. Dominic was still gazing out of the window and showed no curiosity about her phone call. Maybe he was too wrapped up in watching the scenery, perhaps he was thinking about the morning's audition. Or maybe he'd heard every word and didn't care.

‘This is nice,’ Dominic said as they closed the front door against the night. They were in a high-ceilinged hallway with red and white floor tiles, a discrete chandelier hanging from a ceiling chain. ‘I’m on the fourth floor’ she explained, leading the way up the stairs, conscious of him watching his reflection in the full-length mirrors as he passed.

The flat was cold, unlived in, nobody had been there for a couple of weeks. ‘Do you want some coffee? But I have no milk. I think I’ve also got brandy somewhere?’ She switched on lights, turned the thermostat on high, and took him through to the living room. It was a plain, functional space: sofa, armchairs and television at one end; a small well-equipped kitchen at the other. The room’s best feature was its French windows opening onto a small balcony, offering a handsome view across Battersea Park and the nearby ribbon of the Thames.

The flat wasn’t furnished to her taste but she couldn’t see the point of wasting money on somewhere so rarely used. Christian’s mother had given it to them as a wedding present, fully furnished, following advice from her financial adviser. Helen’s own mother had given them a teas-maid.

‘Have you got a beer, please?’ Dominic was making himself at home. He’d taken off his coat and pulled off his boots, and dragged his bulky black sweater over his head, revealing a grey t-shirt, v-necked and long sleeved. Round his neck hung a leather thong bearing a small silver, ornamental dagger. Helen was conscious of the outline of his torso through the thin material, and the way the leather caught against his throat as he turned his head.

‘I don’t think we have any beer,’ she said, after a cursory glance in the cupboards.

‘It’s OK, I’ll just have water. Tap water’s fine. I don’t like that bottled stuff cos it’s unhealthy. I saw a programme about it.’ He was fiddling now with the remote control of the tv, then spotted a book on the floor, left over from Helen’s last visit, a paperback of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

‘Hey I love Dickens, he’s brilliant. I did this theatre workshop thing when I was in care. The tutor said that Dickens had this great sense of drama, you know... like he can bring things to life. You can smell and taste and see it – what London used to be like.’ He started to flick through the book, smiling to himself at familiar passages.

Helen had been reading this copy of *Nicholas Nickleby* for two years. It lived in the Ikea bookcase next to the television. She didn't have much time for reading at home but she liked to have a book for company when she was in London, alone.

'Do you read a lot?' she asked.

'Yeah, sometimes. I love books. One of my foster carers spent ages teaching me to read, she was a retired teacher. I like Thomas Hardy, but man, was he a depressive! Like everyone dies or marries the wrong person. And I like the Brontes. *Wuthering Heights* is really dark.'

Helen passed him a glass of water. 'So what else do you like? Beside books and theatre.'

He crumpled his brow in deep concentration. 'Loads of stuff, like music .... kind of indie stuff ... Kings of Leon, Razorlight, The Killers. And I love The White Stripes, they're just classic. But I also like some Techno and Hard Trance, and people like Faithless.'

It was an alien world to Helen who seldom listened to music anymore; she'd never been that keen in the first place. Christian had played her Bruce Springsteen, Blondie and David Bowie when they first met, albums left over from his agricultural college days. He had Classic FM tuned into the Land Rover radio, last time she'd switched it on.

Then Dominic said quite simply: 'And I like your hair, it's beautiful. In the Tate Gallery they have pictures of women with hair like yours. There was this one picture... You should let it grow long.'

Helen had classic Pre-Raphaelite hair; abundant auburn curls that once hung down her back. These days she wore it in a shaped bob that barely reached her shoulder because long hair was far too much hassle.

'Thanks,' she felt a blush rising, and turned away quickly to fetch her coffee from the kitchen.

She was putting the jar away, when she realised he was standing behind her. His arms closed around her waist as he kissed the back of her neck. She had to tell him she was a married woman, who loved her husband, that she wouldn't do anything to jeopardise the things that were most important to her. Helen was listing her priorities as he slid his hands inside her shirt.

Faint dawn light was nudging its way through the gap in the curtains when she woke. The room was unbearably hot; she'd forgotten to turn down the thermostat. Dominic slept soundly on his

front, the duvet pushed down around his hips, his arms thrown casually on the pillow, a narrow band of terracotta beads circling his left wrist. Most of his slender body was winter pale, but his forearms, head and shoulders still bore the traces of many hours spent in the sun. He looked very young, and very, very beautiful.

Prominent against the vulnerable skin at the nape of his neck, was the knot of the leather lace. Helen remembered how the little dagger had scraped ticklishly against her sternum as he'd eased himself inside her, and its coldness against her breast as they'd dozed afterwards, her head on his shoulder, her arm across his chest.

Sliding out of bed she opened the window, stood for a moment or two inhaling the cool draught of night air, just watching the snow-covered rooftops, terraces and gardens, glinting stark and ghostly in moonlight. Behind her Dominic murmured and moved in his sleep. She shivered and slid back under the duvet where he rolled to face her, pulling her body against his own and planting a series of feathery kisses along her collar bone.

'You're very good at this,' she whispered, feeling her pulse quicken.

He met her gaze. 'I get lots of experience in my job,' he told her earnestly.

'Your job?'

He couldn't have missed the alarm in her voice, but he continued to kiss her languidly, until his lips reached her left nipple, teasing it briefly between careful, clever teeth. Then he looked up once more. 'Yeah, didn't I say? Sorry. I'm a rent boy. Or was. These days I'm more of an escort sort of thing. People ring up and I go round their houses. And the money's a lot better.'

His hand was now stroking the base of her spine. Her mind was yelling at her to push him away, but her body was working on a different agenda.

'But I thought... I mean I thought rent boys...' she was out of her depth here, undermined by her ignorance.

'Only did it with men? Yeah mainly but I have some female clients. And I've had a few girlfriends. I used to think I was just gay but, you know, it's like I'm more bisexual.'

But she didn't know and her confusion must have registered on her face. 'Hey, don't look so worried, I always use condoms and I have regular HIV tests. I'm safe, real careful.' He was keen to reassure her.

'Well that's a relief.' Helen tried to force a small laugh. She couldn't help herself from rehearsing inside her head the kind of conversation she might have with Christian. 'So then I fell over outside the theatre and this young man came along and I thought he was a rapist or some weirdo trying to mug me, except he picked me up and I let him shag my brains out. Then it turned out he normally shags men and gets paid for it. However at least he says he's careful and doesn't have HIV. So how are the horses?' But of course she would never have this conversation with Christian, she'd never been unfaithful to him before and she was never going to do it again. This would be a lesson to herself, getting screwed over by a male prostitute was no better than she deserved.

'...And I mean I don't see you as a client or anything, you know,' Dominic was addressing her and she hadn't been listening. 'I don't want money or nothing like that from you.'

'So what do you want?' she snapped at him. He drew back, looking hurt, but she continued: 'I don't know anyone useful in the theatre, if that's what you're hoping.'

He regarded her with disarming candour. 'I told you before. I like your hair. It's totally beautiful. And...' he dropped his eyes, embarrassed, 'You're like my idea of the perfect woman.'

'And old enough to be your mother.'

He shook his head vehemently. 'I don't think so. I'm 23 in February, you can't be that much older?'

She did the calculation, twelve years wasn't that much of a difference really. Unless one of you was barely out of adolescence and the other was heading for middle age, with a husband approaching 40.

Dominic had started to stroke her, very gently, inside her thighs. His fingers with their short but manicured nails so deft and thrilling, teasing her with their proximity. When he reached for another condom, she was ready to sit astride him. 'I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb,' she told herself, feeling the sheer, youthful vigour of him, controlled but willing inside her. What difference did it make if he left now, or in an hour or two?

## Unsafe Sex

He was gone when she woke again. She hoped he wasn't late for his audition. There was a small torn corner of an envelope propped against a dirty coffee mug. It said simply *Take care Dominic xxx and* gave a mobile phone number. Helen threw it in the bin and washed the mug but later retrieved the scrap of paper and stored it in the back of her wallet.