

STELLA DUFFY

Immaculate Conceit



'Witty, punchy and refreshingly irreverent'

INDEPENDENT

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SCEPTRE

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STELLA DUFFY

Born in London and brought up in New Zealand, Stella Duffy is an author, actor, comedy improviser and presenter.

She has written two other novels published by Sceptre, *Singling Out the Couples* and *Eating Cake*, as well as four crime novels, *Calendar Girl*, *Wavewalker*, *Beneath the Blonde*, and *Fresh Flesh*. She now lives in London.

ALSO BY STELLA DUFFY

Calendar Girl

Wavewalker

Beneath the Blonde

Singling Out the Couples

Eating Cake

Fresh Flesh

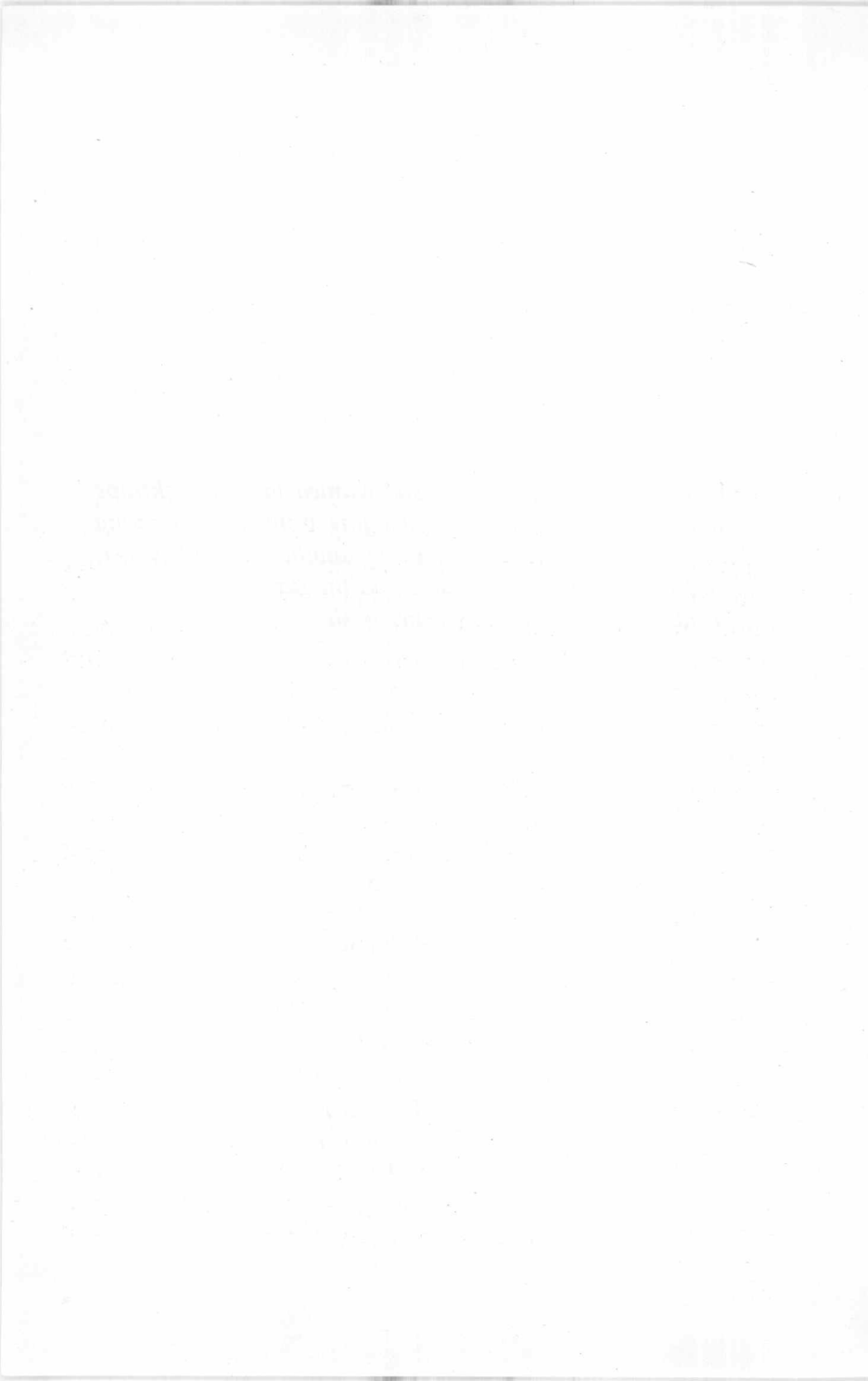
for Agent X-129 and the
Faerie Queen
for allowing the possibility

(Bear with me, it's been a big year.)

Thanks to my family and friends who supported my desire to keep going even when most of them really wanted to make me lie down and rest; the fantastic email support network; Carole Welch and all at Hodder for their love and understanding in a difficult time; Stephanie Cabot, Eugenie Furniss and Yvonne Baker for their constant support; the real Helen, Sandras and Caroline – not lap dancers but great dancers; the amazing Tartcity chicks; the Improbable Lifegamers for being part of the process and giving me something wonderful to stay well for; the men in white shining armour who beat off the baddies and the women in red silk who kept them breathing (and partying); Ruth Curson and Dr Buchanan for their care and kindness; all at King's College Hospital Breast Unit and the complementary alternatives who generously went along with my plans and made keeping going possible; Andy and Glyn for taking care of the girl; and Shelley for protecting me when the world was too scary to look at and for being beside me on those long walks through the park.

When Sofia was a little girl she wanted to be a tightrope walker or a trapeze artist – swinging from the welcoming hands of one potential saviour to another, no safety net, thrusting her trust at strangers and the sky.

And then she was granted her wish.



Sofia should have known better. Sofia Anna Bridget Fisher, twenty-eight, resident of Crouch End, really should have known better. A strange man, sitting on the end of her bed, at four o'clock on a Tuesday morning. A man she didn't recognise and hadn't heard getting into her flat. A man who had found his way in past locked doors and safety-catch windows. And she didn't know why he was there, what he wanted nor, failing that, what to do with him. No idea.

Sofia worked late all week but kept Sunday and Monday nights for herself – Sunday was, if at all possible, exclusively reserved for an evening in, catching up on all the telly she'd taped over the week, with Monday nights free for whatever. On this particular night, a trashy drugs-and-low-life movie made in Hollywood by people who evidently thought all heroin addicts looked like Kurt Cobain three years dead, and dug up to pop over for a nice cup of tea. Sofia pictured her habit-run colleague at the club where she worked and wondered why nobody ever showed users wearing clothes from Voyage and tucking into a good steak sandwich, as Helen regularly did just after midnight. She'd been to watch the movie with her ex-boyfriend and downstairs neighbour, James. Unusually, they had disagreed as to the merits of the film, James loved every frame, she loathed it, and

the ensuing discussion which rapidly turned into a fierce argument only marginally spoiled their meal. It took more than fighting with James to deter Sofia's enjoyment of her regular fried noodles and green chicken curry. Afterwards she had pulled him into the welcome doors of a last-orders pub and they'd shared three late lagers. Sofia's strategy for last orders was always to buy for a third person, just in case. The Elijah pint being her tacit acknowledgement that the extra half always tasted just that little bit finer for being another five minutes closer to magic midnight. They wove a delicate trek home and sat in the downstairs kitchen where they swift-sipped through a fifth of single malt and then moved on to James's sitting room for late-night telly and dope – too strong and heady for Sofia, she rationed herself to accepting the joint from him only every third time that it was offered. They giggled for a while at the inane screen, debated the pros and cons of the silicone-breasted presenter – too many cons for her, too much of a pro for him – and by the time the cuckoo clock squawked three, it was clearly time for bed.

Sofia had wandered slowly up the eighteen steps from James's flat to hers, taken off her make-up, locked the door, turned out the lights and gone to bed. Amused, fairly content and close to exhausted. She had fallen asleep the minute her head hit the smooth white-cotton pillowcase. Smooth because Sofia ironed her sheets and pillowcases. They were the only things she did iron. Ever.

Now, an hour later she was awake again, very confused and not a little frightened. She was certain she'd closed and locked the door to her own flat when she came upstairs, positive she remembered James double locking their communal front door. Thought she was positive, surely she remembered rightly; pissed yes, stoned a little, but she couldn't have been that bad? She wouldn't be this sober now if she'd been that bad then. She would probably have

slept with James if she'd been that bad then. And yet there he was, a bloke sitting on the end of her bed in the middle of the night. And it wasn't James.

Suddenly completely sober, she thought about her options. Run for the door. But the man was sitting on the end of the bed. The door was beyond the end of the bed. She'd have to run past him. She could scream. She was good at screaming, it had been a well-practised art when she'd worked in Japan. And Sydney, New York, Berlin. And now. But despite her undoubted lung capacity, she was acutely aware that James wouldn't hear a thing. She'd slept beside, under and over him for more than three years, knew how deep James sank into the dream zone. And her bedroom was at the back of the house, his at the front. But she was going to have to do something. The man was watching her.

Deep breath, heart pumping tequila-slammer fast. With a cocaine chaser. Poor scared heart beating really fucking fast. Opened her squinting eyes properly. Sofia sat up – the man didn't move. She looked at him. He looked back, still didn't move, didn't acknowledge her at all. Like one of them wasn't really there. She looked again. Then, because she didn't want to be there herself, didn't want to be in that place and couldn't think what else she could possibly do, Sofia closed her eyes. Just for a moment. Except now she found that she was still looking at him. Even with her eyes closed. Lying back down, eyes closed, she could still see the man sitting on the end of her bed. Not in negative relief image, but really and truly, just the same as she'd seen him with her eyes open. And that was almost understandable. That she could see him with her eyes closed actually made it sort of all right. Because his appearance on the back of her eyelids meant he couldn't really be there and therefore this wasn't happening at all. Now that reasoning did make sense – Sofia certainly wanted it to make sense. It was the dope,

the whisky, the beer. It was her overactive imagination, much praised as a child by eager parents. It was a flashback from an unremembered experience, it was a scene from the movie, it wasn't now. Not happening. Huge relief, big sigh and Sofia's tense shoulders fell three inches back into place. There was no man on the end of her bed. No tall dark man with his own backlighting. She was dreaming, tripping, whatever. She was off her face, it wasn't real and that was brilliant. Sofia snuggled down, pulled up the duvet, ignored the picture playing on the back of her eyelids, turned over, tried to sleep.

Then the bastard started talking.

And didn't stop.

Wouldn't listen to her protests.

Was surprised she didn't jump at the chance he was offering her, surprised she didn't believe him. Didn't want to believe him. But he wouldn't go away either. Leaving wasn't in his brief. He was staying until she said yes. Or no. Until she made a choice.

'You've got to be kidding.'

'Sofia Anna Bridget Fisher?'

'I already told you.'

'Sixty-three Hillside Gardens?'

'Sixty-three B. Maybe you want downstairs? James isn't busy for the rest of his life?'

'No. I want you. You're the one. It's you.'

'Listen mate, I don't know who's put you up to this, I don't know if this conversation is actually happening, but even if you believe what you're saying, even if I believed what you're saying, It's not real. It certainly is not me. You've made a mistake.'

'No.'

'But I'm not right.'

'Apparently you are.'

'I can't be the one.'

'Not for me to say, is it?'

'Look at me, look at my flat, look at my job. I'm a lap dancer.'

'I know. I've seen you.'

'Oh right, now I get it, you're some kind of stalker.'

'More of a guardian.'

'OK, fine. Then I'm a nutter and you're not really here at all.'

He shook his head, stupid grin, rueful grin, cute grin actually, but she wasn't going there. 'I think we both know better than that.'

'I don't.'

'Look Sofia, all I know is, it's my job to come and let you know. Ask you for your answer. It's what I do. You're the dancer, I'm the messenger. I'm just passing on the good news.'

'Yeah, brilliant. Thanks. But look, even if I did believe you – which I don't – even if I thought this was really happening, and I don't think I do – don't I get to be asked what I think? You can't just tell me this is going to happen. I must have some say in it.'

The man frowned, thought for a while, 'Maybe. I'm not sure. I mean, I suppose you could say no. If you really didn't want to do it. But it is a pretty big deal.'

'Big deal? It's impossible.'

'That's right.'

'It doesn't make any sense.'

'Doesn't have to.'

Sofia shook her head, unbelievably frustrated by his calm, 'Listen to me, will you? It really is impossible. It would have to be a bloody miracle.' He looked down at her, slight smile, slow nod, half wink, 'I think that's the point.'

'Oh for God's sake . . .'

Smug smile and bigger nod, 'That too.'

Sofia stood up and the man moved away. Back towards

the door behind him. Moved, except she didn't see him move, didn't see his feet make contact with the floor. Ignored the impossibility dawning on her. Kept playing the angry girl. It was easy, she'd done it before, indignant and furious, Sofia could play bad-mood-girlfriend for hours, she was well practised at it. Role playing in the bedroom. Again. It was a damn sight easier than believing what he was telling her. But the man didn't get the game.

'I need your answer Sofia.'

'Look, this is crazy. You're talking shite, you've broken into my home and you're asking me to make sense of it. I can't. So why don't you just go away, please? Otherwise I'm going to call James. The guy who lives downstairs. I only have to shout and he'll be up in a second. I mean it.'

'No you don't. James sleeps through anything. You know that.'

Anger subsiding, fear trickling in, dangerously close to tears and so not wanting this strange man to see her cry.

'Please go away. Please leave me alone. I don't understand what you want.'

He moved closer to her. No sound of feet on floor. No sound at all. 'I don't mean to frighten you.'

She was stunned to find that she felt calmer now that he was closer and hated herself for it, hated him for it.

'I'm sorry Sofia. But I do need an answer.'

'I can't answer you. You're not making sense.'

'As I said, it doesn't have to make sense. You just have to say.'

'What?'

'Yes or no. You have to choose.'

'What choice is there? How can I choose? You're talking rubbish. Or I'm going nuts. This isn't real. Your fucking feet aren't even on my floor. I don't know what's going on. For Christ's sake, I don't understand.'

The man nodded, held out his hand, 'I know you don't.

And I'm sorry. I understand that this is confusing. But you have to choose anyway. After you've made your choice, I can help, but I need you to decide. I have to have an answer.'

'You've asked me a question that doesn't have an answer, that doesn't make any sense and you want me to take you seriously?'

'I do.'

'And then will you go?'

'Definitely.'

'Promise?'

'Cross my heart.'

'Hope to die?'

The man smiled and shook his head, 'That doesn't work for me.'

'OK. Fine. Yes. If that's what you want. Or no. Whatever. I don't care. Go away. How's that? Will that do? Yes. Or no. Honest, it really doesn't bother me, I just want you out of my room, out of here. I don't know what you're on about, I just want you to go away. OK? All right? Please? Please will you just piss off?'

But the man had gone. Without Sofia seeing him leave. Eyes wide open and pleading, but she was begging thin air. She was talking to the light he'd left behind. The man had gone after she said yes. Given the assent. He never heard the no. Or the whatever. Left on wings of yes.

Sofia looked at her clock. It was still four in the morning. Just as it had been when she first opened her eyes and saw him on the end of her bed. She thought about going downstairs to tell James what she'd just been through, then rapidly thought better of it, couldn't bring herself to try waking him up. Primarily because she had no idea what she'd say to him once she did. Sat for a while, shivered for longer. She cautiously opened her bedroom door, checked the front door into her hallway. Still locked,

undisturbed. Pulled the key from the lock and carefully made her way downstairs, hall lights blazing. Eighteen quiet and nervous steps down to James's flat. Main door double locked, windows closed and safety-caught throughout. She ran back upstairs, slammed and double locked the door behind herself. Turned all the lights on in her flat and made herself a cup of tea, shovelled sugar into it, sat by the window for half an hour, sipping at the sweet, sensible liquid. Eventually her racing heart slowed to a tired stumble and she dragged herself back to bed. Turned off the light after another ten minutes and lay in the fading dark looking at the nearly-morning shadows on her ceiling.

When Sofia closed her eyes, the man was behind her eyelids. Waiting. He smiled, 'Thank you. Thank you very much.'

'Yeah, fine, whatever. I'm tired. I'm clearly turning into a nutter. Go away.'

He held out his right hand to her, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord—'

Sofia just shook her head, 'Oh fuck off.'

He did.

She slept. Immediately and long. And remarkably easy.

Sofia is a dancer. A meant-to-be prima ballerina. From pre-planned vitamin intake to ovulation-day genesis right through to hospital rush, there were always strategies and schemes for this girl, the stated intention of nothing but the best. Whatever it was the little one proved to be good at, that was the course her parents would follow. She was the planned baby – their fantasy child born to make the dream come true. They wanted only the best for her. They wanted only the best from her. Had she been a mathematical genius, scientific prodigy, linguistic ace, it would have been the same. The mother and the father – conscious of the blessing in their new titles – were prepared to pave the path of guaranteed promise. They christened her Sofia, named her for Wisdom. They imagined the getting would be painless – as if the name itself might carry its own power.

When Sofia showed elegant poise as a swaying tree at tender three, she was immediately enrolled in every class available. Ballet and tap and drama and jazz and baby bouncing acrobatics to boot. And she did show promise, and she did work hard, and she took pleasure in rewarding the efforts and love of her home and teachers. Sofia was the star girl. All hope, all ambition focused in the stretch of her supple back and the arc of a perfectly poised arm.