

UNBUTTONED

He says it to everyone who comes to work in his department: 'My office door is always open.' Robin Lipton is that sort of manager. Old-school but relaxed. Nonetheless, Judy Hill always knocks — briskly, crisply, twice — although she doesn't wait for an answer.

—Your coffee, Robin, she says, and two almond croissants.

Looking up from the muddle of papers spread across his desk, Robin smiles his lovely smile. The smile that enchants her.

—You spoil me, Judy, he says.

—Shall I unbutton you? she says.

Robin stands in front of her, helpfully lifting his tie. As she undoes the buttons of his shirt, she wonders if Robin is remembering his mother. Or a lover from the past? Is this what lovers do? Judy doesn't know. She's never had a lover. Only what her colleague, Denise Duffy, calls 'occasional flings'. But none of them has developed into anything more. Re-buttoning Robin's shirt, she inhales the sharp, sweet scent of his old-fashioned aftershave.

—There we are, she says.

—What would I do without you, Judy? he says.

Since becoming Robin's 'right-hand woman', this has been their morning ritual. Judy brings Robin his coffee and croissants from the French patisserie. She then unbuttons, and re-buttons, his shirt. Does he never notice that his buttons are misaligned? Does he never look in a mirror? Judy would also like to straighten his tie, comb his hair, brush down his collar but — for the present at least — she feels this would be over-stepping the mark.

—Would you ask Denise to come in? says Robin.

Denise's blouse has several buttons undone. Her patterned turquoise bra is plainly visible. Why does she do it? To provoke? To entice? To show how easily men are led astray? Denise Duffy has a low opinion of men, her husband in particular. 'Like a fish

needs a bicycle,' she says. It's her favourite catch-phrase. This doesn't prevent her from engaging in flings of her own with a collection of colleagues. Does Judy disapprove? She isn't certain.

—You're wasting your time there, says Denise.

—What *are* you talking about? says Judy. In any case, how do you know?

—Oh, I know, says Denise, raising her eyebrows. Believe me, I know.

Among her duties, Denise performs an HR function. She is guardian of the department's personnel files. Judy would like to study Robin's file. There are facts she'd like to establish. How old he is, for example. Forty? Fifty? Is he divorced? Separated? Widowed? Denise could easily provide the answers but she insists on being discreet.

— He's old enough to be your father, says Denise. That's all you need to know. But maybe that's what you're looking for?

Judy pictures her father. A military man with a clipped moustache and cold, dry eyes. Her father needed no one. Neither his wife nor his daughter.

—Robin's asking for you, says Judy.

Denise takes out the perfume she keeps in her desk and sprays her wrists and neck. She then straightens her skirt, undoes another button and, smiling her sharp scarlet smile, closes Robin's office door behind her.

Judy Hill is known for her frightening efficiency. 'No sooner do you give Judy something to do than it's done,' Robin Lipton has been heard to say. 'She's marvellous, of course, but keeping her occupied can be something of a challenge.'

Judy has said several times that she'd be happy to take over Denise Duffy's HR responsibilities. It would make sense. Denise often lets things slip. She takes extended lunch-breaks. She has afternoon 'dental appointments'. As a result, she struggles to complete certain tasks and has to stay late. Judy offers to stay late, too, but Robin always says: 'No, Judy. You've enough on your plate and you have your own life to lead.'

Although Judy sometimes wonders if she has.

The call from the recruitment agency comes out of the blue. They won't say who recommended her. She sends her curriculum vitae and receives an invitation to an interview. A stimulating hour is spent with Miss Siskin and Miss Mooney, both charming, businesslike women and there follows the offer of a job at twice her current salary.

—May I think about it? she says.

—Of course, says Miss Siskin.

—Certainly, says Miss Mooney.

—Naturally I'll be sorry to lose you, Judy, says Robin. But you must do what's best for your career.

This isn't precisely what she'd hoped to hear. She knows, of course, that no one is indispensable, but Judy believes she will be difficult to replace.

Leaving her convent school in Surrey, Judy conceived what she thought of as her 'Bletchley Park' vision of herself. Loyal, competent, with a range of unsuspected skills. She's the only person in the department who has mastered Pitman Shorthand. In all likelihood, she's the only person in the postcode. Pitman Shorthand was something she taught herself in the evenings. In the same way that she taught herself web design, double-entry bookkeeping and Esperanto. One never knows when something may prove useful. Although Esperanto never has.

Her Pitman Shorthand was the reason that Robin hired her. He still likes to give dictation: memos, letters, reports. 'It's terribly old-fashioned, I know,' he says, 'but I think more clearly when I have a live body in front of me.'

Robin is wonderful with people. He remembers birthdays, hobbies, holidays and the names of spouses, partners, children. But he's hopeless with technology. It's Judy who types his emails, writes his blog, updates his Facebook page, composes his Tweets. Whenever Robin attempts any of these tasks himself, things go badly wrong. Data is deleted. Files are corrupted. Documents disappear. Judy can usually retrieve the situation but — and she has said this to Robin several times — she prefers him not to switch on his computer.

It was never established what Robin downloaded that caused the department's network to crash so calamitously. After a fruitless morning seeking a solution, Judy admits defeat and reluctantly summons IT support from the basement. The youths from IT are generally unkempt, monosyllabic and disobliging, but the young man who now presents himself is refreshingly different.

Paolo Pereira's English isn't perfect but he is very — a word Judy normally distrusts — 'charming'. His hair shines; his eyes smile; his soft olive complexion is flawless. And so neatly-dressed. Stylish in a pleasing, if faintly foreign, fashion. A young man, she thinks, who will never need his shirt re-buttoning.

In half-an-hour the problem is solved. A slither of malware has somehow slipped through the firewall. The system is re-booted and all is well. Robin expresses himself both grateful and relieved. Technology problems panic him and — in light of this recent experience — he decides that henceforward his department should never be without its own dedicated IT support. Telephone calls are made. Emails are exchanged. Favours are traded. And, following a senior management meeting on the top floor, Paolo Pereira is installed in Robin's department.

—My office door is always open, says Robin.

Paolo looks puzzled.

—What Robin means, says Judy, is that you can go to see him whenever you wish.

—Yes, says Robin. Any time you like.

Paolo nods. Robin smiles. It seems they understand each other.

In truth, there's nothing like enough work to occupy Paolo and never will be. Does this matter? Judy and Denise agree that it doesn't.

—Such a sweet boy, says Denise.

—So polite, says Judy, and terribly tidy.

As a consequence, Paolo spends most of the day with his iPad, a grammar book and a highlighter, improving his English. Whenever some aspect of the language

particularly puzzles him — phrasal verbs, for example, or prepositions — he sits beside Judy while she patiently explains the linguistic idiosyncrasies that are bothering him.

The cologne Paolo wears — a blend of lemongrass, lime and guava — conjures up visions of a tropical garden. She feels warm breezes on her cheek and neck. She hears exotic birds singing sweetly in the trees ...

—Unbelievable! says Denise, returning to her desk. You couldn't make it up. Really you couldn't.

—What? says Judy.

—The scandal in the Accounts Department. Two of our colleagues have been caught 'canoodling' by the water-cooler.

—Canoodling?

—Isn't it priceless? says Denise. And it gets better. The guilty parties are Miss Oates from Accounts Payable and Mr Wilde from Bought Ledger. As I say, you couldn't make it up. Company policy now strictly prohibits all workplace romances. No exceptions. Which means they've both been summarily sacked.

—I had no idea that was company policy, says Judy

—A diktat last month from Head Office, says Denise. Didn't I circulate it? What's important, of course, is not to get caught. Robin thinks it's perfectly ridiculous but the order has come from on high and there's nothing he can do except buy them drinks at their leaving party tomorrow.

For the rest of the day Judy is lost in thought.

That afternoon, Robin has a senior management meeting on the top floor and Denise leaves early for one of her 'dental appointments'. By half-past five only Judy and Paolo remain in the office. Irregular verbs are causing him difficulties but for once Judy's distracted explanations haven't helped.

It's then she has a Bletchley Park moment.

She goes to Denise's desk, sits down and logs on. The password isn't difficult to guess: 'FISHONABICYCLE' (one word). Judy won't know what she's looking for until she

finds it. Then there it is. A spreadsheet: 'APPRAISALS (underscore) CONFIDENTIAL (underscore) HIGHLY'. Judy opens it.

A list of employees — past and present but exclusively male — with what appears to be an elaborate scoring system. Judy prefers not to speculate which skills or attributes are being measured and recorded. What she does notice, however, is that nothing appears in the columns beside Robin Lipton's name except a question mark, and that Paolo's name doesn't appear at all. Judy closes the file, smiles quietly and logs off.

As she's leaving, she passes Robin Lipton returning from his meeting.

—Enjoy your evening, Judy, he says. Soon be the weekend.

—You, too, Robin, she says. Good night Paolo.

Friday evening: At their leaving party in the Pig and Fiddle, Mr Wilde and Miss Oates seem subdued, but Paolo is in good spirits. He, too, is leaving and people are buying him drinks and saying how sorry they are that he's going. He has promised to come back to see them and maybe he will. Denise arrives later than everyone else. She notices that Judy isn't there and asks if anyone knows where she is. No one does.

Saturday morning: Judy Hill drafts her letter of resignation. On Sunday morning she revises and prints it, puts it in an envelope and affixes a first class stamp. On Monday morning she telephones Denise to tell her that she won't be returning to the office. She is owed more than six weeks' holiday and won't need to work out her notice. Judy doesn't ask to speak to Robin Lipton.

The following Monday Judy will start work with Miss Siskin and Miss Mooney where she will remain for many years, but returning to her last Friday morning ...

Robin's office door is open. She knocks but doesn't wait for an answer.

—Your coffee, Robin, she says, and the two *pastéis de nata*.

—You spoil me, Judy.

—Shall I unbutton you?

He stands in front of her, helpfully lifting his tie. But this morning there's no need. His buttons are perfectly aligned. She undoes them anyway. Out of habit. And to disguise her confusion. Re-buttoning Robin's shirt, she inhales the sharp, sweet scent of his old-fashioned aftershave. Except that she doesn't. It's an entirely different fragrance. One she knows well. A delicate blend of lemon, lime and guava. She feels a chill wind on her cheek and neck. She hears gaudy, raucous birds shrieking and mocking her from the trees.