

Extract from “A Compromising Position”

Chapter 1

Have you ever seen one of those weepy films where the distraught and usually love-lorn heroine cries silently and beautifully, tears coursing down her perfect Estee Lauder foundation leaving not a blemish? Yes? Makes you want to weep, doesn't it?

I don't cry like that - I howl. Like a banshee. A banshee who's been hit about the head with a baseball bat. And I go bright red and blotchy round my neck and my eyes swell up as if they've been punched by Lennox Lewis. My nose generally contributes too, producing, on average, two buckets of dribble per second. Nice.

This is what I'm doing now. Howling. Why? Because I, Emily Miller, have left my boyfriend of five years, one Mr Declan Patrick O'Donnell, fully paid-up member of the Bastard species. And, in doing so, have rendered myself homeless.

At the tender age of thirty-two, you'd have thought I'd have the wherewithal to get it together by now, wouldn't you? But no. At this point, my tissue disintegrates, having clearly reached its Critical Snot Limit. The receptionist looks at me with a mixture of pity and terror. Oh, I forgot to mention, I'm not indulging in this bout of hysteria alone. Oh no. I am doing it in the reception area of the Hampstead Observer, a nineties conglomeration of uncomfortable tan leather sofas, stainless steel and beech coffee-tables and undernourished yucca plants in terracotta pots.

I sniff and make a little gulpy sound. The receptionist clutches her phone nearer to her, and tries to give me an encouraging smile which basically says, 'Pull yourself together, woman!' The trouble is, my lip wobbles alarmingly every time I fight to stifle a sob, so in the end I give up and blub some more.

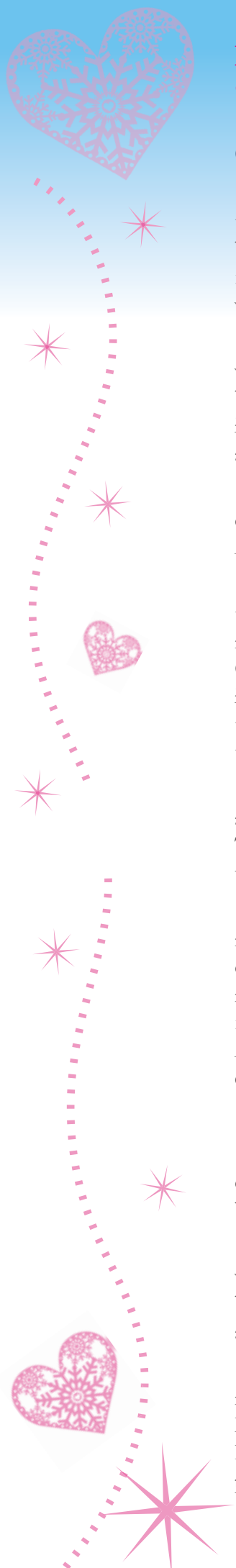
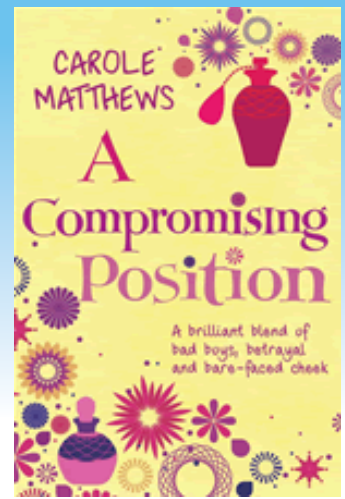
'Is Cara there?' the receptionist whispers in a pantomime style. The look in her eyes reminds me of that bit in Watership Down where the nice bunny gets caught in the headlights of a not very nice car. I take it that Cara isn't at her desk. The receptionist lowers her voice a bit more, but I can still hear her. 'I have a slight emergency.' Ha! She does? If only she knew. 'Her friend's here. In reception. Now. She's a bit upset.' She smiles at me like I'm completely insane. And I have to admit that I probably do look a tiny bit unhinged at the moment. 'Tell her to get down here,' she hisses. 'Quick!' She hangs up and looks reassuringly at me. 'She won't be long.'

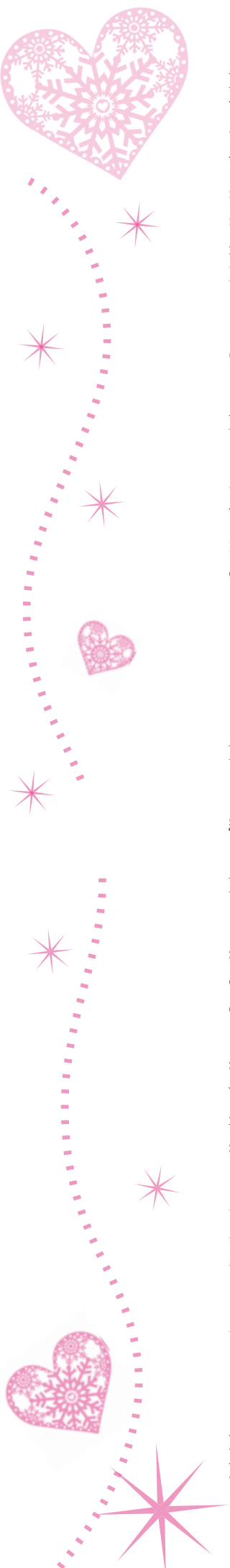
I nod speechlessly.

'Are you all right?' the receptionist asks kindly, if a little pointlessly, since it must be obvious to anyone with half a brain that here is a woman more devastated than she has ever been in her entire life.

I heave out, 'I'm fine. Thank you.' But I'm not fine. I doubt I'll ever be fine again. And with that thought, I dissolve into tears once more. There's nothing quite so bad as someone being kind to you when you most need them to be, is there? Except for someone being cruel and unkind on an unprecedented scale when you least expect it, of course.

I don't know quite where to start really. Should I explain about Cara, my closest and most irritating friend and confidante? Or should I just cut straight to the chase and talk about Declan, ex-boyfriend as of half an hour ago, and his stupendous, mind-blowing betrayal? Oh, I don't know. How on earth can I be expected to think straight when I'm creating my very own papier-mache sculpture with a Kleenex?





Just let me make one thing perfectly clear. This is totally and utterly Declan's fault. One hundred per cent. You know when you hear people discussing their friends' relationship break-ups and they say stuff like, 'Well, it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. ..' or, 'No one's really to blame. ..' or the equally vacuous, 'They just drifted apart ...'? Well, it's all bollocks as far as I'm concerned. Ducks drift apart. Humans get pushed away. No one will ever say that about this particular situation. I did not drift, I was shoved. Heartily. If I were a soap star instead of a boring old English teacher, this would fill the pages of the tabloids. You mark my words. The demise of our lovey-dovey coupledness is entirely due to my bastard boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. And, very soon, when you know the whole story, I think you'll agree.

Chapter 2

Adam stood up and had a quick glance round the office again before he spoke. 'Cara's not here,' he said. 'I'll pass the message on as soon as she comes back.'

He replaced the telephone receiver on its cradle. The news desk was empty - apart from the Himalayan mounds of paper in this supposed age of the paper-free office and Cara's usual barricade of bells, Buddhas and Oriental what-nots - but then it was late in the day and, apart from those on the newspaper's aptly named graveyard shift, they should all be heading home or, more probably, to that home-from-home the British call 'the pub'.

'Where's Cara?' he shouted to no one in particular.

'Our esteemed News Editor is in the toilet,' Chris supplied.

Adam sat down again. 'She's been ages.'

'She's probably Feng Shui-ing her arse.' Chris leant nearer to his computer screen. 'Bloody hell. Look at this.'

Adam raked his fingers through his hair and clasped them behind his neck. 'It'll make you go blind.'

Chris closed his eyes and fumbled around his desk with his hands, knocking over his penholder. 'What?'

They both laughed tired laughter. It had been a long day. Not long as in interesting, long as in the most boring day imaginable. To say that it was a slow news day was an understatement of mega proportions. As Chief Photographer, Adam had been sent out to take snazzy pictures of a car that had been vandalised by the owner's batty sixty-two-year-old female neighbour (who refused to be photographed), a child who had won a place to the local theatre school and a man whose lost dog had returned home of its own accord after two weeks missing in the wilds of Belsize Park. Not much to get the old adrenaline whizzing round the veins, although it was a very cute dog - some indeterminate ball of frantic fuzz that had adored Adam on sight and liked to lick a lot. Adam sighed inwardly. If only women were the same.

Adam shuffled his chair over to Chris's desk where his friend was doing what he did for the majority, if not all, of his working day - surfing the Internet. His favoured sites were those that contained the headings NUDE, NAUGHTY, NAKED and NIPPLES - among other things.

'Now that is a sight for sore eyes,' Chris said, breathless with admiration as he pointed at the image on the screen.

Adam peered over Chris's shoulder and pursed his lips. 'Not bad.'

'Not bad?' His friend scowled at him. 'Are you gay? That is the most luscious pair of legs you're ever likely to see. I would give up all of my worldly goods to walk arm-in-arm with a young lady of such delicate beauty.'

'I don't think a fiver would get you very far.'



Chris looked crushed. 'No?'

Just then, Cara came out of the ladies' loo and walked across the office. She cuffed Chris across the head as she passed behind him. 'You'll go blind.'

'It's been done,' Chris and Adam replied in unison.

'It's also very politically incorrect. I could report you for sexual harassment in the workplace,' she warned. 'You do know that it's now a sackable offence to surf porn sites?'

'It's research,' Chris countered. 'For an expose piece on the dark side of technology.'

'Yes. Right. And Davina McCall's going to be the next Prime Minister.' Cara went to ease Adam out of the way. 'Let me see.'

'You haven't got time.' Adam shielded the screen. It wasn't nearly as bad as some of the stuff Chris liked to surf, but he didn't feel happy about one of the bosses seeing it. 'There's an upset woman in reception asking for you.'

'Who?'

'Bethany didn't say. Sounded urgent though.' Cara scooped up her coat. 'I was about to head for home, anyway. Will you tie up any loose ends for me please, Chris?'

'Ja, mein Fuhrer,' he said, throwing a Gestapo salute at her.

'I'll see you boys tomorrow.'

'Not if we see you first,' Chris muttered under his breath.

'I heard that,' Cara said.

Adam smiled at her. 'Hope it's not bad news.'

'If it's who I think it is, it probably will be.'

'We're going to the pub if you want to join us,' he offered. 'If she's nursing a broken heart, strong drink works wonders.'

Cara shook her head. 'I think this is going to be a tea and sympathy job.'

'Have fun,' Adam said.

'You too.' Cara eyeballed Chris and then the corner of her spotlessly neat desk and the Burger King polystyrene box poised conspicuously at its outer reaches. 'Chris. Burger. Out of my wealth corner. Now.' Then she turned and marched crisply out of the office.

Chris looked up hazily, still intent on drooling at the screen. 'Adam, do you think Cara's a lesbian?'

'No.'

'She eats a lot of vegetarian food.'

'I don't think the two things are necessarily connected, mate.'

'Oh,' Chris said. 'You sure?'

