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Diving In

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Chapter one

As the hot water pounded down on me, I was suddenly aware I was not alone. Someone was standing very close to me, under the same shower. I opened my eyes, blinking away water. It was him. He must have followed me out of the pool. Water was splashing on to his broad shoulders, running off his body and on to mine.

He shrugged, smiled. He was so beautiful. "All the others are taken. Do you mind . . . sharing?"

I couldn't answer. Without knowing what I was doing, I began unscrewing the cap from my shower gel.

He took it from me. "Let me do your back. The bits you can't . . . reach." Then he turned me round gently and began rubbing gel over my shoulders, with wonderful, sensual strokes. . .

"You've got fabulous skin," he murmured.

I turned slowly towards him under the pounding water. His face was almost touching mine. He laid one hand against my cheek, and said. . .

"ARE YOU DEAD OR JUST COMATOSE?"

My mind twitched. Winced.

"Colette! Can you HEAR me? I've been shouting for

hours! Have you died up there or something?! Shift yourself! If you intend EATING dinner tonight perhaps you could come and put some MINIMAL EFFORT into its CREATION!"

And with those words my favourite fantasy was nuked. The steamy shared shower evaporated. My grim, solitary bedroom took its place.

Reality was back.

It was my mum shouting. She likes to use words, lots of them. "Come and help get dinner" is far too homely a phrase for her. And she likes to be loud. Very loud.

With a groan of regret I heaved myself up from my bed. I hate the way Mum blasts into my inner life like that – just as it'd been getting really good, too. It's bad enough sharing a living space, but when you have your fantasies invaded as well it's too much. Mind you, it was a pretty pathetic fantasy. A total fantasy. Guys like the one I was thinking of didn't come and share your shower at the pool. They hung around glowering until one was free, or they kicked someone younger and weaker out of theirs.

I trooped downstairs, deflated. Cooking sounds and smells met me halfway down. Thursday night suppertime. Exactly the same as all the other suppertimes. They were supposed to be the high point of the day, the warm centre of our shared family existence. I hated them.

Every member of the family was expected to help prepare the meal, or Mum lectured you on freeloading. She was very hot on not being a domestic slave. She said that would be deeply unhealthy for all of us, not just her. I thought it might have been quite nice sometimes – kind of restful – but I suppose I could see her point.

The kitchen was in its usual chaos – never quite cleared up from the last meal, every surface crammed with stuff. Mum was standing at the stove, banging away theatrically and cooking up a big pot of her special Mediterranean stew. She dominated the kitchen. Dominated it? She practically filled it.

"Larger than life" is how her admiring female friends describe her. You couldn't describe her as fat, that's too lazy a word. Enormous will do. She has formidable energy. She's strong. She's loud. And she's *huge*. "Disagree with me," she seems to say, "and I'll crush you!"

My little sister Sarah was in the kitchen too, standing at the table. She would have already peeled the potatoes, mixed the crumble, earned Mum's approval. She makes a religion out of Being Helpful. Evil little creep.

Mum turned from the stove to glare at me. "Ah, Colette, you've decided to JOIN US at last, have you?" she boomed. "Very good of you. Perhaps you could

chop some cucumber – if that's not too ONEROUS a task?"

Dad came through the door. He must have heard Mum bellowing. Come to think of it, they must have heard her five doors down the street. He looked anxiously towards the stove and asked, "Anything still to do, dear?"

Mum picked up the colander of draining potatoes and shook it furiously, as though she'd caught it stealing from her handbag. "No, Frank. As usual, it's all in hand."

Dad gave a little shudder. He had Failed To Help – again.

Sharing the housework was the subject of an ongoing, bitter dialogue between my parents. Well, more like a one-way complaint from Mum to Dad. It's sad, because Dad genuinely believes that men and women should share the work in the house, but somehow he never manages it. He gets so involved in his own work – he's a freelance architect – that it's always too late by the time he offers any help. So all Mum's views about the worthlessness of men are confirmed, and she's permanently resentful, pointedly martyred.

She has a job too, you see, five mornings a week. Speech therapy. That's a joke. She'd be the only one doing the speaking. Her patients must need therapy when they LEAVE one of her sessions. It must be pretty

tense being locked up with her for an hour, trying to get a word in.

Mum spooned a large dollop of stew into her mouth, savoured it, and announced that supper was ready. Dad sat down guiltily and I joined him. Mum heaved the huge cast-iron pot from the stove and slammed it on the table. Sarah followed virtuously with the potatoes. Supper – oh, joy – was served.

"Well, Sarah," Mum beamed as she doled out plates of red and green gunk. "How was your GYMNASTIC SESSION today?"

We were on to Stage Two of the family meal. The bonding. The sharing. The sitting-down-as-a-proper-family. No matter if you wanted to go out, or had belly-ache and couldn't swallow a thing – you sat down As A Family and talked together. Correction. Listened to Mum together.

I switched off. First my mind drifted back to my swimming-pool fantasy, but that was a bit uncomfortable, with Mum and Dad sitting right across the table. Sex, you understand, had no place in our homelife. It was absent, acknowledged only in theory. We were the family of Immaculate Perception. In fact I still couldn't quite believe that Mum and Dad must have done it nine years ago, to get Sarah. Maybe they'd just found her under a gooseberry bush, like the old stories said. Or by the drain, or something.

So I switched safely to thinking just about swimming. I always go swimming on a Thursday night, and I really enjoy it. That great pure rush of water as you dive in, washing all the clatter of the day away. The silence under water. That feeling of power as you move forwards, faster and faster.

And – getting back to sex for just a minute – tonight, Achilles might be at the pool. On a Thursday, he nearly always was.

Achilles is the subject of all my endless fantasies. I've been watching him for weeks now, and dreaming about him. It makes my real life a bit more bearable.

He's a great subject for a fantasy, too. He must be about seventeen and he's *gorgeous.* Long, lean, muscular. Thick, dark brown hair. And there's something about his face that just – well, I fancy him so much it hurts. It gives me a real, physical pain sometimes.

He swims very fast, no splashing, like a shark. He gets out of the pool very fast too – you have to be quick to see him go. I started calling him Achilles because he makes me think of a Greek god – and because he has an A monogrammed on his very posh towel. It probably stands for Andrew or something, but I think of him as Achilles. Exquisite, heroic—

"RHUBARB CRUMBLE, Colette – or is that too prosaic for your refined tastes?" Mum's voice interrupted my blissful thoughts. Again. She must somehow tap into

my mind processes and step in to censor them whenever they get near sex.

I mumbled something about needing to get to the pool, then I shot off to get my bike, high on the thought that I might see Achilles. Pathetic? Well, everyone needs something to look forward to in their life.

Chapter two

On the road, I pedalled fast. I needed to work off some of that Mediterranean Stew before I got in the pool. The roads were crawling with the usual bike-blind motorists, but I managed to get to the sports centre in one piece. As I freewheeled in, the car park was filling up with the executive bunch arriving for their after-work anti-stress exercise sessions. I locked up my bike and headed through the big glass doors. I seemed to be the only person there under thirty.

The sports centre is very flashy. It closed down last winter for refurbishment. When it re-opened in the spring the prices had been refurbished too. Now lots of kids from the town just can't afford to go any more. Mum is loud in her condemnation. Local needs, she says, have been betrayed, and commercial concerns have been allowed to rule. The old pool has been turned into an elitist health club.

In theory I agree with her, but in practice I have to admit I love the new place. It's light and airy with hot open showers and huge tropical plants. It's a treat just to go there.

Despite her misgivings, Mum paid for my

membership so I can swim there as often as I like. She only feels the need to tell me how privileged I am about once a week or so. There was one condition attached to her generosity – that I also do self-defence classes at the same place. You get a special reduced rate for them if you're a member. Mum wants me well equipped for the male-female war ahead.

I found a cubicle and changed, then I stopped in front of the mirrors to tie back my hair. My reflection never exactly cheers me up, but at least my hair's OK. It's long and dark and I've got masses of it. After my eyes, which are also kind of long and dark, it's probably my best feature. Not that you see much of it, tied back for swimming.

I went out to the pool, dived in and swam the first length slowly, to warm up. Then I looked around me, hopefully. I was rewarded. Achilles was walking out of the changing rooms. He moved easily, with just a trace of male swagger.

I pulled up at the side, pretending water had gone up my nose so I could stare at him. "You creep, Coll," I scolded myself. "You besotted creep." But I stayed watching.

He walked to the edge of the pool, looking down its length to find a space to swim in. Long legs, broad shoulders. And that face. I ogled shamelessly. He moved a couple of steps to his left, and pulled on his

goggles, obscuring – though not completely – his gorgeousness. Then he dived into the water with barely a splash.

I took a deep breath. I realized I was grinning. "You lech," I said to myself. "You lecherous cow."

But I felt wonderful. Just to see him felt wonderful. I shot under the water and ploughed up to the deep end, first crawl, then breast-stroke. I was only two lanes away from him. Length after length after length. Swimming along in the same water as him, washed over by his waves. Smitten.

One day, I told myself, *I'm going to speak to him. Just not yet.* He might ignore me, snub me, laugh at me. Fantasy was safer.

All I really managed to see of his face as we swam was a quick blur as he swung round at the end of the pool. Then, as I came to the end of my thirty lengths, I couldn't see him at all. He must have done his usual top-speed exit.

I heaved myself out of the water, disappointed. The buzz had worn off a bit. In fact I was exhausted. I stomped off to the poolside showers and took my time shampooing my hair and rinsing off the chlorine. There were half-a-dozen other people sluicing off with me and their "yaah – oh, absolutely" conversations were excruciating to listen to. One guy obviously felt acutely deprived not having his mobile under the shower with him. He kept yapping away

about having to touch base with Geoffrey on the latest figures soonest. Enough to make you puke.

Grumpily, I left the showers, headed towards the lockers – and ran smack into Achilles.

I rebounded backwards. "*S-ss-sorry*!" I breathed. I sounded like a deflating balloon. I bet I looked like one too – a big pink one. I felt myself glow with shock, embarrassment, and the fact that for one second at least I'd been in head to toe contact with him.

"I've made you wet," I said, reddening further.

He laughed, briefly. "Not much. You OK?"

What a *voice*. Deep. Intelligent. Fabulous.

I have a thing about voices. I once trailed a gorgeous-looking bloke for weeks, in and out of coffee bars, through the shopping centre and up to the park, only to find that when he spoke he sounded like a chipmunk. My lust had died with the discovery.

"F-fine," I stuttered. "S-s-sorry." Wow, I'm some conversationalist.

He smiled. White teeth, stunning. Damp hair clinging to his forehead. My knees buckled slightly. Then he walked off.

The bike ride home was to the sound of Beethoven's Fifth in my head. As I pedalled I occasionally shot out a hand to conduct the really powerful bits. He had spoken to me. *He* had spoken to *me.*

* * *

Not even getting home that evening could dampen my spirits completely. “Anyone around?” I shouted cheerfully, as I let myself in.

“Kitchen!” came the slightly surprised, slightly sarcastic reply.

Mum was still ensconced at the head of the big kitchen table but this time she had Claire, one of her friends, listening to her instead of her family. Dad and Sarah had scarpered. No one sits in on one of Mum’s sessions with a friend unless they have to.

The sink was piled high with sticky-looking pans and a J-cloth had expired beside a trail of stew on the stove. The family clearing-up had obviously not happened. The pans would sit there for hours, dried food hardening like a reproach. Judging by the newly opened bottle of red wine on the table, Mum wasn’t about to get up and start in on them.

Only me left. I was still feeling good enough to head for the sink intending to start scrubbing when Mum interrupted me.

“Colette!” she boomed. “Leave that, dear – do it later. Have some wine with us – get yourself a glass.”

I wasn’t sure which had the least appeal – washing pans or joining the twosome at the table. But I didn’t really have a lot of choice. I got a glass from the cupboard.

Mum was holding forth on her all-time favourite topic – the inadequacies of the male sex. She

disapproves of men as a species. She thinks they're generally hopeless, worthless and a complete waste of space. Not to mention destructive and violent and bullying. Not to her, of course – you'd need to be the Incredible Hulk before you pushed her around – but to most women. She thinks we'd be far better off in a single-sex world. Female-sex, that is.

I sat down with them and Claire smirkingly poured me out a couple of inches of wine. The conversation was focusing on Claire's ex now: he was getting a real drubbing. They carried on as if I was only a minor interruption. Which I suppose I was.

Mum liked me to sit in on these sort of conversations, especially now that I've turned sixteen. Learning from real life, real pain. Her many women friends – divorced, separated, or living, like her, in uneasy truce – were welcome to drop in at any time; open house. I called them the Wailing Sisterhood – to myself, that is. Some of them I liked, but most of them were awful, and they were so depressing to listen to. As far as they were concerned, men and women just couldn't get along, heterosexuality didn't work, and men, without exception, were pigs.

But I like men. I really do. I like watching them, thinking about them. I even hope to have one of my own one day. Sometimes when they all talk I feel like shouting, "So your life went wrong – why assume

mine will? Maybe it'll work for me!" But this would only invite a pitying smile, and a "She'll learn" comment. You can't win with them. You can't even compete.

I took a last glug of wine and got up from the table. "Night, Mum," I said. "Night, Claire." They didn't really spot that I was leaving. At least I'd got out of the washing-up. If it was still there tomorrow morning, a symbol of the family that failed to share the chores, maybe I'd do it then.

In my room, I stripped off my clothes and rubbed some body lotion into my legs. I still smelt strongly of chlorine, despite the shower. Then I slid into bed.

As I shut my eyes, I let the smell of chlorine take me back to the pool. That impact when I'd bumped into him. His face close up. His perfect dive into the water. His voice. . .