

*There is always some madness in love; But there is also some reason in madness*

*Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)*

## Chapter One

“Have a great weekend, Sarah... Are you doing anything special?” said Pete Draper, Head of Procurement. Middle-aged, balding, with evidence of a healthy appetite, he was smartly dressed in a suit, the appropriate corporate wardrobe for his role and status.

Sarah thought for a moment. “No, nothing special, just a few chores... You have a good weekend too.” She watched as her boss turned and walked down the corridor towards the lift.

Other colleagues turned off their monitors and began packing their bags. There was always an air of excitement just before going-home time on a Friday afternoon. The office was a buzz, banter flowed freely. It was four-fifty and she checked her outstanding files one more time to make sure there was nothing urgent. She thought about making a phone call to a potential supplier, but it wasn't important; it could wait till Monday. She logged off the store website; Huntsman and Darby, known as Huntsman's, the largest departmental store in town, and the most expensive.

Her screen-saver appeared; a loving family picture; not hers, her brother, Spencer, sister-in-law, Angie, and her gorgeous niece, Amber, taken on holiday on one of the more remote Greek Islands last August. In her darkest moments she envied him, but she would never begrudge his happiness; she loved him unequivocally. She switched off her computer. Her handbag was under her desk; her office space, not generous but manageable. She had become to view it as her private domain after five years and had become quite protective of her work area. There were more pictures of her family in frames including one of her mum and dad.

“Goodnight, Sarah,” said Michelle Stevens, one of the other buyers in the department and as close to a friend that Sarah had.

“Goodnight, Mitch,” replied Sarah.

“Yes, I'm hoping so,” said Michelle, holding up a colourful store carrier-bag festooned with love hearts. “Splashed out in the lingerie department, didn't I...? Rhys is in for a treat tonight.” She made a dramatic wink and headed for the exit.

Of course, Valentine's Day, Sarah suddenly remembered. No wonder there were more risqué jibes than usual. It had been a long time since she had celebrated Valentine's Day. She sighed, but quickly snapped out of her reflection. She had her own plans for tonight.

She picked up her handbag, checking around to make sure she had everything she needed. She noticed a couple of colleagues chatting by the water-cooler at the back of the office and waved. "Goodnight, have a great weekend."

"You too," they shouted back and carried on their discussion. There were just four staff in procurement, Sarah, the senior buyer reported directly to Pete Draper; her friend Michelle and the two part-time admin support staff came under her wing. They were an excellent team and Sarah had enjoyed her time working for the company.

She passed the HR Department, which seemed to be in darkness, and the staff at the Customer Experience Centre who would be staying until the store closed at six o'clock. She could see several people working away on their computers; some were on calls. She reached the lift and descended the six levels to the exit. The doors parted, and she was greeted by the bright lights of the Cosmetics section which took up most of ground floor. She looked around; it was busy, mostly, it seemed, with men searching for a last-minute gift for their partners. Heavily made-up assistants were doing their best to help them choose appropriately.

Sarah waved to a couple of staff she knew by sight and headed for the exit. The evening was dark and there were spots of rain in the air, but at least it was mild and there was none of the snow which had caused havoc just after the Christmas break.

It was a well-trodden path to the station and she followed the pavement with thousands of others, making their way to catch their trains like an army of soldier ants. The station approach was austere and not particularly welcoming, just a functional edifice, as the hordes of commuters piled through the entrance and made their way to the ticket barriers. Sarah checked the platform, there were regular changes, but tonight it was the usual, 3B. She presented her monthly pass to the reader at the gate and the barrier opened giving her just enough time to go through before it snapped shut behind her ready for the next passenger.

There were crowds on the platform as the arriving train eased its way down the platform. A surge forward, as everyone tried to jockey for positions by one of the carriage doors. Some were particularly adept at this exercise, displaying a degree of self-satisfaction as the door opened right in front of them. A pause to allow passengers to get off, then it was a scrum as the waiting throng surged through the narrow doors, desperate to find a seat, like some perverse version of musical chairs. Sarah never indulged in this free-for-all; she would wait for the crush to subside and get on in her own time. She usually managed to find a seat, but not always, particularly on Friday evenings. Tonight, she would be standing for the twenty-minute journey.

The train left on time; her fellow passengers, with few exceptions, were engaged on their phones, texting, messaging, blogging or whatever. Sarah looked out of the window watching the lights of the drab city environs gradually disappear behind her and into the darkness of open countryside. She could see her reflection in the carriage window. For some reason she thought of her beloved parents; she so wished she could pick up her phone and chat to her mum. "How was your day, dear?" she would always say, then she would attentively listen as Sarah shared her news.

The accident had happened four years ago, not long after Sarah had joined the store. It still played on her mind; she blamed herself. If only she hadn't asked her dad to pop over and clear a blocked sink. It was only ten minutes away, and Sarah always turned to her dad in domestic crises. "I'll come too," said her mother. "We can catch up on the gossip while your dad fixes the sink."

It was only seven o'clock, another Friday, but some idiot thought it was ok to have a few drinks after work then drive home. The winding road from her parents' house was notorious for accidents, but the police said this was one of the worst they had seen; head-on, both killed instantly; the other driver, three times over the limit, was eventually jailed for five years. "Jesus," said Sarah to herself; he would be out now, she realised. It was the first time she had considered this; what injustice. She felt the anger well up inside her.

It had taken Sarah a long time to recover from the shock and only now was she beginning to re-build her life. Her brother had been a rock but, having moved to Scotland two years ago, contact was now confined to phone-calls or the occasional video message.

The train slowed down and came to a halt and the crush started again in the reverse direction; Sarah just waited for the crowd to disperse and exited back into the chilly night air. One or two had raised their

umbrellas as they walked away from the station. The rain was just spitting and Sarah couldn't be bothered to rummage into the bottom of her bag for hers.

Five minutes later she was pushing her key into the lock of her front door. It was a bit stiff; another job she would have asked her dad to resolve but would live with it. She turned on the light, and Sarah was immediately greeted by her cat, Moses.

"Hello Moses, do you want some food?" she said as if addressing a small child. The cat leapt up onto the arm of the sofa and Sarah bent down to let it lick her face in a seemingly affectionate way.

"Come on then," said Sarah.

The cat jumped down and followed her into the kitchen. She went to the cupboard and took out a fresh pouch of cat food and emptied the content into a bowl. The cat descended on it as if it hadn't eaten in days.

Sarah left the cat to its meal and went upstairs to her bedroom to change. She loved this time of day, a time when she could just shut out the cares of the daily grind and just be herself. With a two-day break, the feeling was amplified. She washed and changed and returned to the kitchen to be greeted by Moses relieving itself in the cat-litter tray.

"Oh, thanks for that," said Sarah to the oblivious moggy.

Sarah was extremely well-organised and tended to cook meals at the weekend and freeze them for consumption during the week; she rarely felt like preparing a meal after work. Tonight, she chose a tuna bake which revolved slowly in the microwave as she made herself a cup of tea. She put the TV on in the kitchen so that she could catch up with the daily news. The cat had finished its ablutions and was rubbing itself around Sarah's legs, seeking attention. Sarah bent down and gave it a stroke which seemed to suffice, before it returned to the lounge and curled up on the sofa.

The house was a two-bedroomed terrace, small, but it was warm and cosy, and Sarah loved it. It had been financed by the inheritance from her paternal grandparents, and she had spent some time and money bringing it up to her own requirements. There was a small front garden and an area at the rear which was more of a yard, dating back to its early twentieth century origins. She heard the ping of the microwave and placed her steaming repast on a tray, then went into the lounge and took a seat next to the cat which was now fast asleep.

Sarah found the remote control and turned on the larger lounge TV. With neighbours on either side, she was careful with the volume so as not to cause any annoyance. She wished they reciprocated the courtesy. Frequently, Sarah was disturbed by loud music or noises from a games console. She was not one to complain but had mentioned it from time-to-time. There was little else in the way of communication with her neighbours.

She finished her meal and returned to the kitchen placing her plate in the dish washer, then went to the fruit bowl on the kitchen table and took a banana which she consumed while watching the end of the news. Tonight, her evening was going to be different. There was an air of anticipation; a frisson ran down her spine as she thought about her plans. She had a small table in the lounge behind her sofa; on it was her personal laptop. She opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio and poured herself a large glass, then returned to the lounge, sipping as she went.

Placing the wineglass safely away from the computer she flipped open the lid and signed in. The same screen-saver appeared as the one on her work computer. She smiled as her brother's family appeared. She would call him, but not now, over the weekend; this was her time. She didn't want to be disturbed. She opened her web-browser and clicked on the 'favourites' bar... LoveNet.com.

It was just a few weeks ago, New Year's Eve; she was on her sofa watching TV when the realisation that life seemed to be passing by came to her. She made the decision to try on-line dating as a sort-of New Year's resolution. She needed to change things, and finding a partner was, she thought, a way forward. Her love-life had been virtually non-existent since her college days. Looking back, it seemed her time at University was just one long party, but since her parents' tragic accident, she had become something of a recluse. After the initial over-flowing of condolences from her friends, contact seemed to wane. She found the sympathy difficult to deal with; she left calls and voice messages unanswered until they stopped altogether.

Then there was the departmental store where she worked. There had been opportunities; she had been propositioned on several occasions, particularly at staff social functions, but most potential suitors were married or just not her type. She had even gone on a blind date, set up by a well-intentioned girlfriend, which turned out to be a disaster. On-line dating was the way forward, she had decided; it was safe. There was none

of the usual rituals required when meeting in a social context. If she didn't like the profile, she just pressed 'delete'; if only all life's problems could be resolved so easily. She had, surprisingly, found it quite exciting.

She took another sip of wine.

Sarah had been registered with LoveNet.com for three weeks but so far no-one had met her expectations. She logged in and checked her profile again. Age: Thirty-two; Hair-colour: brown; Eyes: green; Profession: administrator. She had decided not to be too forthcoming as she didn't want anyone at work to find out that she had joined. The rest of the information was accurate. As part of the registration process she had to complete a personality profile which, according to the website, would ensure the best chance of finding a compatible match. She also had to post four pictures of herself and a short video via the on-line video-app; 'a unique service', said Aphrodite, her on-line host, as she guided Sarah through the formalities. She found this hard just staring at the screen while talking about herself and it took several goes before she was happy with the result.

She clicked on the tab that said 'Find Partners'. A woman's voice whispered seductively from Sarah's laptop speakers, soothing and deep. "Hello Sarah, this is Aphrodite, would you like to see your like-minded singles, selected just for you?" A box appeared with three options 'yes, no, cancel'. She clicked 'yes' and took another sip of wine. "Thank you... remember, love is the answer," said Aphrodite, in her intoxicating tones.

It all sounded a bit naff, but Sarah had paid for three months subscription, so she would stick with it.

It was 'Aphrodite' again. "These are your partners chosen just for you through LoveNet's unique matching software... Your love partner awaits."

"I'll be the judge of that," said Sarah, then laughed at her interaction with the virtual assistant. She took another sip of wine, then went to the kitchen and refilled her glass.

Back at her computer she composed herself; for some reason she felt nervous.

She negotiated the mouse to her first selection and started to read the profile; then the picture. "Hmm," said Sarah, but not in a favourable way. The prospective date was bald and despite his stated age as forty-

five, looked twenty years older. Sarah moved to the next; a pimply looking geek, twenty-six; hobbies, Star Wars and computer gaming. “Urgh,” said Sarah; this wasn’t looking great.

She carefully went through each profile and couldn’t hide her frustration and disappointment; there had been a great deal of bottom-of-the-barrel scraping, she thought. There was not one that would be remotely suitable. Maybe she was being too choosy, but then why not? It was her life; she needed to be certain before moving onto the next stage.

The final one of tonight’s hopefuls, number twelve.

She read the name; Jeremy Steadman... *‘but people call me Jez,’* it said. Then the picture; this was more like it. A professional photograph, designer stubble, quite ‘hunky’ she thought. He would make it to the video stage. She watched the one-minute vlog as she drank the rest of her wine; this was really promising. She watched as Jez extolled the virtues of loving relationships. “I’m looking for more than a life-partner; I want a soul-mate, someone I can help fulfil all their dreams; someone I can dedicate my life to.”

His eyes engaged, and it felt as though he was speaking just to her. Sarah shivered. It was a bit over-the-top, but miles better than all the others... and he was good-looking; number twelve might just be the one. She checked the rest of the profile; Age: thirty-five; eyes: blue; Occupation: an I/T Consultant, enjoys keep-fit, running, Chekov and travelling. “Chekov?” she said out loud, “wow.” She couldn’t imagine any of the rest of tonight’s candidates had even heard of the Russian playwright.

This could be it. She replayed the video and checked the profile one more time. Her hands were shaking as she clicked on the ‘Next’ button. It was Aphrodite again. “Would you like to contact this person?” said the virtual assistant. There were different methods of communicating with possible partners; mail, video, or chatroom. Again, the three options appeared. Sarah hesitated; then clicked ‘chatroom’.

To maintain anonymity there was a private ‘chat room’ where members could engage with potential partners by text message without disclosing personal contact details.

“Would you like to enter the chatroom?” trilled Aphrodite. Sarah nervously clicked ‘yes’.



For some reason Sarah was starting to feel territorial about her new match. On the face of it, he was so eligible, she imagined hundreds of women wanting to engage with him, and more. She needed to stake her claim before others got their claws into him. The wine was taking effect.

She checked the instructions; it was straightforward enough. There was a dialogue box which said, '*Chat to Jez?*' She clicked on the box and was trying to think of something to say. She entered the word, '*hello*'; not particularly original, but it was a start. She clicked 'send'.

There was a green light next to his name which indicated he was 'online'. 'Shit,' said Sarah to herself; he'll be chatting to someone else. She may be too late. Then came a note above the dialogue box. '*Jez is typing*', it said. Sarah took another gulp of wine and waited anxiously for the reply.

*'Hello Sarah, how are you?'* came the reply. Confident, polite, thought Sarah.

*'Fine thanks, you?'*

*'Fine too. What are you up to?'*

*'Just chatting with you,'* replied Sarah.

*'I saw your profile, and your video. You look lovely,'* said Jez.

Sarah was taken aback by the compliment. *'Thank you.'*

*'Tell me something about you that is not on your profile,'* said Jez.

Sarah thought for a moment. *'I have a cat called Moses?'*

*'Ha, ha, that's great. Are you religious?'*

*'No, he came in a basket,'* typed Sarah.

*'You are very funny, I love that,'* said Jez.

*'Thank you,'* said Sarah. *'Your turn.'*

*'Ok,'* There was a pause for a couple of minutes, which seemed a lot longer than it was.

*'Are you there?'* typed Sarah, concerned that the connection had been lost; then thought that she may have appeared a bit too eager. The dialogue box opened again, *'Jez is typing'*.

*'Sorry, was just called away. I keep tropical fish. Not sure if they are classified as pets.'*

*'That's interesting, I've not met anyone who keeps fish before.'*

*'Well it may not be very sexy, but very rewarding, not to mention relaxing.'*

She noticed the 's' word and wondered if the usage was deliberate to prompt a response. She would play along.

*'It's fine, I love looking at aquariums, sexy or not,'* texted Sarah.

*'Aquaria,'* texted Jez, followed by a laughing emoji.

*'Yes, sorry you're right. BRB,'* said Sarah.

*'BRB?'* said Jez.

*'Sorry, be right back,'* texted Sarah. She needed to relieve the effects of two glasses of wine before it became uncomfortable. It would give her a couple of minutes break and reflect on progress. It seemed to be going well; so far, so good.

Sarah finished her bathroom requirements, then went to the kitchen and emptied the remainder of the wine bottle into her glass before returning to her laptop. She noticed that Jez's green light had gone. 'Oh, no, he's logged off,' she said to herself.

There was a moment's panic. She quickly typed a message in the dialogue box. *'Hi Jez, are you there?'*

There was nothing for a minute, then the green light returned, and the dialogue box indicated that Jez was texting again.

*'Hello,'* it said.

*'Hi, sorry about that, just poured a glass of wine,'* said Sarah.

*'Red or white?'* texted Jez.

*'White,'* said Sarah.

*'Let me guess, Pinot Grigio?'* said Jez.

*'That's very clever,'* said Sarah. *'How did you guess?'*

*'It was easy, Friday night, white wine. It had to be Pinot Grigio or Prosecco. Just a lucky shot.'*

*'Very good, I'm impressed,'* said Sarah. *'What's this about Chekov?'*

*'I like his plays,'* said Jez. *'Very thought provoking.'*

*'I only know Three Sisters,'* said Sarah.

*'I will have to enlighten you,'* said Jez.

*'Yes, you will.'* She was starting to feel intellectually inferior; she had found Chekov's play hard-going when the local amateur dramatic society produced it. She had been at University in Leicester, studying for her degree in business management, and went with a group of fellow students; it would have been at least ten years ago.

The cat and mouse conversation continued for another twenty-five minutes or so, when Sarah had to call a further time out. Moses was becoming a nuisance, jumping onto the table and nudging his face against Sarah's.

*'BRB,'* said Sarah. *'Need to feed Moses, he's driving me mad.'*

*'Five loaves and two fishes?'* said Jez.

*'Ha, ha,'* said Sarah. *'Won't be long.'*

Sarah went to the kitchen and took out another pouch of cat food. Her mind however was firmly on her new online acquaintance. He was making a good impression and so far, more than met her expectations.

She got back to the laptop and opened the browser. Jez was still online; the green light was showing.

*'Hi I'm back,'* she said.

*'Hi,' said Jez. 'I've enjoyed our chat tonight. It's ironic on Valentine's Day, an omen?'*

*'So have I, a good omen, I hope,'* replied Sarah.

*'Yes, maybe we should meet, what do you think?'*

Sarah was trying to decide if she was ready for this move, but then suddenly thought of the competition; it was time to be bold.

*'Yes, why not?'* she replied, then realised it wasn't very explicit.

*'You don't seem very sure,'* came the reply; he'd spotted the uncertainty. She finished her third glass of wine.

*'Sorry, I'm new here,'* said Sarah. *'Yes, I would like that.'*

*'I see you live in the UK, would you be a little more precise?'* said Jez.

Sarah was feeling much more confident now. *'Leeds,'* she texted.

*'That's a coincidence, I'm not far away,'* replied Jez.

*'Really? That's handy,'* said Sarah.

There was a brief pause, then a reply. *'Sorry, I need to go. Do you want to swap mobile numbers save messing around on here?'*

*'Oh, ok, yes,'* said Sarah, and gave Jez her number. Jez reciprocated.

*'Sorry must go, chat tomorrow – I'll message you,'* texted Jez; the green light went out.

Sarah looked at the screen and felt flat; she was hoping for more and was disappointed he had not firmed a date.

She re-read the messages, looking for inference; psychoanalysing each word trying to gauge nuances, hidden feelings between the lines. He appeared genuinely interested and the text messages suggested a connection, but why did he just rush away; it was going so well.

She was logging off her computer when she heard a 'ping' on her phone. It was a text message. '*Chat tomorrow, Jez,*' followed by an emoji indicating a kiss.

She replied with the same emoji. '*Look forward to it,*' she said.

That night, she found it difficult to sleep; she was replaying messages in her mind. She felt a sense of frustration and found herself wanting to speak to Jez again.

Sarah's Saturday morning lie-in was interrupted by Moses nudging her face.

"Oh, Moses, go away," remonstrated Sarah, which did no more than encourage the cat to more signs of affection.

She checked the alarm clock on the bedside table, seven forty-two, and sighed. "Come on then, let's get you fed," she said to the purring animal, and got out of bed.

The cat chased downstairs leading the way to the kitchen then stood patiently by its food bowl, still purring. Sarah went to the cupboard for another sachet of cat food; Moses was trailing around Sarah's ankles in danger of being trodden on but seemed to anticipate Sarah's movements.

Moses was soon scoffing its breakfast with the same urgency of previous feedings. Sarah watched for a moment then made a drink. She preferred tea first thing; it gave her a lift. She checked her phone on the table which she'd left charging overnight. She noticed a message alert and accessed her texts. It wasn't one, but several, all from Jez.

*'Hello, couldn't sleep been thinking about you,'* said the first, timed at two thirty-eight.

*'Just wanted to say hello. Are you there?'* Three fifty-five.

*'Good morning, hope you slept well,'* Six forty-three.

Sarah made her tea and looked at the dialogue box '*Last seen today at 07.34*'. Jez was offline.

She typed *'Hello, '* and pressed 'send'. She took a sip of her tea and waited for a reply. After five minutes without one, she decided to return to bed; Moses had finished eating and was making himself comfortable on the sofa.

It was a grey morning and still quite dark. Sarah was deciding whether to read or doze for a while; there was only housework planned for the morning. She started reading but soon began to feel drowsy and switched off the bedside light; a few minutes more wouldn't hurt. Her phone was lying next to her, just in case.

Within a few moments she had fallen into a deep sleep.

She was suddenly transported to an old house. She was wearing a white shift dress, popular in the nineteenth century. She could feel herself wandering up and down corridors trying to find her way out. The windows were barred and when she looked through there was nothing there, just a whiteness. She was becoming more and more anxious; her heart was beating faster and faster. Then she was in water, bobbing up and down; slimy walls prevented her getting a finger hold; her hands grabbed, but there was no grip. She could feel her finger nails scraping down the walls. She was shouting. "Help me, someone, help me!"

Suddenly, she was woken by a 'ping', the sound of a text message. She lay for a second, panting; then the feeling of relief as she realised it was only a dream. Momentarily disorientated, she flayed her arms around searching for her phone. It had manoeuvred itself underneath her pillow; she peered at the screen. It was a message from Jez.

Trying to get her head together, she hazily keyed in her password, worried he might log off before she could reply.

*'Hello, hope I haven't disturbed you, '* said the message.

She texted back. *'No, I was just having breakfast. Sorry, didn't hear the phone.'*

She didn't want Jez to think she was idle.

No reply; she stared at the phone in frustration, then the dialogue box came alive, *'Jez is typing.'*

*'How are you?'* was the message.

*'Good, thanks,'* replied Sarah.

*'I was thinking about you all night,'* said Jez.

Sarah wasn't sure how to reply; on the one hand she wanted to respond in kind but didn't want to appear too keen.

*'That's nice,'* she replied followed by an emoji of a smiley face.

*'What are you doing today?'* said Jez.

*'Just housework, it's what a girl has to do at weekends, all the boring stuff.'*

*'Do you fancy coffee sometime?'*

*'Today?'*

*'Yes, I want to take you away from your household drudgery.'*

Sarah was now wide awake and, without any thought, texted back. *'Yes ok, where, when?'*

*'I can get into Leeds. What about lunch? Any thoughts?'* said Jez.

There was a café in the store where she worked but didn't want to go there; she was too well known.

*'Do you know Donicellos?'* she texted.

*'The Italian Pizza place?'*

*'Yes,'* said Sarah.

*'Ok, what time?'* said Jez.

*'One-thirty?'* said Sarah.

*'Yes, that's fine. See you later, bye for now.'* The kiss emoji appeared again.

Sarah felt her heartbeat start to race; any thought of housework had disappeared. First question, what should she wear?

She leapt out of bed and opened her wardrobe. Something smart but casual, in control; sexy but not easy; decisions, decisions.

She picked out some new jeans which had been deliberately distressed. The fabric was torn at the knee and thigh with discreet slashes; they were high fashion apparently which meant they had cost almost twice what she would normally pay for a pair of jeans. She looked outside; the weather was brighter, but it was still cold. A blouse and jumper, and her leather jacket; yes, that would work.

Sarah put her outfit on the bed then headed for the kitchen to get some breakfast, although she didn't feel hungry; her stomach was in knots.

She went back upstairs; some serious pandering was going to be required. She checked her hair; she would have preferred to have gone to the hairdressers but there wasn't time. She would manage. After a long bath, she did her nails and hair, then returned downstairs for a coffee. The cat greeted her but was just seeking attention; there was plenty of food in its bowl.

She picked up her phone and re-read the messages from Jez. She could feel the excitement mounting.

Sarah checked the times of the trains; she didn't usually travel on Saturday morning. There was one at twelve-fifty which would get into Leeds station at one-fifteen; her monthly railcard would mean she wouldn't have to pay for a ticket. She put her railcard in her handbag, so she wouldn't forget it; her mind was all over the place. She couldn't remember feeling like this before; not for a date anyway, and couldn't understand why. She was only meeting someone for lunch, in a crowded restaurant so she would be quite safe, but she couldn't help herself.

By twelve-thirty Sarah was ready. She checked her watch for the umpteenth time. Moses was wrapping himself around her legs again, wanting more attention. Twelve thirty-five, she put on her coat and studied herself in the mirror for the last time; it would have to do.

It was only five minutes to the station and she walked briskly along the snicket, the shortcut which would avoid the main road. She crossed the bridge to the platform for the Leeds train and waited. The electronic destination board stated the train would be on time, just five minutes to go. The platform was busy, Saturday morning was a popular time with shoppers going into the city.



Then the voice on the tannoy announcing the train's pending arrival. Within a minute she was joining the others jostling for position at the doors. She found a seat next to a youth who was totally immersed in his mobile phone. Sarah stared out of the window; it was a scene she knew well but, somehow, today it seemed different.

The train arrived on time in Leeds and the station was packed, almost resembling the rush hour. Sarah queued at the ticket barrier but for a moment, doubts started to creep into her mind. Maybe she should have waited a bit longer, got to know him more before agreeing to meet. But here she was and, taking a deep breath, she headed for the restaurant. Outside the station the sun was shining. It was still cold, but daffodils were starting to appear in the ornamental flower-beds; not yet in flower but a sign that spring was not far away.

Donicellos was at the top of the main city-centre complex and was a popular meeting place. She had been there a few times for lunch with clients. She could see the neon sign 'Donicellos Pizza House' glowing just beyond the entrance to the small mall. Sarah breathed in as she took the escalator to the entrance on the second level.

A waiter with a white tea-towel over his shoulder greeted her. 'Buon giorno signora... have you a reservation?'

'I'm waiting for a friend,' said Sarah.

Suddenly she heard a voice. 'Sarah, is that you?'