

Chapter One

Millie's order had arrived that very morning, discreetly packaged as promised in a bland padded envelope. In fact the postman thought it was yet another free gift from Kelloggs – Millie was a great one for collecting coupons – and had handed it over with an indulgent smile, unaware that he was fingering five tubes of high-voltage sexual lubricant that swore it was convenient, easy to use and, most important, sperm friendly.

Not that the sperm had shown up yet. But they were due any minute. Andrew had phoned from the car half an hour ago to say that he was just hitting the M50.

'You do know what day it is, don't you?' Millie had questioned anxiously. She didn't want to put pressure on him. But on the other hand it only came round once a month.

'Yes, yes,' he'd said.

He always sounded very far away on the phone these days. Which he usually was. He had changed jobs three months ago to a young, dynamic company whose mission it was to roll out broadband to every far-flung field and bit of bog in

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Ireland. Having lounged on his backside behind a computer in the bank for the past ten years, being forced to actually work had come as a bit of a shock to him. Through his lunch break, usually. And into the evening, when *Top Gear* and his dinner waited for him at home. Last month he had spent so many days driving up and down to Cork that he declared that they might as well move down there.

There were other concerns too. 'The rest of them are all under twenty-five,' he had relayed to Millie fearfully after his first week. 'They speak in this strange, shorthand language that I can't make head nor tail of. And they can all drink fourteen bottles of beer in the pub after work without batting an eyelid. I haven't been able to do that in ages.' Years, actually.

Millie had briefly tried to persuade him to go back to the bank. He'd been happy there, leading a gentle, slob-like existence, only exerting himself to fix the occasional computer glitch or do a weekly backup of customer accounts. The job was permanent, pensionable, and with no hope whatsoever of advancement. It suited him down to the ground, and he could easily have coasted along until retirement. Look at Millie, after all. Still in the same job since school and not a bother on her.

'Exactly,' Andrew had said, superior – as though it were some kind of deficiency on her part. She worked in the claims department of an insurance company, for heaven's sake. It wasn't exactly the kind of career that propelled you through glass ceilings at a great rate. The highest she ever got was the first floor of Manahans pub on a Friday evening after work to drink pints of lager and bitch with the girls about bad pay and Paul from Personnel, who was down like a ton of bricks on anybody who left even half an hour early on a Friday

afternoon. And don't get them started on the customers, even though most of them had suffered terrible misfortune, what with car accidents and house fires and burglaries every time their backs were turned. She would never say it out loud, but Millie would be secretly sorry for them.

'Our Millie was always the compassionate one,' her mother used to insist, back when she could be bothered to. This was because Millie was forever bringing home bedraggled, three-legged dogs she'd found in the park, building them little huts out the back and tenderly feeding them warm milk. More often than not they'd have disappeared by the following morning, having first dug up the flowerbeds and savaged the clothes on the washing line. She had no idea back then, of course, that that kind of ingratitude would be par for the course in her future career in a claims department.

'Just don't bring home any donkeys,' her father had pleaded. 'The garden isn't big enough.' A brief flirtation with vegetarianism at fifteen was all it took to copper-fasten her place as the socially aware one in the family.

'At least you're not the irresponsible one who went and got herself banged up,' her sister, Oona, pointed out. 'I knew it, I knew it,' their father had kept saying, shaking his head in a scandalised fashion even though Oona had been twenty-nine at the time, and married.

Now, the lubricant awaited Millie. The instructions advised her to apply it about fifteen minutes before making love. Great. That should give Andrew enough time to take off his coat and check the football results on teletext, if he had the energy. And to down a beer for courage. That used to be their little joke. But, honestly, the way he drank that beer now you would think he actually meant it.

The lubricant was cold and unfriendly, and unseemly to

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apply. It was a far cry from the halcyon days when she used to throw herself down in wild abandon upon the bed shouting, 'Take me, tiger!'

Still, maybe it would do the trick. Apparently one of the main impediments to successful conception was the lack of a suitable 'medium' for sperm to travel upwards after being let loose. She had discovered that fact on the Internet. You wouldn't believe how many websites were devoted to trying to conceive. They broke down into all kinds of sub-groups, such as Trying to Conceive After Forty, Trying to Conceive After Tube Reversal, Trying to Conceive With a Female Partner (good luck). Millie would sometimes dip into Trying to Conceive With Prayer and have a good snigger, even though everybody knew that this was a deadly serious business, and that any kind of laughter was totally inappropriate.

It was on one of these websites that Millie first found out about hostile mucus. She had never known that such a thing existed before. It was a condition in which, alarmingly, some women's bodies took grave exception to their partner's sperm, so much so that they actually sent their mucus after them to more or less bludgeon them to death.

It seemed a terrible fate for sperm in general. Especially when the odds were stacked against them in the first place. Of the three hundred million or so that swam off, furiously doing the backstroke or the crawl, only about three hundred of them could actually be expected to make it past the finish line at all. Never mind encountering hostile mucus around every bend.

'They don't have feelings,' Andrew had pointed out.

Millie couldn't believe he was so cold about them. And he owned them!

She hoped to God that she wasn't suffering from the hostile condition. But just to be sure she had spent a fortune on the

mentioned special lubricant, which promised a pH balance that was acceptable to all parties, thus restoring peace down under. Either way, it couldn't hurt, couldn't it?

Millie had a drawer full of things that couldn't hurt: ovulation predictor kits, saliva tests, charts, digital thermometers, pre-natal vitamins, Robitussin Expectorant (apparently it served the same function as the lubricant, but all Millie had done was cough for a couple of days). She also had a dozen cheapie pregnancy tests bought off the Internet. So far none of them had been positive, even though she would take them apart with her tweezers and shine a high-powered torch on them in the vain search for a faint pink line. But there was still plenty of time yet. Oodles of time.

Actually, not really.

The horrible truth was that Millie was thirty-nine. Thirty-nine! Even though she was only twenty-six in her head, sometimes even twenty-three. She still watched *Friends*, for goodness' sake, and browsed in Topshop without anybody coming over to advise her that she'd be better off in an old folks' home. When her friends recently began to turn forty, Millie would still unaccountably think: God, they're ancient, not quite facing up to the fact that it was going to happen to her. In less than a year's time, to be precise. And if she didn't get a move on she might be joining them on the Trying to Conceive After Forty discussion forums.

Still, didn't a woman somewhere in Italy have twins last year, and wasn't she sixtysomething? And another woman had produced a baby in her late fifties. Millie was practically a spring chicken in comparison. It wasn't like before, where you were all washed up if you hadn't popped out four by the age of thirty. Women were having healthy babies well into their middle age. Well into retirement in Italy.

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‘No matter how young you think you are, your eggs are still thirty-nine,’ her GP had intoned last week.

He was a desperately gloomy man. But possibly he hadn’t heard about the woman in Italy who had produced the twins. He had then brought up the subject of her FSH levels without even being asked.

‘My FSH?’ Millie had said, trying to let on that she didn’t know what he was talking about. FSH was something the women on the Internet forums went on about quite a lot, usually with dread. She tended to skip those bits.

‘Follicle Stimulating Hormone,’ he clarified, as though it were something highly toxic. ‘It gives an indication of ovarian reserve. The number of eggs you have left.’

Millie didn’t think that the number of eggs she had left was anybody’s business but her own.

‘And the quality of them,’ he added heavily. ‘It diminishes with age, you know.’

Well, that was enough to depress anybody. She had traipsed out past all the women in the waiting room with their buggies and bumps, feeling like an old prune. That very night she had jerked awake in bed, roasting hot. Oh God. A night sweat: one of the first signs of the menopause. She was doomed. She told Andrew that she might as well go back to taking in stray dogs. Then they discovered that the central heating had been left on full blast all night.

Andrew said she was getting too stressed out about the whole thing. He often said that nowadays. But then again he could father a child into his nineties, if he could find a woman to oblige, so why should he feel any stress at all? Men had it so easy. In her darker moments, when she was truly feeling thirty-nine and not pretending that she was twenty-three, Millie wished that their scrotums would shrivel up and fall

off once they hit forty-five. That would certainly level the playing field.

You would think that she had deliberately left it late. That she had selfishly decided, 'Oh, I'll have a great career for fifteen years and drink like a fish and go on flash foreign holidays, and then when I've tired of that I'll marry someone half-decent at thirty-seven, and squeeze in two kids before everything dries up, and that way I can have it all, just like the magazines tell me.'

The simple truth was that she had never found the right man. Not that she had devoted every second of her life so far to looking, or anything like that. She hadn't conducted an extensive search up and down the country in pursuit of suitable specimens. But she had dated, of course she had. All through her twenties she had gone forth with great hope and expectation that she would meet someone nice, or fun, or even both.

Instead she had ended up with a series of losers, idiots, lunatics and men who were married but failed to mention that fact. Drunks, commitment-phobes, mammy's boys – for some reason they saw her coming, and would hunt her out like heat-seeking missiles and ensconce themselves in her life before she copped on to what they were really like. But even then she usually didn't have the heart to kick them out; the customer-care employee in her tried to change them, and when that failed abysmally, she tried to live with their shortcomings. After all, nobody was perfect. But even Millie's patience would eventually run out and she would end up having to change the locks.

'What is it about me?' she complained bitterly upon turning thirty, and leaving behind a decade littered with the corpses of rotten relationships.

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‘You look too nice,’ Oona advised her kindly.

‘What?’ Millie said, hoping that this meant she was stunningly beautiful.

But Oona said, ‘You’re too open. Smiley. You’ve the kind of face that appeals to users and chancers, and stray dogs.’

‘You mean I’m too soft.’ Tell her something she *didn’t* know.

‘Well, it wouldn’t hurt to toughen up a bit.’

Millie threw back her head in what she hoped was a defiant way. ‘I’m not going to become all aloof and horrible in the hope that it’ll get me a man.’

She needn’t have bothered, because there then followed a spectacularly dry period in which she met no men at all. Not even on the bus. This went on for several years until she began to wonder whether there was some kind of world shortage, and that there might actually be none left. Not even creeps.

It dawned on her then that it could be too late. Most of her friends had been married for a couple of years at that point. She was sick of them taking maternity leave in work. Why did everybody have a husband except her?

‘If you wait another year or two the first round of divorces will be starting, and you might get one second-hand,’ Oona advised her. Easy for her, when her youngest had turned two the previous week. Mind you, she did look wretched. Between them all she hadn’t had a full night’s sleep since 2001. ‘I hear on the grapevine Fiona and Finbarr Maguire are breaking up.’

‘Finbarr Maguire?’ Millie was appalled.

‘I know, I know. But with a haircut and some new clothes . . .’

‘And a face lift. And a personality transplant,’ Millie said grimly.

Oona was only trying to be nice. But Millie would be damned if she was going to take somebody else's leftovers. Not until she was thirty-seven or -eight anyway, and really desperate.

Out of the blue she met Andrew at a friend's house one day, just like that. She didn't even have to squeeze into that horrible scratchy red top and cruise the clubs. Even better, he seemed like a normal, decent, sane person who could actually hold down both a job and his beer, and was reasonably attractive and personable to boot.

Amazingly, he seemed to want a long-term relationship as much as her. 'I've been fighting off a beer belly for about two years,' he confessed to her within a month. 'I'm dying to settle down and let myself go.'

Millie had laughed. But only for a minute. She had a few things to tie down, even at that early stage.

'What about children?' she said baldly. Recently she had become so broody that she went around trying to catch the neighbourhood cats just to give them a cuddle.

He froze, and gave her that rabbit-trapped-in-headlights look. Still, it was better to know now.

'I don't know what people have been saying, but I don't have any,' he blurted defensively. 'Not that I know of, anyway.'

'I wasn't accusing you,' Millie assured him, her heart rising. 'I was wondering whether you might like any. You know, at some point in the future.' The very near future, at her age.

'Children?' His whole face relaxed. 'Oh, definitely.'

They got married the following June. It wasn't a moment too soon, although nobody was so rude as to actually say it out loud. Instead of going straight for babies, they decided to devote the first year of their marriage to 'enjoying' each other, which meant loads of pints in the pub, and lie-ins on

a Sunday morning, and plenty of experimental sex (which usually involved doing it in the back garden when the neighbours were away). The problem was that they enjoyed themselves so much that one year stretched into two, and it was so easy to put off making any decision to start a family.

But thankfully Millie's biological clock had some kind of inbuilt warning system, because one morning she sat bolt upright in the bed, suddenly wide awake, and demanded, 'What age am I next birthday?'

Which was in two weeks' time.

Andrew eased open one eye and croaked, 'I don't know. Thirty-nine?'

'Jesus, Mary and holy Saint Joseph.' Thirty-nine! And lounging around in the bed, actually *sleeping*, instead of having unprotected sex. 'Get your pyjama bottoms off,' she urged him.

'What?'

'Quick.'

All of a sudden Millie was focused. Fiercely focused. She went out that very afternoon and bought a book called *Taking Charge of Your Reproductive Cycle*, seeing as nobody else was offering to.

'What's it about?' Andrew wondered, having a flick and no doubt hoping to find pictures of naked people doing exciting things to each other.

He was disappointed to find only fertility charts and ways of documenting Peak Days.

'Mine is Day 14,' Millie announced to him, having worked it out. 'We have to have sex on Day 10, Day 12, Day 14, and Day 15, just to be sure we nail it on the head.'

'OK,' said Andrew, nodding very seriously, but anyone could see he was delighted at the prospect of all that sex.

Now that they had decided to go for it, Mille couldn't stop thinking about babies. She would daydream constantly about being pregnant, and what it would be like. She found herself hanging around Mothercare on her lunch breaks, fingering the tiny Babygros and socks, and lost in happy dreams of bottle-feeding some tiny little bundle that would look just like a miniature Andrew. Well, not if it was a girl, obviously. Millie told herself that she didn't mind what gender the baby was, so long as it was healthy. She even began to pick out names. She wanted something Irish, but not something too obscure and that nobody from outside Ireland could pronounce, like Ailbe or Dhoireann.

'What do you think of Sean?'

Andrew looked up from the 592-page report he had brought home for the weekend, and said, 'What?'

'As a name for the baby, Andrew.'

'Lovely,' he said vaguely. Then, 'Do you want me to take my trousers off?'

'Not now. Later.'

'Just give me a whistle,' he said, and went back to the report. It was a shame that the new job had happened the very month they had decided to get pregnant. He was distracted, to say the least, leaving her to flick through the baby magazines by herself. He hadn't even been that interested in the whole argument over what travel system to buy for the newborn. Whether to go for the 'two-in-one' or the 'three-in-one'? It was a conundrum. But a nice one, of course. She couldn't wait to get out there and start spending a whole load of money.

'Let's just get pregnant first,' Andrew cautioned. After he had finished the wretched report, of course. And then memorised most of it. He didn't want to look like a klutz at the

meeting on Monday morning, he fretted. He was already at a disadvantage, joining a telecommunications company directly from somewhere like the bank. Apparently on his first day they had all gathered around his ancient mobile phone in wonderment, as some of the younger ones had barely been born the year of its production (circa 1995, an expert amongst them had correctly deduced). His ire was up after that. He went in there every morning with something to prove. 'At least once we get pregnant you can brag to them that you're fertile,' Millie had joked to him. But his head was back in the report again, his lips working feverishly, and Millie was a whole hour waiting for him to come upstairs that night.

She took her first pregnancy test the following month in full expectation that it would immediately turn pink.

It didn't.

She waited ten minutes, then an hour, and then a whole day, and the damned thing still hadn't turned pink.

'Let's write to the manufacturers,' she said a week and nine tests later. 'Their products clearly don't work.'

'Millie, we'll just try again next month,' Andrew said gently.

They did. You never saw two people try harder. They even gave it a lash on Days 17 and 18 just in case, even though Andrew had just got back from a sixteen-hour day in Galway and could barely lift up his head, never mind anything else.

The next pregnancy test was negative too.

'Next month we'll start on Day 8,' Millie vowed, disappointment like a stone in her stomach. 'Just to be sure we don't miss it.'

There was no doubt that it was a gruelling regime. Sex was all very well until you were getting too much of it. It didn't help Millie either that the person she was having sex with was so tired that he would sometimes have little catnaps

in the middle of the act. But she didn't mind that so much as the expression on his face when he would arrive in night after night with some big tome of a report or other, only to find her waiting for him in her nightie.

'Just give me five minutes to have a coffee,' he would say wearily. 'That'll gizz me up.'

Millie naturally began to feel like a bit of an imposition. You would think it was all her fault. Many a night she would much rather have watched telly – a *Budget Special*, anything – than be faced with Andrew's willy yet again, but what was the use in complaining? If they wanted a baby there was only one way to make one, and it wasn't hiding under the bed and whinging.

She began to have very bad thoughts about his new job. He'd have been delighted to have jiggy-jiggy every hour of the day if he were still in the bank, she mused sourly. Who would have thought that blooming broadband would turn out to be the new birth control?

But then she would feel awful – especially as he had begun to settle in a bit. He wasn't so intimidated going off in the mornings, at least. His big breakthrough came when he won a new account for the company, having sat up till four o'clock the night before memorising a report the size of a telephone book. 'I've arrived!' he announced to Millie that night, triumphantly. But she soon wiped the smile off his face by taking her clothes off and asking for sex.

Then, last month, disaster struck. They were going to miss Day 14 altogether.

'They want me to go to Frankfurt for the week,' Andrew announced. He even had the gall to look pleased.

'What?' She couldn't believe it. She was absolutely sure that this would be their month. The statistics were on their

side: well, if every couple had a one-in-four chance of conceiving each cycle, then their number should be coming up right about now.

Except that her husband wouldn't actually be in the country. Her mind raced irrationally to Thermos flasks. How long could sperm survive in the fridge?

Belatedly he realised that there might be something of a clash.

'I'm really sorry, Millie. But I can't help it. It's the first time they've asked me to go, and if I turn it down I probably won't get asked again.'

Millie wanted to give out furiously, and say feck them, what about her? But he looked so excited that she would only feel mean and small.

'Do they not have their own broadband companies in Frankfurt?' she said, rather sulkily. 'Unless you're planning to roll out broadband across the Irish Sea.'

'We're going over to meet a company with similar interests to our own,' he informed her. 'There could be a deal on the table.'

It was then that Millie realised that there was some kind of transformation afoot in Andrew. He'd never have talked about deals being on the table if he were still in the bank: a sandwich, perhaps, or a coffee, but that would be about it. And now that she really looked at him, she saw how much he had changed in four short months. For starters, he had dropped a good bit of weight from missing all those dinners. Where had his beer belly gone all of a sudden? And someone in the office – someone much younger – had obviously taken him down Grafton Street at lunch break, because he now sported an Avengers-style haircut and a couple of cool new suits.

But it was the look in his eye that struck Millie the most.

It was something she'd never seen before, something alien and indefinable. Holy cow – was it ambition?

'Go then,' she said heavily, because there was very little else she could say. 'There's always next month, I suppose.'

So to cut a very long story short, here Millie was again:
Day 14.

Month: five.

Lubricant: yes.

Pink sexy nightie: check.

Biological clock: screaming.

Husband: unfortunately still on the M50.

She was afraid that she'd jumped the gun with the lubricant. At least half an hour had elapsed since application and she had a suspicion that it was melting. Should she apply a second tube, or would that create problems of its own?

Then, thankfully, the front door opened downstairs. Andrew was home.

'Hi!' Quickly she got rid of the packaging from the lubricant, and dimmed the bedroom light. Best to try to keep things as romantic as possible.

'Where are you?' he shouted back.

'In the bedroom!' Honestly, where else did he expect to find her at ten o'clock at night? Outside mowing the lawn? Rustling up a batch of cupcakes in the kitchen?

'Come on up!' she added, just in case he needed a further hint.

Please God may he not be too wrecked, she prayed, as she arranged herself on the bed in what she hoped was a vaguely seductive pose. Please let him have had a half-decent day, without too much stress, and have picked up something to eat on the way home and not be so weak with hunger that he can't make love. (It had happened once before.)

‘Hi.’ He stood in the doorway, blinking around the room. He always had an owlish look after driving in the dark. Eventually he located her on the bed. ‘There you are. Sorry I’m late.’

He was all tense-looking. The traffic must have been murder. And since getting the new company car – a very expensive black number – he seemed to have become a tad intolerant of other drivers. Millie had been most surprised during their trip to the supermarket last Saturday when the conversation had been interrupted repeatedly by him bellowing out the window, ‘For fuck’s sake, are you blind!’ He’d never have behaved like that had they been puttering along in their little Punto.

‘That’s OK,’ she told him, very civilly. ‘Have you eaten?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, frowning. ‘I think so. I might have had something in a garage.’

‘Great!’ she said.

She waited for him to notice the new pink nightie, and her Joan Collins pose on the bed. Any other man, any normal man, would be galloping to the bathroom for a quick brush of his teeth before leaping on her happily.

But Andrew was jangling his car keys restlessly, and hanging about at the door as though they had all the time in the world, while Day 14 slipped past minute by minute. At this rate they’d be into Day 15 before he even got his socks off.

‘Did you have a good day?’ he enquired.

Her whole day had been leading up to this very point, stupid man. But she managed a bit of a smile and said, ‘Fine.’

‘Good,’ he said.

But he wasn’t really listening. He looked completely preoccupied. Probably still thinking about some deal or other.

‘Look,’ she snapped, ‘do you want to do this or not?’

‘What?’

She abandoned her pose and jerked up in the bed. 'I know you're probably not in the mood. You're probably tired. So am I. But, you know, I had a shower an hour ago, and shaved my legs specially, so let's just quit dragging our heels and get on with it, will we?'

He really did look startled now, which made her crosser.

'All right, so I'm not exactly Jennifer Lopez, but I'm not the back of a bus either, so you can stop looking at me as though you'd rather bed down with something in the zoo!'

Something clicked with Andrew. His face cleared. 'Shit. It's Day 14, isn't it?' He slapped himself on the forehead. 'Sorry, Millie. I know you told me earlier. So much has happened today that I completely forgot.'

Millie began to feel better, but only slightly. How could he actually forget? When she had reminded him less than an hour ago?

All apologies now, he came scuttling over to the bed. 'And you've gone to all this trouble . . . you look lovely. The nightie's cute. You even smell lovely.'

'Oh, shut up.' She felt patronised now.

'Come on, Millie. I'm sorry, OK? Give me two seconds and I'll jump in the shower. I can't promise to shave anything, though.'

She didn't smile.

'Hey, Millie. Give me a break here.'

She should have left it at that, of course. He was ready and willing, that was the most important thing, right? But she couldn't let it go. 'Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who wants a baby.'

'What? Don't be daft.'

'It's like I'm always nagging you. Reminding you. That I'm forcing you into it!'

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‘Millie . . .’ He looked a bit irritated now.

‘We didn’t even make love half the number of times we were supposed to this month!’

‘We’d have been dead if we had,’ he snapped. ‘Other people manage to get pregnant without all this planning, Millie.’

Oh! She was really hurt now.

‘Well, at least I know now what you really think,’ she said, icy.

‘Oh, Millie.’ He put his hand on her leg but she drew away. ‘I just think that maybe we’re putting too much pressure on ourselves, that’s all.’

She tried to keep her voice even. ‘You see, the thing is, Andrew, I don’t really have that much time to play around with here.’

But he just swept this away with a flick of his hand. ‘Loads of women are having babies into their forties these days.’

Next thing he would bring up the pensioner in Italy who’d had the twins.

‘No matter what you read in the papers, my eggs are still thirty-nine!’

He looked a bit startled by that. ‘Let’s just try and chill out a bit, eh?’

The more people said that to her, the higher Millie’s shoulders rose. There were no two words in the English language better designed to stress out a women who was trying to get pregnant than ‘chill out’.

‘I *am* chilled out,’ she lied. ‘I would just like to get on with things, that’s all. I thought you did too.’

‘Well, yes,’ he said, vague.

‘Andrew, what’s going on here?’

He looked at her and announced, ‘They want me to go to Frankfurt again.’

‘What, *now*?’ Her immediate thought was, did they have time for a bonk before his flight?

‘The deal with the company over there came through. We’re opening a new office in Germany. They need staff.’

Millie tried to process this information. ‘You?’ she said. She had an image of him on his hands and knees rolling out broadband all the way down the Autobahn. Even though that wasn’t even part of his job description. If she was pushed, she realised she didn’t even know exactly what his job description *was* these days. Something to do with winning new accounts.

‘And a couple of other guys from the Dublin office,’ Andrew said.

That look of naked ambition was back in his eye. Only now it was mixed with excitement. The combination of the two filled Millie with a peculiar sense of dread.

‘What are we talking about here?’ she asked, trying not to jump to conclusions. ‘A couple of days a week?’

They could handle that, couldn’t they? They could manage to fit Day 14 in around it.

But of course it wasn’t going to be that simple.

‘Monday to Friday,’ he confessed. ‘But I’ll fly back every Friday night, Millie. Or Saturday morning,’ he amended sheepishly. ‘It’ll be fine.’

‘Fine? That you’ll only be home at the weekends?’

He must have already felt defensive because he threw his hands up and said, ‘I knew you’d be like this about it! Thinking about the negatives straight away.’

Millie tried to keep calm, even though she felt completely blind-sided by this latest development. ‘If you have some positives then I’d like to hear them.’

‘This is a chance for me, Millie. Can you not see that? I

get to be part of a start-up operation. I've never been offered anything like this before.'

He'd never *wanted* anything like it, in Millie's experience. What happened to the guy who'd told her on their third date that his life's ambition was to collect a beer mat from every country in the world?

'I thought we'd decided to settle down.' It came out sounding whingy and boring. She tried to make it sound more exciting. 'I thought we wanted to start a family.'

'For goodness' sake, Millie. There's nothing stopping us.' He sounded impatient and cross, and not at all like her lovable, soft Andrew.

'What, apart from the fact that you'll be in Frankfurt?'

'Only Monday to Friday.'

'And what are we going to do if Day 14 falls on a Wednesday? Courier your sperm over?'

He looked at her in distaste. 'There's no need to be crude.'

'It's being practical. I can't get pregnant without you, unfortunately!' She didn't bother hiding her anger any more. These were her hopes they were talking about. Her dreams. 'I'm thirty-nine, Andrew! I can't afford to miss month after month because you're furthering your career in bloody Frankfurt!'

He got off the bed. 'I'm thirty-nine too, Millie. But I don't go around acting like my whole life is over!'

'What?'

He took a deep breath. 'Look, let's talk about this when we calm down.'

'I *am* calm.'

But he just grabbed up his car keys from the dressing table and made for the door. 'I'll see you in the morning.'

A moment later, she heard the front door slam behind him.