

Shenanigans 4: mutual and selective congratulation

by Sandra Davies

Caroline had long gone, Felix having been forced to recognise the advisability of taking her home, and Tony had taken himself and a bottle of wine to the storeroom where he now slept, sweat damp, dishevelled and odorous, but nevertheless comfortable, for the time being, on a pile of cardboard and bubblewrap.

As the final guests left the gallery, Chloë locked the door and dimmed the central lights, so that only the paintings were spotlit; the corner where she now stood with Liz and Annabel — unaffected by alcohol but intoxicated by success — was mostly in shadow.

“Seven sold, including the two your wonderful husband bought, Liz, half a dozen on a twenty-four hour reserve, plus genuine interest from that double-barrelled bloke who runs a nightclub, Edward Somethington-Someone (I've got it written down, don't worry and his phone number) that's a seriously good result for an opening night.”

And as she extricated a bottle of champagne and three glasses from under her discreet desk Chloë's neat, petite, blonde elegance contemplated Annabel's 'just-shagged' mass of auburn hair and glowingly generous and exotic appearance with gratitude and admiration, only slightly amazed at this stage because although she had doubted whether Annabel would actually produce anything when they had first discussed an exhibition (had, in fact, insisted on regular updates) she had been more than surprised by both the quality of her work and her professional attitude.

“And Liz, the food was delicious and imaginative, people stayed

around a lot longer as a result of wanting to try out the successive dishes you kept so effortlessly bringing out ... I saw you handing out lots of business cards," and kept wondering how on earth such a mousy insignificant person could possibly have attracted - and snared - someone like the devastatingly delicious Leo, Chloë added to herself, not entirely without malice (although she did try to avoid it), and saw the same question mirrored in Annabel's eyes.

Liz, who was no-one's fool, read their thoughts as clearly as if they'd writ them in neon and hung them in the gallery window, and as easily - having learnt long ago that smugness earned her enemies - forgave them for their ignorance; she was about to indicate that she'd forgo the champagne, but saw that Leo, instead of glowering by the door, was stood in front of one of the paintings he'd bought, deep in conversation with Dan, so she accepted a glass and drank deeply ... and perhaps unwisely.

