

Guess who's coming to lunch?

Aidan always knew introducing his parents to his new partner was going to be tricky, but not *this* tricky...

That morning when the unexpected phone call came, Isabella Chiltern was sitting in her favourite chenille chair, flanked by cushions, reading *The Book Of Chameleons*.

Only when she heard Anthony talking rather loudly did she glance up and quickly tuck her clandestine reading behind a cushion. One moment she saw her husband's ageing image through her highly hung mirror – its hand-carved frame covered in gold leaf – the next he was sidling up to her, wedging the phone between their heads.

'Mother is on the phone, too,' he shouted.

Isabella sat up straight, pressed her skirt with both hands and braced herself for Aidan's news. But when she heard her son's gleeful greetings and chit-chat about the weather, she somehow knew that whatever the news, it couldn't be too dreadful.

'So, darling,' she interrupted. 'To what do we owe this lovely surprise? We rarely hear from you these days and never at weekends. Is there something wrong?'

'On the contrary,' Aidan said. 'I have some rather good news.'

'Do tell,' Anthony chimed in.

'At last, I have a new partner,' Aidan said happily.

Isabella felt her heart pounding. His divorce had been finalised scarcely a year ago. She could hardly stop her mind from racing ahead. What did he mean by partner?

'Partner?' Anthony said jokingly. 'Please don't tell us that you're coming out of the closet after suffering 25 years in a bad marriage, old chap.'

Aidan laughed curtly. 'Absolutely not, Father,' he said. 'You needn't worry. It's more like I have come out of a fog.'

'Who is she then?' his father asked.

'Slim Withers is her name,' he said, sounding quite besotted. 'She's the most gorgeous creature the good Lord has ever made. I can't wait for you both to meet her. How about lunch tomorrow?'

'Lunch?' Isabella said questioningly, remembering their long-standing Sunday lunch at Anthony's club, where he'd been a member for donkey's years. They couldn't possibly invite Aidan and a new girlfriend along to that. Heaven knows they'd suffered enough scandal there already.

'What about...?'

'Half past one?' Anthony interrupted.



Isabella moved away from the phone, folded her arms and shot him a heated stare. Was he mad, inviting this new person to the club? She shook her head violently, and mouthed 'absolutely not'. At the very least they should check her out first. Anyway, they'd never be able to fit two more people in at such short notice. Never!

She whispered, 'Tea? What about tea? I could throw something together at the Lawns.'

Anthony lowered his eyes and kept talking. 'Yes, we'd love to meet her. Shall I find a spot?'

'I thought we'd tag along at the club,' Aidan said.

'Fully booked,' Isabella said, leaning in closer to the phone again.

'Very well then,' Aidan said. 'I'll find a spot halfway between Bucks and London.'

They both agreed.

'Oh yes,' he said, before ringing off. 'There is one more thing.' Isabella questioned Anthony with her eyes. He shrugged his

shoulders. 'Slim is African-American. Toodle-oo.'

It was just as well that Aidan had put the phone down. Isabella's voice had stuck in her throat and her husband was knocked for six, too. He somehow fell onto her, squashing her. She pushed him and fully expected him to have his say, but he got up, brushed himself off and proceeded to leave.

'Aren't you going to say something?' Isabella called after him.

'What is there to say?' he replied over his shoulder, without even looking back.

Isabella grabbed one of the cushions and hurled it in his direction. It hit the floor far short of him without so much as a sound. Exasperated, she dug out her book, found her place and began reading again. But try as she might to focus on the eccentric narrator of her novel, all she could think about was her own life becoming quite colourful.



The sun darted behind the clouds, casting a dreadful shadow over another spring day. The Chilterns waited at an odd restaurant, no better than an American roadside café.

The lime-green tablecloth flapped in a brisk wind. Isabella hung onto her paper serviette, the same horrible colour as the tablecloth. She wished the staff would close the door. After all, they were standing around in green vests and dicky bows, hands behind their backs, like they had nothing to do.

'We could have taken them to the club, you know.' Anthony eyed Isabella.

She forced the paper napkin onto her lap.





'I think we've had enough scandal at the club, don't you?'

and so on, but if the truth were known, she had not had an encounter with one. Anthony, on the other hand, had had many opportunities as a retired senior partner in one of the most prestigious law firms in the country to meet all sorts of people.

'Isabella,' Anthony called out to her. She glanced at him. 'You must put this colour thing out of your mind before the girl gets here. If you don't, Aidan will see right through you. Neither of us wants that.'

'You're right,' she said quietly. Isabella took a sip of her water, noticing that the restaurant was now crowded and teeming with laughter and chatter. Still, she kept worrying about their son's choice of partner. 'It's just that Aidan has already had one bad marriage.'

'Who said anything about marriage?' Anthony said, frowning his brow. 'The boy hasn't lost his marbles. He's already lost half of his fortune to one woman. Surely, he'll want to hang on to the rest.' He gazed assuredly at

Isabella. 'This girl is an intriguing, new friend, nothing more.'

'Partner,' Isabella said. 'That suggests something serious.'

'On the contrary,' her husband said, pulling at his jacket. He stretched his neck. 'It's a modern-day term of endearment, that's all. Ah, they're here.'

Isabella patted the delicate pearls around her neck. 'Aren't you glad you chose that blazer?' she asked, eyeing him.

'Not in the least,' Anthony retorted. 'I still say the ochre one was more appropriate. The girl will think I'm an old stuffy egg, dressed for the regatta.'

'Surely she won't judge a book by its cover.'

Anthony grunted and shot her an ironic glance, then jumped up from his chair to receive their guests.



At first glance Slim looked svelte, like a model, just as Isabella imagined her own daughter would have been had she honoured the pregnancy. She somehow knew it would have been a girl. Her heart felt heavy, remembering her youthful past. Quickly, she put the thoughts aside and focused on her approaching son and his partner.

Up close, the girl was petite and perfectly shaped, with untamed curly hair, several curls falling over her forehead. Unable to calm her clacking chest, Isabella could hardly rise. She jerked when Aidan leaned over to kiss her. He wore an open-collar white shirt, the buttons undone down to his stomach. And that was

not the worst of it. He sported a flashy earring in his left ear. She couldn't help buttoning up his shirt.

Aidan stopped her from meddling and introduced the girl, who extended her hand, exhibiting an expensive-looking diamond ring. Dazzled by it, Isabella only caught snippets of the chit-chat. The girl was from Florida. She was named after her father, a retired jazz musician, nicknamed Slim. Hypocritically, Anthony said he rather liked her unusual name.



Before long, the four of them were sitting around the table, having a drink together. Isabella could hardly keep her eyes off the girl. She had perfect white teeth and a chiselled face that came to life when she smiled. And her grammar was impeccable, albeit she had an American drawl. Isabella longed to tell her how wonderful she looked and sounded, but she contained herself.

It was Anthony who pointed out that her skin was absolutely stunning.

'It's my tan,' she laughed coquettishly.

'Why, I didn't know that coloured people tanned,' Anthony said rather freely.

Before Isabella could agree, the girl coughed and spat wine across the table. Aidan, roused in anger, threw his father a menacing look and began fussing over the girl clumsily.

'Did I say something wrong?' Anthony asked, dabbing at his own face with his napkin.

'The word *coloured* is not only derogatory, but it's also politically incorrect,' Aidan said, without any restraint.

'Darling, keep your voice down,' Isabella said. 'Please!'

'Why should I?' he said. 'I told you both that Slim is African-American.'

'I'm sorry to have upset you, dear,' Anthony said frowning. 'But during the war, we openly used the word coloured and no one objected to it.'

'That was then,' Aidan said. 'This is now. The word is so yesterday, Father.'

'I do apologise,' Anthony said, lowering his gaze. Still Aidan looked at him sharply.

'Sweetheart,' the girl whispered. 'Your father has apologised. It's an easy mistake. It happens.' She glanced at Anthony and then at Isabella. 'I'm so sorry for my bad manners,' she said. 'It's just that I was a bit taken aback.' She lowered her eyes. 'All skin tans, Mr Chiltern. Skin is skin, you know.'

Isabella had never seen her husband look more sheepish than at that moment. Clearly, he wanted to sink into his chair. Aidan, on the other hand, sat tall and beamed. And quite rightly so, Isabella found herself thinking. Thank goodness the food has arrived. ■