

She had him at hello, but what happened next...?

After Hello



'Hilarious'
JENNY COLGAN



MHAIRI
McFARLANE

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *YOU HAD ME AT HELLO*

After Hello

MHAIRI
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Prologue

Then ...

It's quarter past eleven on an unremarkable and stereotypically rainy Friday night in Manchester. Except it is remarkable, and everything beyond the water-flecked windows of my flat, the night-lit Manchester, is made of magic and hope and promise and also I might be a little bit drunk.

There are foil lid boxes of food from the Yang Sing strewn around the coffee table in this poser's sprawling city flat full of mirrors and string lights, because I didn't make it as far as the fridge when we stumbled through the door. (My mum would be saying: 'Don't touch the egg fried rice now, it'll be ridden!') I don't know who we thought we were fooling by going to a restaurant instead of just heading straight here, to be honest.

It's our first night together – second, if you're being picky, although Ben didn't stay over after the ill-fated previous tumble – and we're in the stupidly large bed in my flat which doesn't feel oversized with both of us in it, propped up against each other on the pillows, legs tangled together, listening to the soothing hum of the traffic and the post-pub passers-by outside and enjoying a moment of perfect happiness.

I don't even remember any conversation over dinner, just a lot of grinning like loons at each other and pushing food around our plates and holding hands under the table and generally being obnoxious. Until the bill arrived and I said to Ben, 'Would you like to come back to mine?' and he said: 'Nah, it's been a full on sort of day. Would you like to go to WrestleMania with me a week on Wednesday though? Work has a corporate box.'

And for a percentage of a split second I believed him and we both laughed far too much for such a crap joke and I thought: I will never tire of this

friendship. Can it really have happened? A couple, at last? It feels so right but so strange.

We were both nervous beforehand, given the amount of anticipation, until Ben accidentally jabbed his elbow in a stray portion of General Tso's Chicken when we were kissing on the sofa. While laughing at his radioactive red patch, I decided to address the elephant in the room.

'What if we don't worry about this being perfect? It happening is enough for me.'

'I was hoping you'd say that,' Ben said, starting to unbutton his stained shirt which makes my stomach go *whoosh*. 'Then I have a chance of meeting or exceeding expectations.' I laughed, delighted and delirious. 'Seriously. I agree. It doesn't need to be perfect. It already is.'

Yeah. We didn't need to worry.

'Do you think we've changed much since we were twenty-one?' I say, in the post-coital peacefulness.

'Er. In what way? You more than lived up to fond memories, if that's what you—'

'Not like that! In general.' Though I'm glad to hear I don't look like I've melted. That said, this flat has dimmer switches.

'I hope so,' Ben says. 'I look back on that age and want to give myself a good slap.'

'I wasn't any better,' I say.

'You were. You were loyal to your boyfriend and decent and honest and annoyingly northern and not about to run away with the show off from London.'

This ability to see me clearly, but see the best in me before all the bad bits, this is Ben's unique gift.

'Hah, that's crazily magnanimous,' I say.

'Yeah well, it's easy to be the bigger man when I'm the one in bed with you.'

'Ah you're not the bigger ...'

'SHUT UP YOU MOO!' Ben shouts and we start laughing. 'No, honestly,' he continues, 'I'm not sure what kind of boyfriend I would've been back then, either. And I was off travelling, imagine that as our maiden voyage. There was an outdoor toilet situation in Cambodia that I'm pretty sure would've broken us.'

I laugh but it makes me wonder: is it true, or are we comforting ourselves? Were we actually best off not getting together for another ten years after that one-night stand? Would we still be as much in love now? He's here, he's next to me. After all this time and against all the odds. I slide my arm around Ben to prove to myself once again: he's warm and solid and he's *actually here*.

There's so much excitement but some fear, too, as I look out on a future at last with Ben. What did Caroline say, of my Forever Ben fixation? 'It's perfect because it's a fantasy and it's a fantasy because it's perfect.'

'I had Caroline and Mindy in this bed ...'

'Oh aye?' Ben ruffles my hair.

'... For a sleepover. When I had that flat warming.'

'Oh, yeah,' Ben says, with a sigh.

I pause, for a moment, as we both silently ride the bump of remembering that the last time Ben was here, it was with his ex-wife. I may not be the reason they split up, but I hardly helped.

'Caroline said that night that if you and I were meant to be, we would've happened at twenty-one. I felt so bleak. Everything I felt told me we *had* been meant to be, every single piece of logic went against it. And, you know. Morality.'

Ben's quiet and I worry that referring to the now defunct marriage at this point is distasteful.

'... I don't know what "meant to be" means, really, do you?' he says, eventually. 'It suggests there's some sort of God and a grand plan and life happens the way it's supposed to, with or without input from you. Which is a pretty depressing notion, if you think about it. We don't have any free will, if things are *meant to be*.'

'I don't know if that's it. Perhaps it just means, if things mess up, there's usually deeper reasons than the ones you acknowledge.'

'So you're changing your story entirely and saying you didn't like me enough?' Ben laughs.

'No! Oh, I don't know. I didn't mean there were reasons. I wish I'd never raised it.'

Ben squeezes me. 'Say anything you like. Things unsaid have done us enough damage.'

I squeeze him back.

'I'm just in shock that I get another chance.'

‘Me too,’ Ben says.

‘And,’ he adds, adjusting his arm around me, ‘part of you is fretting what if we’re not soulmates. We’re just two people who met at university and still fancy each other and this whole “giant love affair at last” thing is going to go horribly wrong?’

‘Yes, maybe,’ I smile.

‘Well I’d rather have things go wrong with you than right with anyone else,’ Ben says. ‘I think that’s pretty romantic, Chicken Little.’

‘God, that’s it, isn’t it!’ I say. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ I pause. ‘The phrase is *hopelessly* in love. It’s easy to miss the hopeless part.’

‘I’ve accepted your potential hopelessness as a partner,’ Ben says.

‘Likewise.’

‘Also,’ Ben says, ‘kiss me like that again, and then tell me we’re not soulmates.’

And I do, and I can’t.

1

Two years later ...

While we always thought any Mindy wedding would go *supersize with curly fries*, we didn't anticipate it would extend to falconry.

The four of us – me, Mindy, Caroline and Ivor – are having a Thursday-night dinner at The Grill On The Alley, which is basically a poshed-up TGI Friday.

It's a weekly catch-up tradition that Caroline and I put in place when our friends Mindy and Ivor got together. As great as it was and as pleased as we were for them, we didn't want factions and politics developing and this seemed a good way of 1) ensuring the democratic state of the four of us as equal friends continued and 2) not having to worry about what to cook for dinner 1/7 of the time.

We needn't have worried it would imbalance anything though: the pairing up has made them even more like themselves, somehow. She's still a rainbow of nonsense and he's her straight man and (now not-so-secret) biggest fan. They pecked at each other endlessly as friends until the penny dropped they were smitten.

Ivor proposed last Christmas, and while we were overjoyed we were also aware that a period of rank insanity would commence. Because Mindy.

'I was thinking ...' Mindy said, as she forked her steak around the plate in the fashionable murky gloaming.

(She's been on various fad diets since the announcement, the latest is the Paleo. 'Did Prehistoric women have mashed potato?' she had asked our confused waiter.

'Sir Walter Raleigh found the potato,' Ivor said to her. 'A bit later.'

'Oh my God yes, I remember that *Blackadder* now,' she said. 'Did he also invent the bicycle?')

‘... On the big day. I want a bird of prey to deliver my ring,’ she declares. Ivor spits out his mouthful of appletini.

‘I’m not sure it’s the time to reenact scenes from *Game of Thrones*?’ I say.

‘I’m serious!’ Mindy says. ‘There are venues where you can get a bird of prey to fly down from the roof. It clasps the ring in its beak and it lands on the groom’s hand at the altar. It promises an unforgettable spectacle, the website says.’

‘No shit,’ Ivor says. ‘I don’t want to be an unforgettable spectacle, thanks. Some lairy parrot clawing my hand off while blood spurts everywhere and people scream. Jesus, Mindy, it’s a wedding, not a show by Siegfried and Roy.’

‘It doesn’t claw you!’ Mindy wails. ‘They give you a giant Michael Jackson glove. Or how about a barn owl?’

‘Or a pigeon!’ I say. ‘You could lure it with a chip.’

Caroline and I start laughing, spraying bits of our ‘home-cut’ chips around while making NURHURHURHUR noises.

‘Mindy,’ Ivor says, rubbing his temples, ‘are you telling me you’ve been somewhere and had an actual conversation about this bird bullshit?’

Mindy sucks coyly on the straw in her Long Island Iced Tea and gives a look I’d describe as furtive.

‘I was passing by Peckforton Castle and called in and ...’

‘*PASSING BY PECKFORTON CASTLE!*’ Caroline bellows. ‘In Cheshire!’

‘Peck your finger off Castle, more like, am I right?’ I add.

Ivor puts his face in his hands.

‘This is so not squad goals, from you two,’ Mindy snaps at myself and Caroline.

‘What did we say from the start? Agree to nothing without prior consultation,’ Ivor says. ‘We’re not getting married in a castle, Mindy. Apart from the expense, that footballer crap gives me the willies. It’ll be Rolls-Royce Ghosts and cream silk cravats next.’

‘We can’t have proper cars either?!’ Mindy cries. ‘Oh sure, why don’t I arrive on one of those mobility scooters with the flag poles on the back?!’

A beaten-looking Ivor excuses himself to the gents – ‘Take his shoelaces and belt first,’ I say – and everyone except Mindy is laughing again.

‘Why is he being so nowty?! Stop encouraging him!’

Caroline lays a cool palm on Mindy's blue-silk-clad arm. (I was hoping she'd get wed in one of her trademark peacock-brights but she's going cream-white she says, not that she'll let either of us come with her dress shopping. 'I can have the red and gold in the Hindu bit in India afterwards.')

'Dearest beloved Parminder. Don't get sucked in by castles and eagles and the fucking cake knife fucking hire, which I'm still furious I paid for, and that was before I was getting divorced. I know it's exciting but it's only a day, it goes by in a blur. Trust me, you don't want to be waking up the morning after to the reality of thirty grand on credit cards. You want to be setting off on honeymoon on a debt-free natural high.'

'Yes! It's going to be amazing whatever you do. The *best*,' I say. Good cop, bad cop. Nice sly mention of Caro's impending divorce too, bound to bring Mindy's fevered temperature down by a few notches (for her own good).

'I want it to be different, though.' Mindy pouts. 'I don't want the function room with the sash-tie chairs you've seen a million times. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but it's not individual.'

'Then you need somewhere you can decorate and customise yourself,' Caroline says.

'Really?' Mindy said, doubtfully. 'I don't want a barn dance vibe. Oh my God, did I tell you that my cousin Nuvvy had his thirtieth in a community centre? There was a noticeboard with a Photofit of a sex attacker with a goatee on the loose in Cheadle Hume. It was so not a party buzz.'

'I've know,' I say, inspiration suddenly striking, 'how about Victoria Baths in Chorlton? One of the feature writers at work did a piece on it, it looked incredible. It's restored Edwardian but you can gussy the room up how you want. You get married actually *in* the tiled swimming pool.'

'In your cossies?!'

'No, it's drained.'

Mindy has already whipped her iPhone out and is Googling at a speed that could give you whiplash.

'OMFG! Rach, I LOVE it!'

Caroline winks a 'well done' at me, Mindy squeals some more, I glow with smug and Ivor returns from the loo.

'Oh God, what?' he says.

I make a covert thumbs up sign at him. After a browse of the pictures,

Ivor's also enthused, it looks far more within budget and trendy without being revolting, and I'm so pleased I could shag myself for thinking of it.

'And now, my thoughts on the hen do ...' Mindy says, and mine and Caroline's bums clench and Ivor laughs heartily.

2

‘I’m thinking Miami!’ Mindy says.

Caroline does a reel back. ‘Unless there’s a Miami I haven’t heard of in Northamptonshire, I’m out.’

‘Caro, this is my hen do! You’re supposed to push the boat out.’

‘Yes, and we will, but not all the way across the Atlantic. Right, Rachel?’

‘Er ...’

‘This is a week before the wedding, right?’ Caroline asks Mindy.

‘Right.’

Mindy’s hen has to be close to her wedding because her Indian relatives can only afford one trip to Europe.

‘With long haul, you’re risking being jet lagged on the day. Imagine. Tired as you like. No energy for boozing and dancing. Puffy face on the photos,’ Caroline says, mock grimacing.

I can see Mindy doesn’t want to give in this quickly but Caroline’s got her good and proper.

‘Hmm OK. So my next best idea,’ she does eyes up, opens palms in the air, motioning an imaginary sign, ‘*MINDYFEST*. A hen festival. I hire a field. We all glamp, think Hunter wellies and Ray-Ban Wayfarers. Artisanal sausages. Cider. Cream teas. We could get a band!’

‘I think Daft Punk are out, dear. Your budget is more Gay Dad,’ Ivor says.

‘I wondered if Rhys would consider it?’ Mindy says, tentatively.

I’m momentarily thunderstruck. ‘Will I ask my surly ex and his mates to play a gig at your hen do? You’re kidding, right?’ I say.

‘You’re on good terms though, aren’t you?’ Mindy says.

‘We would say hello if we ran into each other, I’m not really into spending drunken weekends away together.’

‘Yeah OK, I see that,’ Mindy nods vigorously. ‘But also I had wondered if Rhys would do covers of Taylor Swift.’

Ivor stuffs a napkin into his mouth, Caroline shakes her head and I don't know what to say. Mindy has always had a silly side, I wonder if this wedding has made her, to use a technical journalistic term, nuttier than squirrel shit.

Mentioning Rhys has given me a pang. I don't miss Rhys, yet thinking of him cohabiting with his new girlfriend – not so new, now – still feels strange. I sure as hell don't want to holiday with him.

'Mindy,' Caroline intones, sternly, 'we'll do an easyJet flight to somewhere city breaky. I know you're being innovative but it seems there's a fine line between innovative and sounding crazy as a shithouse rat, here.'

I know Caroline's sticking up for me and I appreciate it, but I can see Mindy looks stricken and I can't think of anything to follow this, so an uncomfortable silence descends.

'These Mindy mini dramas have stolen my thunder over announcing my choice of song for our first dance,' Ivor says, breaking it. 'Will there be any politics with getting Macclesfield Elvis to sing "Bitch Don't Kill My Vibe"?''

'Macclesfield Elvis! Booking him was the trigger for the collapse of my wedding plans,' I say, before considering this might be a downer.

There's a slightly laden pause.

'Shit, sorry, Rach, I wasn't thinking,' Ivor says.

'Oh don't worry, it doesn't bother me,' I say.

Which is almost true.

3

‘Hi, honey, I’m home,’ I call when I get in, slightly lustily given the gin cocktails with the meal.

‘I’m in here. Ronnie Barker’s been sick again,’ Ben says, from the kitchen. Six months ago, celebrating being proud new homeowners, Ben and I got rescue kittens.

We’d actually only gone for one but the woman in charge did a nifty bit of upselling. ‘You can’t separate brothers. They’re devoted to each other,’ she said, as we watched a tabby kitten gnawing a lump out of the hindquarters of a fluffy black kitten, while it quacked angrily.

‘Upselling?’ Ben said, on the drive home with a cat box full of squeaking fur, ‘More like passing off. They’re not even brothers. They’re like Schwarzenegger and DeVito in *Twins*. This was a blatant BOGOF offer.’

After three Rekorderligs, watching them kebab the curtains, it seemed funny to call them The Two Ronnies, in honour of Ben’s university nickname for me. (We met when he laminated my halls of residence ID card, and my failure to crank the photo booth stool up sufficiently caused Ben to compare me to a famously short-arsed comedian.)

In the cold light of day, we have to call them Barker and Corbett to distinguish them. Barker, the tabby, has an appetite like a bucket attached to the front of a rocket. Corbett, midnight black with one white paw, sleeps all day and has the face of a vampire monkey.

Ben is crouched down, mopping up feline stomach fluids. He’s in a grey hooded top that I once called his ‘Prince Harry’s gap year’ style and he nearly swung for me. He’s still as sharp of jawline and quietly showily-offily handsome as the first day we met. I still don’t comb my hair properly so we’re equal.

‘It’s one of his foamy ones full of plant matter,’ he says. ‘He can’t accept the vegetarian lifestyle doesn’t suit him. How was dinner?’

‘Was good,’ I say. ‘Sorry I’m really late.’

I told Ben I’d be back by ‘nine-ish’ and it’s nearly eleven.

‘You’re hardly *really* late. Having fun? How’s the wedding planning coming along? Cup of tea and tell me about it?’

And I relax, without having been conscious I’d tensed.

It’s been surprisingly hard to shake the lingering ghost of the rows I’d have had with Rhys. The reflexes are so ingrained, I continually have to remind myself that Ben doesn’t pick fights and the simmering air of permanent irritation has gone.

In two years, Ben and I have never had a serious argument. (If you discount ones in Ikea, which I think we all should.) I used to hear couples say they rarely fought and wonder how that was possible. Now I know.

Ben follows me through to the front room. After too many months of him crashing at my rented flat in the Northern Quarter while his rent went to waste, we found this Victorian semi in Chorlton and couldn’t believe our luck – it was on at a very low price considering the leafy street, period fixtures, glam décor and general appearance of structural solidity.

‘It must be haunted or something,’ Ben had said.

‘At this price we have spare money for an exorcist,’ I replied.

It turned out it was a young couple from Twickenham who’d been burgled twice in the first month and never got over it. They wanted rid, fast.

‘Rach is a reporter at Crown Court, you can’t shock her,’ Ben explained as their polite smiles said: TAKE IT FOOLS, TAKE IT NOW. They left us a security system so tight it’d be called excessively pessimistic by No.10 Downing Street.

Ben flicks the kettle on and we listen to it boil while slumped against each other on the sofa.

‘Blee, you smell like Mindy’s vape stick,’ Ben says, burying his face in the collar of the coat of I’ve not yet taken off.

Mindy never smoked cigarettes but for reasons incomprehensible to the rest of us, has lately taken up vaping. ‘The vanilla one sounded nice.’

I fill Ben in on the eagle and am rewarded with him shaking with laughter.

‘Ooooooh Mindy, never change. Imagine if it crop-sprayed crap on the guests as it flew over their heads.’ We laugh and then he brings me up short: ‘Oh, by the way, I saw Rhys today. He gave me a message for you.’

I sit up straight. ‘What?’

Ben nods. 'Bumped into him near the Arndale.'

'What happened?'

'It went like this, he says, "Oh, it's you, is it."' Ben sits up and shoves balled fists into the front of his top, and angles his chin down, in an impression of Rhys's Gallagher swagger that's good enough to make me laugh, despite my apprehension.

'He blocked my path, jabbed his finger at me and said, "You're a massive twat for what you did but I hope you're looking after her."'

I wince. 'Sorry.'

'Not your fault. Also I would think of me as massive twat if I were him, nicking his girl while he wasn't looking, to be fair. Anyway, I said I hoped I was looking after you. All I could think was there's no way I'm taking this guy in a fight but at least I'm a lawyer and know this area is well covered by CCTV.'

I laugh, nervously.

Rhys and I fell apart in our own time, for our own reasons, but after the fact, Rhys worked out that I'd been secretly hopelessly in love with Ben for much of our time together, and obviously that didn't help. With hindsight, the university friendship with Ben that Rhys tolerated as platonic was in fact a lurking threat. I don't blame Rhys for feeling betrayed either, even if he was no angel himself.

'Then it got a bit weird ...'

'What? How?'

'Well, he says, "Tell Rach me and Claire are getting married in September. It might be weird but I'd love her to be there. If that means you being there too then so be it, I suppose."'

I absorb this. 'What did you say?'

'I said, "Thanks, I'll let her know," and we went on our way.' Ben pulls his sweatshirt hood back down and gets up to make the tea.

'Wow,' I say.

This makes me feel peculiar, both the wedding and our invite. 'Should we go?' I ask him, as Ben comes back in and hands me a cup.

'Seriously? I'm not going. I'd hardly call my invite effusive. I translate that wording as "She can come but you should stay away if you have a shred of decency." He'd probably give me a Tony Soprano hug once he's pissed. The threat-hug that says *I've ordered your whacking.*'

‘So should I not go?’

Ben squints. ‘Do you *want* to?’

‘No!’

‘Then why would you?’

‘Because he wants me to.’

‘Rach. Part of being grown up is realising that “I don’t want to” is a good enough reason.’

‘I know, I’m touched he wants me there, that’s all.’

Ben rubs his hair. ‘Or, he’s trying to prove something. “Look how happy I am!” “You didn’t win!”’

‘No,’ I say, emphatically. ‘Rhys is a giant grouse but he’s not spiteful. He wouldn’t think like that.’

‘If you say so. You know him best. Seems pretty odd to me.’

I sense Ben expected a HAHAAAAHA AS IF to this gesture from Rhys and is slightly perturbed I’d even consider it.

‘Anyway, it would set a precedent he has to come to our wedding,’ I say, to break the mood and bring it back to us, tongue poked through lips. I expect Ben to laugh but he grimaces and eye rolls.

‘Huh. Doubt either of us fancy going through that rigmarole again.’

A silence settles. Now *I’m* perturbed.

Ben catches himself as he sees my expression, and adds: ‘... Anytime soon.’

‘Really?’

‘What, do you want to?’

‘... Guess not.’

‘Uh oh, here comes Crockett and Tubbs,’ Ben says, as cats waddle in together and yowl at us. Is it just me or is he the tiniest bit relieved that the cats allowed him to change the subject? ‘Yes yes, we know you want your Cat Smarties,’ Ben says, unwinding from me and standing up.

I smile, on auto pilot, and feel oddly churned up. Later, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and listening to Ben’s breathing deepen as he slips off to sleep, I wonder if Rhys proposed to Claire in a completely different way to the way he did with me, which was naught more than a drunken whim based on a prosaic sense of *ah not getting any younger, best get on with it*. I hope for her sake he did. Did they resolve the wedding band versus DJ issue?

And Ben says he’s got no desire for that ‘rigmarole’ again. Fair enough, he

was married, I only have a broken engagement behind me. And I didn't think I was much bothered either, but I assumed we would, at some point. I thought he might want to. Now Ben's saying he doesn't have any interest, I feel oddly bereft.

That's not fair, I tell myself. A proposal isn't a measure of his affection, you hardly put it in the T&Cs. And last time, I didn't get as far as the altar: Ben really *has* been through it all before. Given we've agreed we'll think about trying for kids in the next few years, looks like that is that, then. Do I really need a piece of paper to make it official too?

I'll have to get in touch with Rhys and say it's lovely he wants me there but it wouldn't be appropriate and wish them all the best. Another thought occurs to me: has his fiancée signed off on this? I wouldn't want the long-term ex sitting there like a Bad Fairy, if I was her. Still, I am moved that, after everything, Rhys feels enough for me to risk it being awkward, and even tolerating Ben.

As a journalist, I'm used to trying to break a story down to its most salient, newsworthy fact. I turn the information over and over and work out what it is. However ridiculous, precious and trivial it sounds – tonight, for the first time in history, Rhys was more romantic towards me than Ben.

Downstairs, I hear a cat vomiting.

4

It's a truth universally acknowledged of thirtysomething life that one of the best messages you can get from your partner is the unexpected one, in the middle of a weekday afternoon, that reads:

Can't be arsed to cook tonight, can you? Fancy going out?

Somehow the surprise nature of the meal out makes it as exciting as Christmas when you were a child. Or like when the heating broke at school in the winter and you were told to go home. A planned dinner, a scheduled inset day: they're nowhere near as good.

Anyway, I text back emphatic agreement and am grinning when grubby freelancer Pete Gretton barrels back into the press room, smoothing down his wiry carrot-coloured bouff and bringing with him a whiff of Lambert & Butler.

As ever, he has his mobile clamped to his ear. '... Let me tell YOU something, this is a ten-course turd-tasting menu you're serving me, and every course is made of shit.' Pause. '... And the wine flight is PISS.'

Owen and I exchange a massive grin. Gretton's tic of entering the room while barking a rhetorical flourish into the receiver has become a source of delight between myself and my *Manchester Evening News* colleague. Owen's convinced there's no one on the other end. 'I'm waiting for the day it rings while he's talking.'

Owen O'Reilly came from Belfast to the *MEN* six months ago, and opted for the not-much-coveted role of being my permanent sidekick at crown court.

I didn't covet his arrival much, either. Since the dramatic exit of treacherous snake Zoe, who took a story of mine with personal consequences and sold me out, I've had a procession of junior reporters who I've kept at arms' length. And Owen's a senior.

‘Why does he want to be trapped in here with me?’ I asked news desk.

‘Maybe he saw your picture,’ Gretton leered, in the background. Urgh, Gretton. One of the saving graces from moving from copytakers to the internet era is not having to listen to him dictate lurid stories in lasciviously excited tones.

I got my answer to my question about Owen on the first day when he said, lovably scruffy-haired, with his gentle Norn Ireland brogue: ‘I’ve got to be honest, I’m news to my bones but I’m too old’ – the bastard is twenty-eight – ‘to be knocking doors any more. Ringside seat for solid stories here suits me fine.’

And bugger my shoes if he isn’t brilliant at his job, too. He’s my dream colleague: competent, funny and principled and not particularly ambitious, beyond the aim of hitting the pub at six sharp. Oh, and always gets the caffeine in the next day.

Gretton, a man for whom the acronym ‘PC’ still refers to a police constable, does ‘Gerry Adams’ voices around Owen, pretending to mutter down an imaginary telephone handset: ‘You’ve got TURTY minutes to get out of da building.’

‘Hahaha I’m Irish, so I bomb people, Pete,’ Owen says. ‘Don’t let that joke’s insensitivity, crass stereotyping and twenty years out of date nature bother you.’

To which Pete typically pretends to clutch a handbag, calling: ‘Will you noe have a cup of tea?’ in a Mrs Doyle voice from *Father Ted*.

‘So Esther Cowley at Salter & Rowson is a right piece of work,’ Owen says, conversationally, offering me a Hula Hoop which I decline. The press room is for gossiping, bitching and moaning. And snacks.

‘Oh, you know that’s my boyfriend’s firm?’ I say, absently.

‘Yes. And lovely Esther is a fan of your fella,’ Owen says, digging in his crisp bag. ‘I mentioned him. In happier times, when Esther wasn’t asking for my skinned pelt to be hung outside the building.’

‘A fan?’ I say, wondering if Ben’s work is good enough to create fandom. I mean, not that I doubt he’s great, but I didn’t think he was the rock star of diligent regional solicitors.

‘Yeah, think she said Ben Morgan was “a rising star and very easy on the eye” and did some maiden-like blushing. Confessed to a crush. I said, “You

know he has a girlfriend?” And she said: “Nobody’s perfect.” Owen tosses a Hula Hoop into the air and catches it in his mouth.

‘Huh,’ I say, simultaneously gratified and slightly needled, and now properly paying attention. He IS the rock star of diligent regional solicitors. ‘Why does she want you skinned?’

‘Remember Twin-Sister-Gate? That was her client.’

‘Ah. Whoops.’

Sometimes we have to identify a defendant in a case to a photographer outside the building. This unscientific process involves hissing ‘THERE THEY ARE!’ ‘WHERE?’ ‘THE ONE IN THE NAVY JACKET.’ The photographer dashes forward to stick their Nikon in the face of someone who either tries to hide or tells them to get fucked, or both.

In his first month, Owen made the cock-up we all dread, he managed to identify the wrong person. He pointed at a twin sister, which might sound like it would get him off the hook, except she was non identical.

It cost the paper a fair bit in damages, but Owen fronted the error with the kind of courage and decency I should show more of. After going to newsdesk and confessing, he rang everyone else he could to say sorry, but Esther Cowley – representing the actual perp – went crazy. Although I haven’t met her, I suspect she’s young and inexperienced and hasn’t yet learned to separate the shit that happens from the shit that’s intended.

‘So what’s riled her this time?’

‘You know the university prowler case? She’s his brief. I tried to get some details about her defendant after the adjournment and she *iced* me. I called her afterwards and she said she’s instructed everyone in the criminal department to refuse to speak to me in court, as blanket policy. I realise she was upset about the photo, but mistakes get made. Bygones be bygones. Libel be libel, we paid it.’

‘Huh. Well that seems an overreaction. Good job solicitors have never made mistakes in their whole lives,’ I say, bullishly. When any of us have had a monsterring, we stick up for each other.

‘Right? So I said, well you’re making errors more likely if you won’t help us. Then she started on about why should she help and what a disgusting job I do and I thought, Owen, this should be handled with cool head and calm manner.’

‘Well done.’

‘Yeah, I *thought* that, and then I said, oh really, I’m not the one being paid for putting some rapey pervert back out on the streets to hang round teenagers in halls of residences, am I? That dialled it all down.’

I laugh and wince. Journos and lawyers, little love lost. Except between myself and Ben. Luckily he works in the family department, so our paths never cross. I mentally file this away as a talking point over dinner. Maybe Ben could even have a tactful word, help smooth this over. Sounds like he’d have influence if this Esther gets knee-wobbles just at his name.

‘These bloody lawyers,’ Gretton says from the other side of the room. ‘They all think they’re Atticus Finch. Atticus Shit, more like.’

‘*This*,’ Owen says and smiles at me.

Owen and I are saying our farewells outside court later as I see Ben approach, some yards away down the street.

‘Ah, here’s my ride,’ I blurt, and then blush, because I somehow didn’t intend to make a risqué joke to Owen, after the ‘easy on the eye’ conversation.

He smiles, faintly awkwardly.

‘Oh, is that him? Very ... what’s the word my mum would use? *Dishy*. Very dishy.’

‘Don’t tell him, his head’s big enough,’ I say.

‘Good to be warned, I was about to say, “Hi mate, you’re fit”,’ Owen says, pulling a face. Owen’s accent renders everything he says several degrees warmer and funnier.

Owen and I are giggling when Ben draws level.

‘Afternoon,’ Ben says, unsmiling.

‘Ben, this is Owen, who I was telling you about!’ I gesture at Owen. ‘Owen, Ben, Ben, Owen.’

‘Hi,’ Ben says, abruptly, with the merest glance, and turns his attention to me. As Owen says ‘... *I’ve heard a lot about ...*’ Ben talks over him to me, as if he hasn’t heard.

‘Ready to head off?’

‘OK,’ I say, embarrassed at his bad manners. I say goodbye to a politely neutral looking Owen and wait until we’re safely out of earshot.

‘That was a bit brusque, what did Owen do to deserve that?’

‘He’s been shitty to Esther today,’ Ben says. ‘I’m not in the mood to humour one of your lot.’

‘No he hasn’t!’ I say, indignant, ‘Not at all! She’s been a bitch!’

‘What?’ Ben stops and turns. ‘Don’t start throwing names at someone you don’t know. She’s nothing of the sort. She’s great.’

‘Well don’t call Owen *one of my lot*. She’s being an obstructive arse.’

‘Ah, the journalistic definition of obstructive, not giving you exactly what you want, when you want it.’

‘Oh right, and what will you say when she’s behaving in the same way to me? I’ll be “another one of that lot”, will I?’

Ben says nothing, glaring at the pavement as he strides ahead, and part of me already knows that the evening is ruined.

Here's the thing, having not had a full earthquake row until now, Ben and I don't know what our joint style is.

After more scrapping en route, we've sunk into a mulish semi-silence over the tapas dishes at El Rincon and conversation has become artificial. *How's your mum? / Yeah, fine. / Oh, I said to my parents we'd see them for lunch too, is that OK? / Yeah, fine.*

Rhys and I had our format down, from the shouting to the sulking and the usually making up by dinnertime, because neither of us liked to go hungry. In defiance of the official advice, we were prepared to go to sleep on an argument too, and things were usually mended over a series of fractious texts during the working day, because again, it needed to be sorted so we could have our tea.

It was steady escalation: if I went to level five with Rhys, he'd take it to level six, and if it warranted, I'd up it to seven, and on we went, raising the stakes, until one of us lost the taste for battle. Ben isn't like that, Ben meets my noisy outrage with a steely but contained fury. It's deeply unnerving.

'How's the chorizo?' I ask.

'Nice, want some?' he says, flat.

'I'm full, thanks.'

More silence and a waiter tops up our glasses while we give him tight smiles and plan what to say to each other when we get in.

Ah, sod it.

'Look, I know you're bound to see it from Esther's side, but I promise you, Owen isn't some rule-free pushy hack, like Gretton.'

'I think this is best parked, don't you?' Ben says, eyes hard over the rim of his wine glass.

'We haven't parked it though, we're sat here in a nark.'

The angel on my shoulder says *Leave it*. The shoulder demon says *Why should you?* The demon has Deansgate sangria to help him along.

‘I’m a decent judge of character, I’m promising you, whatever ... misunderstanding ... he and Esther Cowley have had, Owen isn’t a bad guy and wouldn’t have meant to come across that way.’

I flatter myself that calling it a misunderstanding is being sufficiently diplomatic. Ben clenches his jaw, glares and looks both fiercely handsome, and just fierce.

‘Well, *I’m* a decent judge of character and I’m telling you it wasn’t a misunderstanding, he was a rude toerag to her. You liking him and him being in the right aren’t the same thing. I was in the room and heard her side of the call, can you say the same?’

‘No, Owen told me all about it though.’ I frown. ‘Why is she having conversations sat next to you? Thought you were in different departments?’

‘I was in her office, we eat lunch together sometimes.’

Oh aye. ‘You’ve never mentioned her before.’

‘Didn’t see a reason to.’

Ben pushes some patatas bravas around his plate and I try to quell the irritation that he’s white knighted Esther while doubting me.

‘Owen’s a friend. I have good taste in friends ...’

‘And I don’t?’ Ben snaps.

‘I didn’t say that, but you don’t think I’d say someone’s sound when they’re not?’

Ben raises an eyebrow. ‘You said the last person who worked with you in court was sound and she sold you and everyone else down the river.’

This is 100% accurate, a very painful memory and has all but completely destroyed my case in one zinger. I’ve been put in my place and I’m fuming. There’s some sort of horrible paradox at work now that says that when you should most wind your neck in, your emotions are least likely to allow it.

‘Mmm, the last woman you thought was great was your ex-wife, who was a right bitch ...’ As I say this, I realise it’s unpinning a grenade, and add ‘... *to me*.’ It’s hardly enough to out the pin back in.

Ben and I have never seen entirely eye to eye on choices of friends and lovers, stretching back to university.

Ben’s eyes are wide and he says nothing. It’s worse than shouting.

‘What the fuck has Olivia got to do with this? Are you throwing anything

and everything now?’ he hisses finally.

Er.

‘Evening all,’ says a posh male voice to my side, and I look up to see the last person in the world I want to see standing at my side right now, if you discount The Grim Reaper.

6

‘Hi,’ I say, in blank horror. God, I hope he didn’t hear any of our argument. El Rincon is a low-ceilinged, homely room, crammed with tables, and given our proximity to other diners, Ben and I had been talking at the standard British volume of raised whispers.

‘Benjamin,’ he says, oily as a pilchard, as ever, eyes swinging over me, without similar acknowledgement.

‘Hi, Simon,’ Ben says, taking a big swig of his drink.

‘The lovebirds, together at last,’ Simon says. ‘Can’t believe it’s taken this long to run into you. How the devil are you?’

After Simon was suspended from Ben’s law firm thanks to my dastardly intern’s story that ended up in the nationals, he turned down an offer to be reinstated and set up his own practice, somewhere in Greater Manchester. Last I heard, it’s doing very well. I’m surprised I’ve not seen more of Simon in court; he must be delegating.

He loathes myself and Ben so much – for what he’s convinced was my double-dealing treachery, and Ben defending me – that Ben and I have a running joke: ‘Simon’s been round then’ whenever any appliance malfunctions or a dog turd turns up on the front path.

‘We’re good, thanks, Simon, hope you are too. If you don’t mind, we’re having a private conversation.’ Ben’s tone is admirably level and controlled-friendly.

Simon ignores this and turns his attention to me. Small mercies: he was obviously so full of himself when he breezed over, he did miss the total dynamite that Ben and I were arguing, or he’d have gloated by now.

‘How’s reporting going? Still in the same job, I see?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you got everything you wanted,’ he glances at Ben. ‘Winner takes it all. Seem to recall being told you weren’t involved with each other, incredible

to think you might've lied to me, eh?'

I'm trying to think of something more articulate than 'piss off' when Ben says 'Simon,' again, in a very steady voice. 'I've asked you politely to leave us alone. Sorry if this still looms so large for you but we'd rather let a difference of opinion, from two years ago, lie. There's really no need for the *Ah at last we meet again* Poundshop Moriarty routine. Enjoy your meal.'

This is pretty ironic, given the subject of our spat, but a good comeback nonetheless.

'The Royal we!' Simon laughs. He casts a withering gaze over me and then looks back at Ben. 'Given who you stupidly passed up, she must be an amazing lay, that's all I can say.'

I'm winded by the old school sexist bastard nastiness of this. Did everyone think Ben was crazy to swap Olivia for me? And also who says 'lay'?

Ben abruptly pushes his chair back and gets to his feet, while keeping his voice low.

'Insult us again and I'll smack you.' He looks past Simon, at a table in the corner with several suits, who are looking at us curiously. 'Looks like you're out with either colleagues or clients and I'm guessing win or lose, a fight won't project the right image?'

'Such chivalry!' Simon spits, but I can see he's uncertain.

He holds Ben's gaze just long enough to be sure Ben means it, or to make it clear he's not scared of him, or both. Then makes a '*oh fucksake*' sort of noise and returns to his table. I sense the people in the room who've been watching us going back to their meals.

'About finished?' Ben says, looking at my Padron peppers with a miserable hatred, and I say a hearty yes.

In the taxi, on the way home, I say, 'Thank you for defending me,' and Ben says, 'No thanks required,' without warmth, and stares determinedly out of the window.

All other things being equal, Ben sticking up for me like that would be heartening; in these circumstances, it's shaming.

Given who he stupidly passed up. Simon always had a thing for Ben's ex-wife Olivia but to be disparaged in comparison in front of Ben, and right after I'd been ungraciously running her down, too: it hurts. I feel small and shabby.

It's some slow-acting but serious karma that during our first real fight, which started over a journalist allegedly being a shit, we encountered Simon – who once verbally decapitated me for being a shitty journalist. Ben took my side, back then, and trusted me. I wonder if he's regretting that now, as he glares furiously out of the cab window, body angled away.

And Simon wasn't wholly wrong that I covered up my role in that shambles. Ben knew whatever mistakes I made, I'd never intend that much harm, but that reasoning might feel rather thin right now. I was naïve about Zoe and now Ben thinks I'm being naïve about Owen. (Am I? Is it possible Owen's got a vindictive streak I don't know about? In remorse, I have to confess it's entirely possible.)

Tonight really wasn't the night to be reminding Ben that this journalist made an implacable foe of his ex-colleague and his ex-wife.

It's only as Ben's putting his key in the door and jabbing the eight-digit code into the alarm that I realise I potentially have a solid, respectable objection to Esther that I've not mentioned. I should let it lie, but I can't resist the chance to reclaim some of the moral high ground that I promptly vacated by gratuitously mentioning Olivia.

'Look, I'm sorry if I was overwrought, and went too far,' I say, as Ben shrugs his suit jacket off. 'Apparently Esther went on to Owen about how she has a crush on you. It was a bit unprofessional and didn't make me very sympathetic towards her.'

Ben frowns, mid tie-loosening. 'What? Seriously?'

'Yes, some chat they had a short while back. She described my existence as a shame.'

Is that fair? Near enough.

Ben grimaces.

'God, well ... That's out of order of Esther and I'm sorry. I didn't realise.'

'She and Owen obviously used to get on better than they do now.'

'Obviously,' Ben says, dismayed, and I can see him adjusting his opinion of her.

It's an ignoble triumph but a triumph nonetheless. I do the fake generosity thing, to seal the deal. I don't feel my best self, as a result.

'To be fair, it was probably meaningless banter, but it bothered me.'

'Of course she meant it. Look at me.'

For a moment I'm taken in by Ben's deadpan expression and in relief,

burst out laughing. He gives a grudging smile and I'm so relieved.

'Rach,' he says, throwing his tie over the arm of the sofa. 'I can imagine it was your and Rhys's way to fight dirty. Can we not do that? We can fall out without it turning into you trashing my judgment.'

'Yes, I'm sorry.' I pause. 'I was jealous because you took Esther's side, that's all.' Honesty at last.

'So was I.'

'What?'

'This Owen has a particular interest in you too.'

'Oh God, no way!' I splutter. 'Why would do you think that?'

'He gave me the exact same look that I used to give Rhys's car outside your house at uni. The Car-Having Wanker look.'

I gurgle.

'And come on, why do you think he's talking to her about me and then stirring by passing it back to you?'

'That's just journalists for you,' I say. 'I'm old enough to be his mother!'

'How old is he?'

'... Twenty-eight.'

'Old enough to be his mother, if you'd given birth to him aged five.'

I laugh and Ben rolls his eyes.

I put my hands on my hips and pull a face.

'So Esther is "great"?'

'At her job, yes.'

'Is she fit?'

'Objection: irrelevant. Know who I think is, though?'

'Nope?'

'C'mere please,' Ben says, and I don't need to be asked twice.

What's that saying about cheats never prosper? Or you know, the general law of life that when you do a shabby thing, it comes back to bite you on the arse not long after?

Later, in the darkness of the bedroom, unable to sleep, frowning face lit by the moonglow of my smartphone, I look up Ben's firm.

I mean: '*Objection: irrelevant*' – that's a yes, isn't it?

I click on the About Us section. Hang on ... Criminal Department ... scroll down ... through the As, Bs ... Cs. Cowley. Esther Cowley.

Oh for God's sake, she's stunning. Not pretty, properly knock-out beautiful: long auburn hair, delicate features, pointed chin, that kind of mischievous glint and unflinching gaze that only the very attractive give cameras. And in a company headshot too, where let's face it, most of us look like a breakout from the Prison of Azkaban.

She reminds me of someone. An actress? Then it hits me – can this be right, am I imagining it? – she reminds me of Olivia. She's like elfin blonde Olivia, but wigged up, as if she's on the run in *Gone Girl*.

In order to check the theory, and because I haven't yet done myself enough psychological damage, I look for Olivia on Facebook. I've never searched her before, although I do know that she reverted to her maiden name when she and Ben split and I don't know what it is. Now it occurs to me – thanks, brain – I can search under Olivia in any mutual friends with Ben from the London days, and find her that way.

It works in seconds and I click to a picture: seeing her face again makes me shiver. Last I saw her, she was screaming at me in the darkness outside a wedding, by a Portaloo. It was a misunderstanding, but it was complicated. It was Ben's fault – he hadn't told her about our one-night stand at university, or what we'd meant to each other. I can see why I became a hate figure.

Olivia's grown her hair out to one of those shaggy wavy bobs that glossy magazines pretend you can achieve with a blob of mousse, drying your hair upside down. If I tried it, I'd look like the arrest photo of a hillbilly heroin addict. Her profile shows her with bare tanned shoulders, chin propped on palm, serene. She is a type of Oil of Olay advert wholesome-ravishing that my greasy fringe and I can't compete with.

Given who you stupidly passed up.

I turn my phone off, pull the duvet up to my neck and throb with insecurity. Why didn't I mention the crush thing, straight off the bat, especially as it was so argumentatively useful? I know why.

It was because I hadn't wanted to put the thought in his head.

I'd been weighing whether a text, an email, a call, or a meet up was best for approaching Rhys about his wedding invite, when the decision is taken out of my figurative hands. However in my literal hands, I'm holding a box of Tampax Pearl.

I round the corner in Boots, wondering if I want a packet of sour cream Shapers crisps to go with it, when there is Rhys in his off-duty rock star glory: unkempt tarry hair, light beard, leather jacket, jeans and All Stars, examining the electric toothbrushes. He's not a rock star by day, he works in IT. His employers initially tried to get him to wear a suit, and then gave up.

'Hello!' I say,

'Rach!' he says, startled, and we both hold ourselves stiffly to make it clear there's no kiss or hug expectation on either side.

'How are you?' he glances down at my hands.

'Oh, you know,' I say, 'still menstruating. Still not loving police.'

(Rhys often quoted Dre lyrics at me when I got in from court.)

He smiles, awkwardly. He used to buy sanitary wear for me, along with grab-bag pouches of Minstrels and a copy of *Grazia*, usually handed over with the words: 'Don't let anything light the fuse on your tampon. If you feel like kicking off, have a pint of pink wine and put a Hugh Grant film on.'

Now we're two people of opposite sex who don't share a bed any more but know what each other look like naked, and my having periods is too close to acknowledging a reproductive system, which is *awks*, as the kids say. He's not in the friendzone so much as the Dadzone.

'You look well,' I say, and he really does: slimmer and brighter than I recall. Rhys in great quality HD.

He rubs his hands together.

'Uh? Got time for a quick coffee?'

'Definitely!' I say, jittery but willing.

Transferred to a window seat in a nearby Caffè Nero, Rhys setting down our cups, I garble out: ‘*Thankssomuchortheweddinginvite*. Ben told me. I’d love to but I don’t think I should. It’s your and Claire’s day and I don’t want to detract from that, even in any small way.’

Rhys nods. ‘Yeah, I didn’t think you would come, but always nice to be asked, right?’

‘Right,’ I say. ‘Really nice.’ I don’t know if I’m disappointed he gave in so quickly. Perhaps Ben was half-right about it not being genuine – but if it was a gesture, it still meant something to make it.

‘So what are the plans?’ I ask, perky. ‘All back to Piccadilly 21s?’

‘Town Hall for the ceremony’ Rhys says, slightly embarrassed. ‘Like us.’

‘Ah!’

‘I’d say bad karma but we never actually got there.’

‘Hah. Yes. Its vibes are clean.’ It’s good we’ve done this face to face. In type, that could look like a dig. In person, I can see Rhys is being friendly and making light of it.

‘Then reception is the Great John Street Hotel.’

‘Lovely!’ I say. I actually have no idea what it’s like but positivity seems only polite.

‘Yeah, Claire’s sorted it all. She’s good at that stuff. I’m just along for the ride,’ he smiles and I think: wow, radical departure from our years. My guess is his band aren’t playing, and there was no fight about it. Well, those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

‘How’s it going with Zac Efron?’

I guffaw so loudly that people nearby glance over. ‘Hahahaah! Hardly, isn’t he about fifteen? Zac Efron’s dad, maybe. Good, thanks.’

Rhys smiles, pleased to have amused me.

‘Actually he’s not him, he’s the spit of the fella in that crap spanking film, isn’t he? *Fifty Shades*, that’s it. Claire fancies him. The actor, I mean.’

This casual remark tells me Rhys is truly, *truly* content with Claire. There’s so little residue of resentment he can cheerfully admit she crushes on a man who resembles my hitherto-despised boyfriend.

‘No plans to get hitched on your side?’

‘No,’ I twiddle the spoon in my latte and think he’s been open, so I can be too. ‘I don’t think it appeals to Ben, as a divorcé.’

‘That’s a shame. Always thought you’d make a cracking bride.’

‘Aw. Thanks.’

‘You’ve got the fresh face for it, haven’t you? And y’know, no tattoos.’

I laugh. ‘Actually I’ve got one with my date of birth in Roman Numerals and *Distilled In Hell* across my back.’

‘Ah nice. Font?’

‘Art Dystopia. It’s a jaggedy heavy metal one that looks evil.’

Rhys smiles.

‘As long as you’re happy, that’s the main thing. I really want you to be happy. Y’know that?’

I nod and mumble thanks and you too. Rhys was never this emotionally open when we were together. It’s like meeting someone after they’ve come back from a Yogic retreat, full of meditative calm instead of spiky barbs.

We discuss respective house purchases and find soothing refuge in neutral trivia and facts and figures and the fluctuating fortunes of various Manchester postcodes.

‘Ah, guessed you and him would be somewhere cool,’ Rhys said, ‘We’ve thrown the towel in on cool. I want a big garden for the kids.’

I smile and we don’t follow that line of conversation, my recent purchase making it clear there’s no news of mine on that score. It’s also the only moment he needles me. Rhys’s choices are the only correct choices. I know Rhys will be running down Chorlton to Claire later. ‘*It’s the kind of place where you’ll slip on an avocado skin. Too rich for my blood.*’

We drain our cups and leave.

‘It’s weird, isn’t it,’ Rhys says outside. ‘We’re both happy. Seeing each other is still a happy-sad, but we don’t know what we’re sad about, if we’re happy in our lives. Not that I don’t miss you. Sometimes. When I see custard doughnuts on offer in the supermarket, like.’

I laugh. ‘A valid alternative to jam!’

‘They’re like bursting a zit,’ Rhys says, in very possibly the last time we’ll revive this double act.

‘It’s happy-sad, but I’m so happy for you,’ I say, voice thick, thinking, *don’t cry, don’t cry*. ‘We had some good times.’

‘We did.’ He beams.

Claire has worked miracles on Rhys. Hats off to the woman.

‘You’ll always be my mate, Rachel,’ Rhys says.

‘Same here. Forever friends,’ I say. ‘I don’t mean the teddy bear thing.’

Rhys claps me on the shoulder, then leans over and squeezes me hard, and disappears fast into the lunch-hour crowd.

I walk back to work, lost in thought. I nearly married Rhys, and look how wrong for both us that would've been. There's relief and this terrible irrational melancholy, too. I don't want to be with him, but part of me will always miss him. Christ, perhaps I'm just pre-menstrual.

As I arrive back into court, Pete Gretton calls: 'There she is!' I turn and see him skulking with Owen, who's making 'rescue me' hostage eyes.

'Woodford, my girl, you've been caught red-handed.'

'Have I?'

'How have you spent your lunch hour?'

'Buying ...' nah, not alluding to my uterus around Gretton. '... Shopping, why?'

'NEH-UHH,' Gretton makes a gameshow buzzer wrong answer noise. 'Consorting with dark and mysterious strangers, more like. Itchy feet, is it? Your flash young whelp not satisfying you?'

'Oh, you mean Rhys?' I say. 'Rhys is my ex-fiancé. He's marrying someone else.'

Gretton looks momentarily deflated. 'I see ... and you still get along, do you?'

'Yep. Sorry, Angela Lansbury. You do look like her actually. Murder, He Wrote. Or a senseless brutal slaying, as you'd call it.'

Pete scowls. For someone who dishes it out harder than the Salvation Army at Christmas, he's got a very thin skin.

'It wasn't me who saw you, actually, sugartits, it was Paddy Pantsdown here.'

Owen looks sheepish. 'I happened to mention I saw you ... that was all ...'

I smile and shrug and think: Ben might have been right about Owen taking a special interest in my significant others.

Ben is making a bloody annoying habit of being right.

8

Last year, my friend Caroline took her husband Graeme back after finding he'd had a prolonged fling. It didn't make huge sense to me, but then Graeme as a husband never made sense to me in the first place, so I'd kept quiet and stayed supportive. She's the most sensible person I know but might've been *too* sensible in her choice of partner, if you know what I mean.

Then, six months after they reconciled and started counselling, Caroline's dad died. They were very close and it was a huge shock: apparently in fine fettle, he keeled over with a giant heart attack while gardening, aged sixty-eight.

As Caroline said on the first night, when I stayed up till dawn with her, it seems impossible that a person can just end. Then she got back from the wake and finished with Graeme. Calmly, with no fuss.

'I had to ask myself, Rach,' she said, 'if I was struck down with a giant coronary doing the weeding, had I spent my time wisely? I couldn't avoid the fact my marriage didn't qualify as one of the things to be proud of. All those reasons I gave you for staying with Graeme, about not giving up the lifestyle we'd built together, they were shit reasons. I was scared of change. Now everything's changed anyway.'

She sold the big house in the suburbs, and started renting an incredible apartment in the city. ('Graeme was more upset at my lack of re-investment in the property market than he was at me telling him I was leaving him.' And by that, shall ye know Graeme.)

Caroline was the one out of the four of us at university with life mapped out: she wanted the high-earning job, the husband, the kids, the Labradors, the second home and the Land Rover Explorer by forty. She'd already got the gilet. Yet to everyone's astonishment, including Caroline, she absolutely loves being single. She says she might never bother with a serious live-in relationship again. Bunk-ups only.

‘Unless someone’s absolutely extraordinary, I honestly don’t see why I’d want to Cif their pubes off the toilet. I don’t *need* to. If you’d told me a few years ago I’d have split with Gray a week after my Dad died, I’d tell you that you were mad and I’d never have coped. It’s very powerful to know you can cope. You can do anything after that.’

Ivor said: ‘Alright, Khaleesi,’ and pointed out she could turn it into a series of inspirational memes, set against sunsets.

But we were all very impressed, and pleased for her. Even a shortlived foray on to Tinder didn’t rattle her. ‘All I learned was not to check it while I’m waiting for the train to work. Loads of attractive men in my area, minutes later they’re in Stockport.’

Anyway, one of Caroline’s ‘New Her’ habits is an early morning run on Saturdays. She jogs from town to Platt Fields Park at dawn, and back again. I coughed on my wine when she told me and asked why on earth she’d do that to herself.

After she extolled the mental and physical virtues of it with the devotion of a cult member, I found myself saying: ‘Can I come?’ (Mindy instantly opted in. ‘If you two are doing it then I have to do it too. That’s the law. I can’t be left out.’)

Ben is nauseatingly naturally sporty and I enjoyed surprising him with the news, all super casual.

‘Really?!’ Ben said, grinning. ‘Well well. Tell Caro to schedule in a little vomit in the bushes if you’ve been on the Crabbies with the reporters the night before.’

I tutted loudly, but then the first morning we did it, I was so hungover I thought I might actually die.

Ivor wasn’t to be won round to joining in, however.

‘Pounding the streets in purple Lycra posing pants? With three women? Whither my dignity.’

‘You don’t have to wear budgie smugglers,’ Caroline said.

‘Budgie smugglers! You’d be calling mine Crow Smugglers. That’s right. A massive crow.’

He wagged his trademark thick-rimmed glasses. Ivor looks like a bulked up Moby.

‘You forget you can’t make these claims these days, babe,’ Mindy said. ‘One of us here has had eyes on the prize.’

At which point both myself and Caroline put our fingers in our ears and said NOPE NOPE NOPE, NO THANK YOU.

‘See, they don’t want to know. The perfect crime,’ Ivor said.

Instead, we arranged that at the end of our runs, we’d meet Ivor for breakfast. The carrot and the stick.

This is why a prawn-pink, sweaty trio of women are arriving at hipstery brunch bar Moose Coffee, where a bespectacled Ivor sits with coffees and menus ready. I’m planning to terrorise a big plate of hash browns, jalapenos and eggs, which no doubt replaces all the expended calories and then some, but I refuse to care.

While we’re debating Mindy putting Caroline on My Single Friend – ‘And you need to get rid of your Emma Bridgewater pottery.’ ‘I like my spotty mugs!’ ‘It says nesting, total boner killer.’ – I see a gorgeous, auburn-haired woman sitting alone near the door with a coffee and an omelette.

At first I notice her simply because she’s beautiful, long rust-coloured hair pulled up on her head, sylph-like and cool in a summery dress and ankle boots, wrinkling a perfect small nose while reading the *Times*.

I imagine I’m free to covertly stare, except that while I’m recognising Ben’s workmate Esther from last night’s online snoopathon, I quite clearly see her glance over and recognise me, in return.

I’m positive I haven’t imagined it. Her startled *Oh, It’s You* expression over her flat white reads perfectly clearly. Spooked, I hastily pretend to have been simply scanning who’s coming through the door next to her and return to my menu, giving my order.

Esther might have noticed me around court, I suppose. Just because I haven’t seen her doesn’t mean she hasn’t seen me: although the people on the press bench are the spectators and the solicitors are the players, so it’s more likely to happen in reverse.

Hmm, no. It was a look of particular interest, and *MEN* reporter personnel like me aren’t automatically fascinating.

I suspect she knows who I am for the same reason I know her: she’s done some internet stalking. Ben’s got a Facebook page he never uses with virtually no photos, so even if they’re friends, I won’t be familiar from that. Argh. She knew my name, did she look me up to get a measure of the competition? Whenever you do some spying, you never imagine you’re being spied upon. I wish life involved less karma, frankly.

And of course, in person I'm drenched in sweat, wearing a baggy old t-shirt, a sports bra that binds me so hard I could play a boy in a Shakespeare play, and a pair of joggers with a saggy behind.

When the food arrives, I fork it much more daintily than my appetite demands, in case she's taking covert photos and SnapChatting them to a hostile group: 'His girlfriend = The Cookie Monster.'

'Isn't it weird how "late breakfast" became commoditised,' Ivor is saying, 'All these subway tiles. I am nostalgic and patriotic for the days when it was either a greasy spoon or a McDonald's Egg McMuffin.'

'You look very nostalgic and patriotic, with your huevos rancheros,' I say.

'Harking back to the grand English tradition of McDonalds,' Caroline agrees.

I risk a glance over to Esther and she's been joined by a female friend. My stomach does a forward roll as I realise she's busy telling this friend who I am.

The friend looks right at me, then looks away, embarrassed to be seen seeing. Esther was also looking and then does a gloriously unsubtle 'hand pressed to temple' gesture designed to shield your eyes, as if she wasn't.

Curse her, and curse bottomless coffee refills that mean she's still there by the time we leave, so I have to walk my pouchy bottom past her.

When I get home, Ben's laying the table for lunch in the dining room. We're having my parents over from Sheffield. (If you've done a run you can do big breakfast and big lunch, as any fool knows.)

'I saw Esther at the café this morning,' I say.

Ben says: 'Oh, right,' uninterestedly.

'She seemed weirdly preoccupied by me, pointing me out to the friend she was with and so on.'

'She recognised you from court, I guess. Do we have four glasses like this that match?'

'Yes, in the cupboard above the sink. I've never seen her in court.'

Ben bangs around finding the extra glasses, comes back and says: 'She could've still seen you? I think, given you virtually share an office when she's in court, this isn't *Twilight Zone* eerie, Rach.'

'Know what I think?' I say.

'No! What?' Ben says, doing a 'oh, God' beaten-down grimace which I refuse to laugh at as it'll undermine the impact.

‘I think she looked me up online as a person of interest, as I’m seeing you.’

Ben shrugs. ‘Who can say? Who, in a very real sense, cares? Are you going to get changed?’

I look down at my kit. ‘No, a spritz of Britney Spears’ Curious and I’m good.’

‘Hmmm,’ Ben says.

‘What?’

‘Just ...’ he scratches his neck, mumbles: ‘... wondering whether Esther would ... standards ...’

I shriek and flap my hands and Ben laughs and tries to nuzzle my neck while I push him away. I stomp upstairs to shower and change.

The Saturday lunch tradition is a good one. I prepare most of it the night before, and Ben is on ‘putting lump of meat in oven at appointed time’ duty. We feed them, then my mum drags my dad off for an afternoon looking round House of Fraser.

I hear them arriving as I’m de-clingfilming potato salad and setting it out. My mum is exclaiming and cooing, even more effusively than usual. Did I mention they love Ben? They’re more smitten than me. My dad likes to say that if we split up and they had to choose, they would stay in touch with him.

Ben had a tough introduction, too: my mum was still mourning the departure of Rhys and fretting over the certainty of my old maidhood. They’d both met Ben at a family friend’s wedding, when he was with Olivia. ‘I’ve taken up with that married man’ wasn’t music to their ears, but more ‘the downward trajectory continues’. Then they met him. Love at first sight.

‘I’ve got some of that whisky you like,’ Ben’s saying to my dad. ‘You can take it with you, given the M67 and Lagavulin don’t mix.’

‘Ben, you always look so nice,’ my mum says, taking in his light blue preppy boy shirt, then glancing at my attire. ‘And my daughter looks like she lives in a hollowed-out tree. You are a very patient man.’

‘Mum!’ I say, looking down at my lightly cat-hair-dusted navy dress. God, it was from Cath Kidston as well. No pleasing some people.

The meal goes well, as we have our formula down, both in terms of the food and the conversation. Ben being a lawyer is hugely popular with them: solid, respectable profession with prospects. He’s so bloody charming, without smarm. I’m 90% pride and 10% *how can it always be so easy for you*.

Things only go off-kilter during the trifle I've made for dessert (and it's not the trifle's fault, killer Nigella recipe).

Ben's discussing a case that my parents have seen on the national news. They mention an aspect of it and Ben gently corrects them: 'That was given too much prominence in the story. He had those guns, but a lot of them belonged to his brother, only he couldn't prove it.'

'What!' I chortle. 'He had a proper "end of the world" firearms stash, he was an apocalypse nutter. Owen did that story.'

Ben says, curtly: 'Nutter: a catch-all journalistic term of abuse for anyone you don't understand.'

'Are you saying you do?!'

'A colleague covered that case and thought he was a sad, damaged sort.'

My parents nod sympathetically, spooning up their custard.

'A colleague ...' I say, 'Ohhhhhh, that was the famous Esther Cowley's client, wasn't it? Nice she can find sympathy for someone who was pointing guns at kids. When he's paying her costs.'

'All right, Miss Hang 'Em and Flog 'Em! Next stop, the *Sun*, then?'

The back and forth has become strained and we change the topic. My parents are enjoying Ben so much, they linger over the after-dinner drinks. By the time they leave, I've lost all desire to go back to that disagreement.

However, he took Esther's side over mine, a second time. Noted.

9

When Mindy first started planning her wedding, the dates looked positively futuristic. Stardate log, etc etc.

Now, improbably, it's upon us, and eight of us clamber out of the minivan at Manchester Airport, en route to two nights in a Portuguese villa.

'We'll check in and then find the Ye Olde English pub for four pints of wife-beater,' says Mindy's fifty-something colleague Trish, who despite Caroline being the official organiser, appears to be our organiser. 'I'm a nervous flier.'

'I've got journey juice too!' says Mindy's friend Emma, holding up a rattling M&S bag. 'Much better than Kalms, Trish.'

Caroline casts a wry look at me as we roll our trolley cases into the terminal and join the Ryanair queue.

After standing in it for fifteen minutes, making polite hen-do chat with Mindy's beautiful cousins Harshika and Ruksheen (despite Mindy's warnings that Ruksheen is 'pure filth,' a claim which we do not wish to probe in any detail) a hideous wail goes up at the front desk and Caroline and I look at each other in alarm. Mindy has collapsed between Trish and her friend Kate.

'What's happening?' Caroline says.

'Her passport is out of date!' Kate screams.

'What?!'

It's passed to Caroline, and after a few moments of inspection she mutters: 'Oh, fuck.' She hands it to me. It's there in black and white, Mindy has not legally been able to use it for over two months.

'I forgot!' Mindy sobs, still unable to stand without support. 'I knew it was close and I totally forgot. When we said we wouldn't do America ... I'm so sorry, everyone.'

'Don't be daft, we're fine, we'll still go without you,' I say, and Mindy half guffaws, half sobs.

I give her a hug and Caroline has hushed words with her, before returning to my side and getting her phone out in businesslike fashion.

After stabbing at it for a minute, while I text Ben with a *'you'll never guess what,'* she says: 'Well, we're definitely not going to Portugal tonight. An emergency passport means going to a passport office in Liverpool with new photos and the necessary forms, and that's tomorrow morning earliest by now.'

'Oh God, poor Mindy,' I say.

'What should we do?'

Caroline chews her lip.

'We can't rearrange, it's the wedding next weekend,' I say.

'Plus everyone's accommodation and flights are non-refundable. Bit much to ask them to spend it twice.'

We gaze at each other and intermittently shake our heads in disbelief. A hen do in ruins, thanks to one piece of admin.

'Have you got Mindy a wedding present yet?' she asks.

'No, I was going to ask what you were doing, given she's got no list.'

Caroline says: 'I've got an idea. What if we stay here?'

'The airport?' I say. 'Like the Tom Hanks film?'

'No, not the airport, you silly tart! Manchester. I know the manager at The Midland. There's eight of us, that's four doubles. We could ring her, see what we can get, give Mindy the best room and you and I lob in wedding-gift cash to offset the cost? Or am I presuming too much?'

'I think that's a brilliant idea.'

'You're too kind. It's an only OK idea but it's the best I have.'

I fist bump with Caroline. 'Let's see if Mindy goes for it.'

Once a wailing, heavily lamenting Mindy has been gently plied with a burger, we put our suggestion forward, and mercifully, having got over the first shock, she goes for it.

For my part, I don't think I'm going to miss sharing a villa with Trish too badly. She spends a lot of time discussing how many Slimming World 'Syns' we all consumed in the burger bar, then asks the driver of the minivan to plug her iPhone in and spends our journey back to the city bellowing Shania Twain's 'That Don't Impress Me Much'.

Thank God for gin in a tin.

Caroline is an incredible human being. She sorted accommodation, put it on her plastic (with a large IOU from me and smaller IOUs from volunteers), got us into a Greek restaurant that night, arranged they'd have champagne, balloons and streamers on the table, and right now Mindy may be soused as a herring, but she undeniably looks very happy.

'It's not Portugal but I do have hummus,' she says, holding a triangle of pitta bread aloft, and we toast her. 'To hummus!'

'I feel like Shirley Valentine,' cackles Trish, making an unseemly grab at a waiter's arse.

The improvised crawl itinerary afterwards involves lots of Google Maps on phones held aloft, until finally Mindy bellows, 'Cottonopolis! Follow Emma!' and off we trot on clattery high heels to the Northern Quarter. Cottonopolis is one of those bars that is pure heaven in your mid twenties, and the fitting hedonistic reward for a week of hard work. After thirty, it's a cruel sensory torture chamber.

The wooden floor and obligatory exposed ventilation-pipe ceiling, combined with music belting out at eardrum-perforating pitch, mean conversations are relegated to bellowing VODKA TONIC THANKS! VODKA! TONIC! over Drake feat. Rihanna.

Communication is reduced to grit-grinning, semaphoring vigorously and desperately wishing you were in a Wetherspoons. With everyone on the dancefloor and in lieu of conversation, I do some people watching as I swing and wiggle in the girl circle we've formed. There's a girl in a backless top whose incredible rack must be being held entirely up by youthful firmness, and I try not to ogle and marvel. There's four lads in short-sleeved shirts doing the hard-swig-from-beer-bottle wolf-pack looks round the room, having assembled for hunting purposes. Perhaps in spite of all the booze I've consumed, the couples all seem to me to be foolishly attractive, the kind of

pairings that only exist in music videos, all biker jackets and ombre hair and pouting. I mean, there's two in the corner that could be in, what did Rhys call it, *the crap spanking film* and ... oh my God.

At first I don't believe it because I don't want to. I keep staring in disbelief and the visual information is unequivocal: at a table in the corner sit Ben and Esther. They're deep in conversation, alone, and look oblivious to everyone else.

They've clearly been in here a little while as Ben's most of the way through a pint, shirt sleeves rolled up, hair wetted with sweat at the tips. She's propped her chin on palm, the other flicking her hair.

I get a funny sense of flashback and realise this is Ben at university, how I remember him: always a different girl and the same ease in accepting their undivided attention. He leans over and says something directly into Esther's ear, and she throws her head back and laughs, clutching her neck. This looks like a pre-coital scene, no doubt about it, any observer would say the same.

I could be sick. I can't look away and I can't keep looking. What if I see them kiss?

I slip my phone out of my pocket and check my texts. Still nothing. Well, now I know why he had no time or inclination to reply to my text.

Mindy tugs at my sleeve.

'RACHEL! IT'S SO LOUD IN HERE WE ARE THINKING OF MOVING ON IS THAT OK?'

'Yes sure!' I shout, glad that the alcohol is doing battle with the adrenaline in my bloodstream and some sort of composure is just about possible.

'Just going to say hi to Ben,' I say.

'WHAT?!' Mindy shouts, uncomprehending, which is fair enough because only sentences with standard format content are going to be comprehensible. I pat her shoulder by way of 'never mind' and turn round, walk over.

I'm nearly on them when Ben looks up, though Esther spots me seconds before.

'Hi,' I say.

Ben is utterly speechless, eyes wide, a stunned reaction which further confirms to me that this is not innocent.

'What the ...! What are you doing here?' he says, one hand on his head.

'Didn't you get my text?' I hate doing this in front of Esther. He hasn't stood up.

‘Your what?’

‘Text!’ I scream, and I suspect I’d scream it even if the music wasn’t this loud.

Ben frowns. ‘Oh, no,’ he half-shouts back, patting his pockets for his phone, ‘Sorry we’ve been out since work and not looked, I thought you’d be in the air right now.’

I’d have landed hours ago. Actually.

‘... Criminal had a big win today, we’ve all been out celebrating.’

He nods to Esther who still doesn’t have the decency to say hello, staring at me in brazen act of assessment. I feel naked.

‘It’s a real throng, yeah,’ I say, gesturing at the table, failing to keep my cool. Nevertheless, the volume probably drowns it out.

I relate the Mindy passport drama in as few words as possible and Ben nods and looks over my shoulder and waves at them as they depart.

‘Bye then. Got henning to do.’

I shoulder my bag and slip away very quickly, before Ben can give chase – not that there was any sign he was going to – my stomach roiling like a cauldron of hurt and cheap Sauvignon Blanc.

By the time we're in the extremely pleasant surroundings of The Midland hotel's circular bar, with me feeling extremely unpleasant, a mea culpa text has arrived.

Sorry darling, I forgot my phone was off. Hope you're having fun. Is Mindy OK? What a disaster. B xx

Hah. DARLING. A weasel endearment, as he doesn't usually use it. Screw you. Disaster, indeed. I switch my phone off and extract some savage satisfaction from the screen slowly turning black.

'Are you OK?' Caroline says, catching me frowning at my phone like it's a turd in my palm.

'I just saw Ben out alone with a female colleague of his. I say "saw", I don't know if I should say "caught". They looked really close. I know she has a crush on him. And he knows this, too.'

Is Ben messing around? Is it possible? It doesn't seem possible but perhaps this is how everyone feels, discovering an affair. Denial is the first stage.

Caroline frowns. 'Odd, but. A drink after work doesn't seem *that* bad?'

'He was supposed to be playing pool with his friend Jim,' I say.

'Oh.'

'And he'd turned his phone off, which he never does.'

'Mmm.'

'Also "after work" is stretched at this time. We're well into witching hours.'

'I'm not the least biased person you could ask about workplace extra maritals but I have all the time in the world for Ben. I'm going to say benefit of the doubt.'

'Oh yes, sorry.'

Argh, I should've remembered Caroline's ex-husband played away with a colleague. It's enough to make me shut up: especially as I haven't made sense of it myself yet.

'Even if Ben was doing some flirting ...?'

I wince and Caroline says, 'Look, even if he was ...' She pauses and pats my arm. 'Look, don't tell Mindy, she'll start shrieking if you tell her about this ...'

We both glance over at Mindy, who last we overheard being encouraged by Trish and Ruksheen to have her foof hair waxed into the shape of a heart as a 'romantic wedding night surprise'.

'... But *even if he was*, it's not the end of the world if he's not going to go any further than that.'

'I suppose. It's just not what I thought we were going to be.'

Not by a long way. At university, he was the Romeo who bounced from girl to girl and I was the faithful coupled-up one. Could it be that all these years later, that's who we both are? Maybe it wasn't our circumstances, it was our natures. Ben ended a marriage and took up with me. We never tested the strength of the love he professed, aged twenty-one. *Maybe this is who he is. Sooner or later ...*

'I don't want to sound like a manual for 1940s housewives but you can't expect things to be permanently rose-tinted,' Caroline says. 'Occasionally one of you will be stupid and another time it'll be the other one and forgiveness – not of *anything*, I'm not saying you should turn into Tom Jones's wife – is why long-term couples stay together. Not because they got the formula magically exactly right at the outset but because they clung on when they had cause to jump off.'

I nod. I can't believe I'm thinking about Ben in these disappointing terms.

Caroline squeezes my arm.

'I'm sure he's not doing anything, Rach, honestly. Any idiot can see how devoted he is to you. Look at what you went through to be together. He's not going to throw that away.'

I nod and smile this time and pretend to be convinced, as it's hardly fair to ruin Mindy's hen for Caroline as well by moping.

The thing is, as the shock recedes, I don't think Ben *is* sleeping with Esther. I think they may be in the early stages of a too intense friendship that

tips into him wanting to sleep with Esther. And then an inner voice whispers: *And you'd know how that works, right?*

I smile and chat and run on screensaver mode, all the while feeling more and more sick inside. I think about Simon's hatred of me. I think about Olivia's righteous explosion. All this time, whatever disgust they'd directed at me, I was convinced they had it wrong. I wasn't trying to take Ben away from his wife, I'd never have made a move on a married man. I didn't hide the one-night stand detail from Olivia, Ben did. Hmmm. Ben lied to his wife by omission, look at that precedent.

What if Esther is only making the same rationalisations? She's already caused one argument between us. I know I did the same between Ben and Olivia, without intending to.

Call me a cynic but I'd say the second argument between myself and Ben over this woman is a foregone conclusion. And again, Esther can tell herself it's platonic, only going for drinks with him, despite the attraction, just like I did.

You're only guilty of having an imagination, so you hang around until the relationship dies of 'natural causes' and then you turn up at the funeral, dressed like the mistress who's attending against the wishes of the family.

Perhaps tonight I got a big dose of finding out how it felt to be on the receiving end of hurt I've inflicted myself.

Mindy wobbles over, glassy- and starry-eyed.

'How are my bridesmaids? You'll be next!' She gestures to me with her drink, spilling most of it on the floor at the same time.

'Hah, doubt it,' I say sourly, and add, 'Ben's said he doesn't want to get married again,' before Caroline thinks it's a reaction to Cottonopolis.

'Why not? You could ask him? Propose!'

'Feminist way forward.' Caroline nods.

'Absolutely, it's not that I wouldn't. It's that if wanting to do it isn't mutual, I can't see the point.'

'Pfft,' Mindy waves her hands. 'You don't think Ivor really wanted to do it until I *made him* want to, do you?'

Though conversation moves on, my mind stays stuck on Ben, Esther and whether I really saw what I thought I saw. Rationally, I have nothing to worry about. Yet my instincts say DANGER in large red letters. I wonder whether Olivia once thought I had very slim odds, too.

12

Despite the rocky start, Caroline has done a credible salvage job on Mindy's hen and we start to wonder if the 'staycation' wasn't superior to two hurried nights trying to get our bearings in a foreign clime anyway.

On the Saturday, Caroline organises a minivan and an M&S picnic trip to Lyme Park in Cheshire, which played Pemberley in the 1995 *Pride & Prejudice* and as such is very close to Mindy's heart. It's welcome green space and air, out of the city, even if I could've done without the bit where Trish tried to jump in the lake to try to recreate the wet-shirt scene for Instagram.

In the evening, we go for a dressy dinner at The Midland's restaurant, Mr Cooper's, a last-minute booking we achieve through string-pulling and taking a very late sitting.

I turn my phone back on afterwards and find three texts from Ben.

Hi. How's it going?

Are you giving me the silent treatment?

I'll take that silence as a yes.

I don't reply.

According to the law that once over thirty, you can only manage one truly big night out of two on the sauce, Saturday is surprisingly civilised. The classiness of the surroundings means even Trish agrees to put the penis deely-boppers away.

On Sunday morning, Mindy wheedles Caroline into going back to hers as apparently Withington is too far in her weakened condition (we all love hanging around at Caroline's, her place is so great. No wonder she has no need for a man for company).

'Want to join, Rach?' she asks.

I'm tempted but I decline, knowing delaying the inevitable confrontation with Ben will only make me fidgety. When I get home, I push my trolley case inside the door, feeling shaky. I feel I'm in the right but I also want to be very wrong. Problematic. Ben emerges from the front room and stares at me, pale and apprehensive.

'Hi.'

'Hello,' I say. I wanted my voice to sound breezy and normal. It does not.

'Why have you ignored me all weekend?'

I shrug. 'Turned my phone off. You know how it is.'

Ben shakes his head in dismay.

'So that excuse works fine for you, but not me?' I say, voice thin and tight.

'Is this how we're going to do this, Rachel?' Ben says, and I don't think the house has ever felt this quiet. Even the cats are holding their breath. 'Whatever you think I've done wrong –' my stomach lurches '– we can discuss this without being sarcastic and nasty to each other.'

I shrug my shoulders. I doubt I can.

'Talk in here?' he holds the front room door open.

'You're not speaking to me because I was out with Esther?' Ben says, once we're inside. We don't sit down because you can't argue properly sitting down. I notice he looks as nervous as I feel. 'I was meant to meet Jim, but he couldn't make it. Then the criminal team had a good result and they asked me to come to the pub—'

'*Esther* asked you,' I interject, bitterly, not knowing I was going to say this and realising I'm not in control.

'Esther asked me,' Ben agrees.

My blood is hot and full of small jagged particles.

'And naturally you end up in the corner of a late bar alone, draped all over each other, whispering intimately in each other's' ears?'

Ben doesn't flinch.

'As if you could do any "whispering" in that place. If I was leaning in, it was because of the din. Four of us went to that bar ...'

'Double date?' I say, mouth running away with me again.

'John and Andrew aren't a couple. Four of us went to that bar and got a round and they couldn't hack the noise and left before us. All you saw was me finishing that drink before I found a taxi.'

'Oh, really. It looked like you were both about to find a hotel.'

‘Jesus, Rachel! Are you seriously accusing me of an affair?’

‘You see how this looks, though? It looks like you were flirting with someone you know has an interest in you, while turning your phone off? The only reason you’re having to own up to it is because I caught you.’

‘It didn’t look great, I agree, but I’m telling you that nothing was going on. I thought we trusted each other.’

‘If it was innocent, why did you look so shocked and guilty?’

‘I was shocked because you were supposed to be in Portugal! I wasn’t aware I looked guilty. I mean, yes, given we’d argued about Esther before, I knew it probably wouldn’t go down well.’

‘You didn’t think you were encouraging her?’

‘I wasn’t. I told you, there were four of us. She didn’t ask me out on a date.’

‘Yeah, she did, in an underhand way. I’m sure that was the aim from the start, and you obviously didn’t have much of a problem with it.’

Ben gives me a profound look of regret and disgust and right now I’m unsure whether this damage is permanent. I hate how bitter I sound, but I can’t stop. I tap my finger against my lips, faux-thoughtfully.

‘What did Esther describe my existence as: your “imperfection”?’

Ben rubs his forehead. ‘I was unimpressed she said that, I told you at the time.’

‘Did I come up?’ I say, and for the first time, Ben looks flustered.

‘Not really.’

‘Not really?’

‘I said you were on a hen do and she asked a few things about it, that’s all.’

‘Great,’ I say. ‘Checking I was definitely out of town.’

Ben says: ‘No,’ but I can see he’s embarrassed. ‘OK, look – how do you think I feel when you’re quoting Owen to me all the time, telling me about *your* drinks together, *your* private jokes at work. When your phone’s pinging away with WhatsApps from him all evening, because some stories are so important you need to be discussing them at seven at night and yeah, thanks, I have spotted he puts kisses on those messages? You don’t think you ever give me cause to be jealous, just because I don’t complain?’

‘The key thing here is I’m telling you about these things. Not switching my phone off and sneaking around.’

‘The bloody phone again! If I was sneaking around, I’d have my phone on,

wouldn't I?!' Ben says. 'You weren't in the city, I thought. Surely a cheat would call you and say "Oh hey, yeah, I'm playing pool," and then go back to his cheating?'

He has a point, I suppose. Still, I know what I saw. What I felt.

'You can reason me out of this all you want, but we both know what was happening when I intruded,' I say, and part of me is silent-screaming DON'T SAY THIS.

'And what's that?' says Ben, folding his arms, expression murderous.

'I saw that moment before she talks you into going somewhere else quieter for one last one, and you end up slumped on each other on a Chesterfield sofa somewhere with a nightcap, pretending you're not building up to a big *oh dear how did that happen* moment where she crosses the line that you've been subtly implying might not be there all night.'

I'm far too worked up to conceal how much I've thought about this.

Ben rakes at his hair as though he's about to pull it out.

'No. Completely wrong. I had no intention of doing any of the above. There was no flirting.'

'Being there with her was flirting!' I near-shout.

'Oh, God,' Ben says, 'I can't defend myself against hypothetical scenarios that have only occurred in your head.'

'I can't believe you're playing dumb about something like this.'

'I can't believe you think so little of my character.'

Check mate. Silence.

'... I'm going for a run,' Ben says eventually, shrugging, and thumps upstairs to get changed. After he slams out, I sit in an empty house and realise I want to be out of it, too.

I text Caroline and ask to join her and Mindy's carbohydrate-heavy recovery session after all. Fifteen minutes later, a mini cab is depositing me back in town.

'Can you use your spare keys to let yourself in?' Caroline texted on the way. 'Mindy and I can't move unless it's for the Deliveroo man.'

In the end, the laden, tortoise-like bike boy and I arrive simultaneously, so I relieve him of his Pizza Express bounty.

It helps in making my arrival welcome.

'I confronted Ben over Esther,' I say, dropping my bag and coat, after handing them the boxes.

Two sets of wide eyes look up from their American Hots.

'Oh, kay.'

'Oh.'

'I think I might've made a mess of it.'

Caroline says: 'Uh, *huh*.'

'I pretty much accused Ben of infidelity. Or pre-infidelity.'

'What's pre-infidelity?' Mindy asks, brow wrinkling.

'The stage where you're working up to it. Engineering high-risk situations.'

Caroline smooths her ponytail with her as-always immaculately manicured hands. 'How does this pre-cheating look different to not going to cheat?'

'It involves bad decisions, such as being alone and flirting with sexy women who fancy you in sexy bars. Sexy women, who, by the way, are a ringer for Ben's ex-wife.'

'It's like the pre-cogs in *Minority Report*? When you know there's going to be a crime so you arrest them before they can do it?' Mindy asks. This is a ridiculous but also essentially accurate summary and I open my mouth and close it again.

‘What did Ben say?’ Caroline asks.

‘He said there was a group of them out after work and they were the last two left, and when I saw him he was on the verge of going home.’

‘Do you have any reason to think that’s not the truth? You honestly think there was a boffing in the offing?’

I nearly wail. ‘Who knows!’ Then I force myself to dig deeper than the mortification of seeing them in that bar, to a more rational assessment. ‘... No.’

‘Doesn’t seem the *greatest* strategy to accuse him, then,’ Caroline says gently, standing up. ‘Hair of the dog? We’re on the Chambord. Take a seat.’

I sit down next to Mindy and lean my head on her shoulder. She puts her arm round me and I’m done for. Thirty-something deep-blue hangover plus anxiety of last two days plus giant ugly fight equals inevitable tsunami of tears.

‘I know I’m being stupid but it just hurt, seeing them together like that,’ I gasp, wiping my eyes on my sleeve. ‘I convinced myself he was talking to her in a way he talks to me. They looked so ... confidential. Like they were discussing things I had no part of, in a place Ben and I never go to. It was like seeing a different Ben.’

‘Work-place stuff though, you know how it is. You get out on a Friday and it’s shop talk gossip non stop,’ Mindy says. ‘I go to Ivor’s computer club nights and they could be talking in literal Canadian.’

‘Literal Canadian is English,’ Caroline says, handing me a flute of blush-coloured fizz.

‘I know,’ I say, wiping my eyes. ‘To both things.’

‘Are you and Ben having problems otherwise?’ says Caroline, and if I was her I’d be looking for displacement too, only I say: ‘No. We’re great otherwise. Never happier.’

A brief, contemplative silence descends.

‘I think you might have Dave Stewart’s Paradise Syndrome,’ Mindy says eventually.

‘What the hell is that?’

‘The beardy one out of The Eurythmics. He has an illness where life is too perfect so he gets sick.’

I start laughing, weakly.

‘... I’m sick of perfection?’

‘No, not sick, I mean. But maybe it’s all so good with Ben, you were looking for the problem? Coldplay explained it all in their song “Warning Sign.”

I laugh and then I consider, in that peculiar Mindy way, she might be on to something. Despite my fears, Ben and I didn’t find the transition from friends to lovers to co-mortgagees and cat parents difficult. We can haggle about mislaid socks and worming tablets and still fall into each other’s arms with as much passion as we did outside that café two years ago.

What if it isn’t that Esther’s a problem, it’s that I was subconsciously looking for one, and decided it was her? What if I mistook my fear building for a threat building?

It’s like the sun breaking through the clouds only for the clouds to return and give me a good dousing.

‘Have I wildly overreacted?’ I say to Mindy and Caroline after a long pause.

They are both mid-bite, but both do the fatal hesitation where you try to modify a ‘yes.’

‘Oh God!’ I cry. ‘I’m Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City 2*! I think I have problems because my husband got me a television as an anniversary present!’

There is another pause and then sudden, loud, relieved laughter, and not for the first time I think, I don’t know what I’d do without you two.

Caroline wipes her mouth on some kitchen roll and says: ‘I don’t think you doubt him, I think you doubt yourself.’

‘Do I?’

‘Yes. You talk about how much this girl looks like Olivia, forgetting it’s irrelevant. It’s you he wants.’

Mindy nods. ‘He looks at you the way I look at peanut KitKat Chunkys on fast days.’

I lie prone with Mindy and Caroline and let their chatter about the wedding-day plans wash over me. I idly check Facebook on my phone. Ben’s friend Jim had posted on his wall, at 5 p.m. on Friday, saying sorry work was overrunning and he had to cancel. Ben responded half an hour later by asking him if he wanted to join the solicitors’ pub crawl instead, when he got out. I’ve been a right tool.

I text Ben.

I'm at Caroline's btw. x

OK. Are you staying there tonight? x

I'd prefer to come home. x

I would prefer that too. X

When I get in, I have conciliatory opening words planned. Ben's in his running gear, feeding the cats, bickering with them as one of the Ronnies tries to take his hand off.

I say 'Hello,' and suddenly I can't stop stupid tears welling at the sight of him.

It's like we're right back in that halls of residence queue, that incredible once-in-a-lifetime moment when we met as strangers who somehow knew each other already.

He puts down the Whiskas tin and says: 'Ah, God, don't, it's OK,' steps forward and puts his arms around me. However much I might deserve more furious reproaches and sulking, I appreciate the fact he's not the resentful type so much right now.

He shushes me and says: 'I'm so sorry if I upset you, Ron. Nothing's going on.'

Whenever he calls me Ron, we're instantly eighteen again. Me in my Doc Martens and him in his silly always-brand-new trainers.

'I know,' I mumble.

'Do you?' Ben says, pulling back and looking at me.

'Yeah.' I wipe my eyes. 'I was freaked out but deep down, I know you wouldn't mess around. I mean, even at uni ...' I smile weakly, 'Even when you were ladding about, you weren't a liar.'

'I've never given you any cause not to trust me, have I?'

'No. I got completely paranoid, thinking about how different we were at university ...'

'First of all, that was a long time ago. Second of all, I believe I was the one who spent that time in love with you, waiting for you to come round to the idea of going out with me?'

I wet-face smile. 'True.' Amazing how you construct your worst-case scenarios by being so selective.

‘I do worry that maybe I’m too ...’ Ben pauses and I say ‘What?’ as he hesitates.

‘... I worry you’re used to big ups and downs and making up and breaking up with Rhys and you find our life slightly too steady and boring. I know you didn’t have the full picture on Friday, but it still seems ...’

‘Go on,’ I say, as I can see Ben biting his lip and wondering if he’s about to recklessly pluck defeat from the jaws of victory, now I’ve calmed down.

‘I can’t quite see why you’d go to Def Con Five and assume I’m shagging about on the basis of one unfortunate coincidence. At first I was insulted, but having thought about it, I’m just confused.’

I’ve wondered about this in my Uber home, while enjoying some Heart FM and I know I have the answer he needs – we need.

‘It’s not because we’re boring. At all. Fighting-drama is grim, I had enough of it with Rhys. When I saw you talking with Esther, I was scared she was me. The new me. Or the old Rachel, if you know what I mean. In a way, Esther is exactly what I deserve.’

Ben and I gaze at each other and through the transformative power of telling the truth, I know we perfectly understand each other at last. I understand myself a bit better.

After a long pause, Ben says: ‘Yeah. Do you know what, I suppose I worried Owen was being a mate in the way I was once your mate.’

‘Haha! *Seriously?*’

I simultaneously can’t believe Ben could get it that far wrong, while realising I’ve done the same. I always assume Ben is seamlessly confident, but it’s selfish: it allows me to think I’m the only one with doubts and fears.

‘I mean, university-era-Ben. A shit Ben. A really early clumsy prototype.’

We both laugh.

‘The story of my life is that there is only one you for me,’ he says. ‘How is worrying about Esther what you “deserve”? Liv and I didn’t split up because of you, you know that.’

‘I was the best friend who became the girlfriend. It’s like what they say about the Other Woman who becomes the wife, creating a vacancy. I made a vacancy.’

‘But you haven’t. You’re still my best friend,’ Ben says.

This moment, and some that follow, almost make up for all the fraught moments that directly led to it.

One week later ...

You know when people say a bride walked in wearing their gown and the onlookers burst into tears? I used to think that sounded ridiculous too. However nice somebody looks, it's a dress.

Caroline and I have had our floral hair decor and make-up done and have wiggled into our narrow black off-the-shoulder dresses, praising Spanx to the skies, in our room at Didsbury House. It's a boutique hotel, a short drive from the venue and however much piss we took out of Mindy for her matrimonial monomania, we're reaping the benefits in her attention to detail. The three of us tried not to stay up too late last night in its lovely plush drawing room bar, reminiscing about university years and fizzing with excitement.

There's a gentle knock at the door, I answer, and there's Mindy, in her finery. She insisted we weren't allowed to know anything beyond the fact she was wearing white, so this is the first time we've seen her. She's wearing a look that says she has anticipated our reaction.

'Oh my God!' I cry and Caroline, round the corner in front of the mirror still, shouts 'Oh no, what?!' because PassportGate is a little too fresh a memory.

Mindy is a – well, the word is 'vision'. The dress is scalloped vintage lace, cream with delicate gold edging, 1920s flapper feel that suits her hair style, which is the usual mirror-shine black bob. She's gone for an Indian touch with a necklace in her hair, a teardrop pendant in the centre of her forehead.

Caroline collides into the back of me in her hurry to see, and then we look at each other and have to hop around to stop ourselves blubbing and making our make-up run.

'You look ridiculously beautiful,' I say.

'So grown up!' Caroline chokes out. 'How can this be Mindy?!'

‘Well I am thirty-three,’ Mindy says, grinning. ‘I’ll do?’

‘Mindy,’ I say, in a bit of a gasp, ‘you look incredible.’ I grab one of her hands. ‘We’re so proud of you. Your happiness is our happiness too. We’re stealing it.’

‘Ah, Rach!’ Mindy says, as her face collapses in emotion.

‘Oh for God’s sake!’ Caroline shouts at me, as tears are now flowing for everyone. ‘What she said!’ Caroline nods at me and runs to the mirror to check the damage.

‘Don’t worry, Liz is still here,’ Mindy says, unperturbed, and with that she rustles off to find the make-up artist in her room. She seems to have gone through a year of frenetic hysteria to achieve this Zen-like connection with her inner Buddha on the big day. She’s exhibiting no nerves whatsoever.

When we pile out of the vintage cars at Victoria Baths, and embark on that strangely harrowing period where you hover outside the door of the ceremony, she’s as calm as can be.

Her dad is much more antsy, and keeps absently patting her hand in the crook of his arm.

‘You’re meant to say if I don’t want to go through with it, it’s OK,’ Mindy says.

He looks startled. ‘Don’t you?!’

‘Of course I want to. But you’re meant to ask. It’s tradition.’

‘Do you want to go through with it?’ her dad asks.

‘Now you’ve asked, I’m not sure,’ Mindy says.

Her dad looks worried. Caroline and I are laughing as the doors open and we have to concentrate hard on keeping faces straight during our lock step down the aisle. The room looks incredible: the sunken tiled space has been decorated with bundles of red Amaryllis, LED candles and tangles of clear fairy lights in glass vases.

A string quartet, stationed to the left of the registrar, strike up Journey’s ‘Don’t Stop Believin’’. (Apparently they compromised on wedding music: Mindy gets her choice during the aisle walk and register signing, Ivor picked the first dance. A lot of couples find merging their music collections tricky; with Ivor and Mindy it was implosion on contact.)

We reach Ivor, in his ink-blue suit and red tie, looking incredibly un-Ivorish both in his smart clothing and rictus terror. We grin foolishly and supportively. When he sees Mindy behind us, the look on his face is ... I

struggle to find the word. Rhys would say sappy. I would say: I didn't even know he had that expression in his face's repertoire. Absolute joy mixed with incredulity she could be about to marry him.

You know, now our generation doesn't have to get married – and thank goodness for that – it's easy to think it's a superfluous nonsense, and sometimes weddings are. But it's also easy to forget how absolutely fantastic they can be. This isn't just one of the best days of Ivor and Mindy's lives, it's one of the best days of all of our lives.

After sausages and mash; after the signature cocktail of the reception (passionfruit Martinis, so sprightly tasting and more-ish, so likely to induce a state of 'have a judge declare me legally dead' tomorrow); after the tables are cleared away and Mindy and Ivor perform an energetic first dance to Billy Ocean's 'Red Light Spells Danger' ... after all of that, the ballads-for-couple-waltzing starts.

Ben appears at my side at the dancefloor, half-cut, Paul Smith suited and booted and pleased with himself.

'Hello. Would you like to dance? I'm hoping to pull a bridesmaid tonight.'

'Oh really,' I say, allowing myself to be swung on to the floor to the Stone Roses' 'Ten Storey Love Song'.

'Do you know if the blonde's single?' Ben says, nodding his head towards Caroline. 'You look exceptionally beautiful,' he says. 'Even if your flower's drunk now.' He puts his hand up to adjust my wilting rose.

'Ah, well. Might as well make the most of it. *Always the bridesmaid ...*'

Ben's eyes narrow. 'Oh, come on ...'

'... Aiming for a sexy Miss Havisham feel. It's exciting to think I'm still on the market.' I pull a face.

'You're not on the mar ...! Oh you're a bugger, you really are,' Ben huffs. 'Are you harking back to a conversation we had when you heard Rhys was getting married?'

'Yes. It's cool.' I glance around the room with an exaggerated sigh, 'It's only *rigmarole*.'

Teasing Ben about this has an edge. I should let it go. I am a little sad, though.

'You said you weren't arsed about marriage,' Ben says. 'Being Angry Rachel, like I remember from university. I remember you drunk on cider in the Union once, telling someone a wedding veil is like a burqa.'

‘Hahahaha. Did I?’

‘Yup.’

‘I was always so fun. I’m not bothered, really. It’s just ...’

‘What?’

‘Remember that time you asked me at university? As a joke? You had your late essay? You got down on one knee in front of the tutor.’

‘Hah. Yes. It didn’t work, the bastard threatened to fail me.’

‘Part of me hoped you might do that again someday.’

Ben casts his eyes to the ceiling, full of white balloons.

‘You’re being exasperating.’

‘Am I?’

‘Distinctly.’

We do a few turns to the music and I lean my head on Ben’s shoulder.

‘Did you really think I’d want to make a verbal agreement in principle to marry?’ he says, above me. ‘I’m a lawyer for a living, not in my private life.’

‘No, ’spose not,’ I mumble.

‘And did you think I wanted to make that verbal agreement in the context of competing with news from your ex?’

‘I dunno ...’

‘Didn’t you notice your parents couldn’t pour enough whisky down me, the last time they came for lunch?’

My head jerks back as I look directly at him. ‘Eh?’

I thought that was because Dad was driving.

Ben grips my hand tighter.

‘Did you really think I wouldn’t have called your dad to ask for permission, not because we need it, but because I knew it’d give me a great quote for the speech, *then* asked your mum’s advice on rings, *then* scoured Manchester’s jewellery shops to find something suitable for an ex-Goth and hidden it in the case for the Black & Decker drill, which is the perfect place to hide it from you, although being fair, it’d be the perfect place to hide something from me, too?’

‘Wait, wait. You ...?’

‘Yes. You effing idiot. Sorry if my attempts to fob you off on the topic weren’t the most tactful but you caught me by surprise and I had to put you on delay somehow.’

I am completely and totally wrongfooted. I stop dancing and stare at him.

‘But ...? You said? You didn’t want to ...?’

‘Yes. I said that. I wanted my proposal to be exciting and unexpected, if at all possible. Turns out it isn’t possible.’

I didn’t know I was welling up but I can feel a tear slide through my inch of panstick. Ah, fuck. Oh me of little faith.

‘So, well done, you’ve ruined the surprise now. I’m not doing the one-knee thing here and I don’t have the ring.’ Ben leans in so no one can overhear. ‘But Rachel Woodford, will you marry me?’

I simultaneously cough, choke and laugh and can’t get the words out. My heart rate’s all over the shop.

‘Er, no,’ I say when I get my breath back. ‘Not yet. We’re stealing thunder from this wedding. Ask me again, how you originally planned, and my answer might change.’

Ben smiles. ‘Talk about high maintenance. OK. Third time lucky. Want to know something ridiculous?’

I nod.

Ben leans in. ‘I meant it the first time.’

THE END



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1

Life through a phone is a lie. Edie imagined the process like a diagram from physics lessons, the one on that Pink Floyd album cover – a beam of white light refracted in a prism, splintering and fanning out as a rainbow.

I mean, how much artifice, she wondered, was crammed into this one appealing photograph? She gazed at its seductive fictions in the slightly greasy, warm slab of screen in her palm as she queued at the hotel bar.

Activity in the room whirled around her, messy unkempt sweaty reality, soundtracked by The Supremes ‘Where Did Our Love Go?’ In this still life, everything was forever image managed and perfect.

Untruth number one: she and Louis looked like they adored each other’s company. In order to squeeze into the frame, Edie had rested her head against his shoulder. She was coquettish, wearing a mysterious smile. He was doing the self-satisfied, slightly 007 quirk of the lip that conveyed *hey life is great, no big deal*. It really wasn’t a big deal.

They’d spent five hours as platonic plus ones – the wedding planner had demanded pairs, like Noah’s Ark – and now they were grating on each other, in heat and booze and wedding clothes with waistbands that had got tighter and tighter, as if inflating a blood pressure cuff.

Edie’s heels had, like those high enough for special occasions, moved from ‘wobbly and pinchy, but borderline tolerable’ to stabbing at her viciously like some mythic pain where she’d given up her mermaid tail for size 4s and the love of a prince.

Falsehood number two, the composition. Twinkling-happy party girl Edie, looking up through roadsweeper-brush-sized false lashes. You could glimpse

the top half of her red dress, with nicely hoisted pale bosom, stomach carefully held in. Louis's cheekbones were even more 'killer in a Bret Easton Ellis' sharp than usual, chin angled downwards.

This was because they'd held the lens at arm's length above their heads and discarded five less flattering images, bartering over who liked which one. Edie had eye bags, Louis objected he looked gaunt, the expressions were slightly too studied, the shadows had not fallen in their favour. *OK, another, another! Pose, click, flash.* Half a dozen was the charm: they both looked good, but not too much like they'd *tried* to look good.

(‘Why does everyone do that expression now, like you’re sucking on a sour plum?’ Edie’s dad asked, last time she was home. ‘To make yourself look thin and pouty, I suppose. But you don’t look like that face you pull, in real life. How strange.’)

Louis, an Instagram professional and very sour plum, fiddled with the brightness and contrast settings. ‘Now to filter ourselves to fuck.’

He selected ‘Amaro’, bathing them in a fairytale cloud of lemonade fog. Complexions were perfected. The mood was filmic and dreamy, you’d think it captured a perfect moment. *You had to (not) be there.*

And then there was the caption. The biggest deception of all. Louis tapped it out and hit ‘post.’ *‘Congratulations Jack & Charlotte! Amazing day! So happy for you guys <3 #perfectcouple living their #bestlife.’*

This was mostly for the benefit of the rest of the Ad Hoc agency, who’d all found elegant excuses not to travel from London to Harrogate. Nothing tested popularity like several hundred miles of motorway.

Like after admiring Like rolled in. ‘Sigh. You two are another #perfectcouple!’ ‘Shame I’m a bender!’ Louis replied. *That’d be the least of our problems*, Edie thought. They’d all done the arithmetic with Louis, that if he slagged off everyone else to you, he slagged you off, too.

And of course, Louis had not stopped grouching under his breath about the ‘amazing’ wedding. Edie thought criticising someone’s big day was like making fun of the way they ate, or the size of their ankles. Good people instinctively understood it was not fair game.

I really thought Charlotte would go for something more clean, minimal. Like Carolyn Bessette marrying JFK Jr. The crystal beading on that gown’s a bit Pronuptia, isn’t it? Even women with taste seems to lose the plot and go Disney disaster in a bridal salon. I am so over those rose bouquets with pearl

studs and white ribbon round the stems, like a bandaged stump! Once a WAG has done something, it is DONE. And sorry, but I find a tanned bride vulgar. Ugh, two sips of that Buck's Fizz and it was into a plant pot. I can't bear orange juice used to hide cheap champagne. Look at the DJ, he's about fifty in a blouson leather jacket, where did he get that from, 1983? He looks like he should be on Top Gear. It'll be rocking out to Kings Of Leon's 'Sex On Fire' and Toni Braxton for the erection section. Why can't weddings be more MODERN?

The Old Swan in Harrogate was not, as the name suggested, modern. It had the exciting association of being the place Agatha Christie disappeared to during her 'missing days' in the 1920s, even though there was probably nothing exciting about being in a confused fugue state.

Edie loved it here. She wouldn't mind absconding from her life into one of its rooms with four-poster canopied beds. Everything about The Swan was comforting. The ivy-clad frontage, the solid square portico entrance, the way it smelled like cooked breakfasts and plushy comfort.

It had been a blistering high summer day – *Haven't they been lucky with the weather* becoming the go-to banal conversation opener – and the French doors in the bar opened on to the honey-lit rolling gardens. Children in shiny waistcoats were zooming around playing aeroplanes, high on Coca Cola and the novelty of being up this late.

Nevertheless, this was, for none of the reasons Louis described, the worst wedding Edie had ever been to.

Giving her order at the bar, she found herself next to a group of women in their seventies and possibly eighties, dressed as flappers. Edie guessed they were here for a Murder Mystery weekend; she'd seen a coach from Scarborough pull up earlier.

There was a 'suspect' with no legs, sitting in a wheelchair. She was wearing a feather headband, long knotted beads and draped in a white feather boa. She was sipping a mini bottle of Prosecco through a straw. Edie wanted to give her a cuddle, and/or cheer.

'Don't you look lovely,' one of the group said to Edie, and Edie smiled and said, 'Thank you! You do too.'

'You remind me of someone. Norma! Who does this lovely young lady look like?'

Edie did the fixed embarrassed smile of someone who was being closely

inspected by a gaggle of tipsy senior citizens.

‘Clara Bow!’ one exclaimed.

‘That’s it!’ they chorused. ‘Ahh. Clara Bow.’

It wasn’t the first time Edie had been given a compliment like this. Her dad said she had ‘an old-fashioned face.’ ‘You look like you should be in a cloche hat and gloves at a train station, in a talkie film,’ he always said. ‘Which is appropriate.’

(Edie didn’t think she talked *that* much, it was more that her father and sister were quieter.)

She had shoulder-length, inky hair and thick dark brows. Their geometry had to be aggressively maintained with threading, so they stayed something more starlet than beetling. They sat above large soulful eyes, in a heart-shaped face with small mouth.

A cruel yet articulate boy at a house party told her she looked like ‘A Victorian doll reanimated by the occult.’ She told herself it was because she was going through her teenage Goth phase but she knew it was still applicable now, if she hadn’t had enough sleep and caught herself glowering.

Louis once said, as if he wasn’t talking about her when they both knew he was: ‘Baby faces don’t age well, which is why it’s a tragedy it was Lennon shot instead of McCartney.’

‘Are you here with your husband?’ another woman asked, as Edie picked up her white wine and V&T.

‘No, no husband. Single,’ Edie said, to lots more staring and curious delighted *ooohs*.

‘Plenty of time for that. Having your fun first, eh?’ said another of the flappers, and Edie smiled and nearly said, ‘I’m thirty-five and having very little fun,’ and thought better of it and said ‘Yes, haha!’ instead.

‘Are you from Yorkshire?’ another asked.

‘No. I live in London. The bride’s family are from—’

Louis emerged from the restaurant, gesturing for her to join him with an urgent circling motion of the hand, hissing:

‘*Edie!*’

‘Edie! What a beautiful name!’ the women chorused, looking upon her with renewed adoration. Edie was touched and slightly baffled by her sudden celebrity status. That was Prosecco drunk through a straw for you.

‘Are you this young lady’s gentleman?’ they asked Louis, as he joined

them.

‘No, darlings, I like cock,’ he said, taking his drink from Edie while she cringed.

‘He likes who?’ said one of the women. ‘Who’s “Cock”?’

‘No. Cock.’ Louis made a flexing bicep gesture that Edie didn’t think made it much clearer.

‘Oh, he likes *men*, Norma. He’s a Jolly Roger,’ said one, casually.

Attention shifted to Louis, the not-that-jolly Roger.

‘I prefer a game of Bananagrams and a hot bath, these days,’ another offered. ‘Barbara still likes a bit of cock, well enough.’

‘Which one of you did it, then?’ Louis said, eyeing their costumes. ‘Who’s the prime suspect?’

‘There’s not been a crime yet,’ one said. ‘Rumour has it there’s going to be a body found on the third floor.’

‘Well you can probably rule her out then,’ Louis said, tapping his nose, gesturing at the woman in the wheelchair.

‘*Louis!*’ Edie gasped.

Fortunately, it caused a cackle eruption.

‘Sheila used to dig her corns out with safety pins. You don’t mess with Sheila.’

‘Looks like she overdid it.’

Edie gasped again and the old ladies fell about, howling. She couldn’t believe it: Louis had found his audience.

‘Great meeting you, girls,’ Louis said, and they almost applauded him. Edie was forgotten; chopped liver.

‘Come back to the table. It’s all kicking off big style in the main tent,’ Louis said to her. ‘The speeches are starting.’

With a heavy heart, Edie excused herself. The moment she dreaded.

An Audience With The Hashtag Perfect Couple, Living Their Hashtag Best Life.

‘Was that free?’ barked the sixty-something man with the hearing aid, dressed as a posh country squire, eyes fixed on the glass in Edie’s hand. Edie and Louis had been put on the odds and sods, ‘hard work, nothing in common’ table. The others had immediately abandoned the hard work and scattered, in the *longueur* between meal and disco. This sod remained, with his timid-looking, equally tweedy wife.

‘Er, no? I can get you something if you like?’

‘No, don’t bother. You come to these bloody interminable things and they fleece you like sheep. As if the gift list wasn’t brass neck enough. Four hundred pounds for some bloody ugly blue cake whisk, the silly clots. Oh hush, Deirdre, you know I’m right.’

Edie plopped down in her banqueting chair and tried not to laugh, because she thought the KitchenAid was a rinse, too.

She swigged the acidic white wine and thanked the Lord for the gift of alcohol to get through this. The top table passed the microphone down the line to the groom, Jack. He tapped his glass with a fork and coughed into a curled fist. His sleeve was tugged by his new mother-in-law. He put a palm up to indicate, ‘Sorry, in a second, folks.’

‘What’s this crackpot notion of wearing brown shoes with a blue suit and a pink tie, nowadays?’ said hearing aid man, of the groom’s attire. ‘Anyone would think this was a lavender liaison.’

Edie thought Jack’s tall, narrow frame in head-to-toe spring-summer Paul Smith looked pretty great but she wasn’t about to defend him.

‘What’s a lavender liaison?’ Louis said.

‘A marriage of convenience, to conceal one’s true nature. When one’s interests *lie elsewhere*.’

‘Oh, I see. We’re having one of those,’ he grinned, clasping Edie to him.

‘Forgive me if I don’t scrabble for my inhaler in shock,’ he said, looking at Louis’s quiffed hair. ‘I had you down as someone who likes to *smell the flowers*.’

Edie had heard more inventive euphemisms for ‘homosexual’ than she expected today.

‘Think you’ll ever bother with marriage?’ Louis said, under his breath.

‘I think it’s more whether marriage will ever bother with me,’ Edie said.

‘Babe. *Loads* of people would marry you. You’re so “wife”. I look at you and think “WIFE ME”.’

Edie laughed, hollowly. ‘Surprised they’re not making this known to me then.’

‘You’re an enigma, you know ...’ Louis said, prodding the bottom of his glass with the plastic stirrer. Edie’s stomach tensed, because meandering, whimsical trains of thought with Louis were always headed to the station of *I Can’t Believe You Said That*.

‘Hah. Not really.’

‘I mean, you’re never short of fans. You’re the life and soul. But you’re always on your own.’

‘I think that’s because *being a fan* doesn’t necessarily equal *wanting a relationship*,’ Edie said neutrally, casting her eyes over the hubbub in the room and hoping they’d snag on something else they could talk about.

‘Do you think you’re the commitmentphobe? Or are they?’ Louis said, moving the stirrer to one side as he drank.

‘Oh, I repel them with a kind of centrifugal force, I think,’ Edie said. ‘Or is it centripetal?’

‘*Seriously?*’ Louis said. ‘I’m being serious here.’

Edie sighed. ‘I’ve liked people and people have liked me. I’ve never liked someone who’s liked me as much as I like them, at the same time. It’s that simple.’

‘Maybe they don’t know you’re interested? You’re quite hard to read.’

‘Maybe,’ Edie said, thinking agreeing would end this subject sooner.

‘So no one’s ever promised you a lifetime of happiness? You haven’t broken hearts?’

‘Hah. Nope.’

‘Then you’re a paradox, gorgeous Edie Thompson. *The girl who everyone wanted ... and nobody chose.*’

Edie spluttered, and Louis had the reaction he’d been angling for.

‘“Nobody chose”! Bloody hell, Louis! Thanks.’

‘Babe, no! I’m no different, no wedding for loveless Louis any time soon. I’m thirty-four, that’s dead in gay years.’

This was nonsense, of course. Louis no more wanted a wedding than an invasive cancer. He spent all his time hunting for meaningless hook-ups on Grindr, the latest with a wealthy, hirsute man he called Chewbacca to his ‘Princess Louis’. It was just a way of claiming the latitude to take the mickey out of Edie.

‘I did say gorgeous, you diva,’ Louis pouted, as if Edie had been the aggressor. You had to admire the choreography of Louis’s cruelty – a series of carefully worked out, highly nimble steps, executed flawlessly.

‘Ladies and gentleman, sorry about the delay ...’ said the groom into the microphone at last.

Jack’s slightly anaemic speech ticked off the things it was supposed to do, according to the internet cheat sheets. He said how beautiful the bridesmaids looked and thanked everyone for being there. He read out cards from absent relatives. He thanked the hotel for the hospitality and both sets of parents for their support.

When he finished with the pledge: ‘I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Charlotte. I will spend the rest of my life trying to make sure you don’t regret your decision today,’ Edie almost knocked back the flute of toasting champagne in one go.

The best man Craig’s speech was amusing in as much as it was horribly misjudged, with gag after gag about the varying successes of Jack’s sexploits at university. He seemed to think these tales were suitable because ‘We were all at it!’ and they were, ‘A bloody good bunch of chaps.’ (Jack went to Durham.) At the mention of a rugby game called ‘Pig Gamble,’ Jack snapped, ‘Perhaps leave that one out, eh?’ and Craig cut straight to, ‘Jack and Charlotte, everyone!’

The bride had a nervous fixed grin and her mum had a face like an arse operation.

Charlotte’s chief bridesmaid, Lucie, was passed the microphone.

Edie had heard much of the legend of Lucie Maguire, from Charlotte's awed anecdotes in the office. She was a ruthlessly successful estate agent ('She could sell you an outdoor toilet!'), mother of challenging twins who were expelled from pre-school ('they're extremely spirited') and a Quidditch champion. ('A game from a kid's book,' Jack had said to Edie. 'What next, pro Pooh Sticks?')

She 'spoke as she found' (trans: rude); 'didn't suffer fools gladly' (rude to peoples' faces) and 'didn't stand for nonsense' (very rude to people's faces).

Edie thought Lucie was someone you wouldn't choose as your best friend unless there'd been a global pandemic extinction event, and probably not even then.

'Hello, everyone,' she said, in her confident, cut-glass tones, one hand on her salmon silk draped hip: 'I'm Lucie. I'm the chief bridesmaid and Charlotte's best friend since our St Andrews days.'

Edie half expected her to finish this sentence: 'BSc Hons, accredited by the NAEA.'

'I've got a bit of a cheeky little surprise for the happy couple now.'

Edie sat up straighter and thought *really? A wedding day surprise with no power of veto? Oof...*

'I wanted to do something really special for my best friend today and decided on this. Congratulations, Jack and Charlotte. This is for you. Oh, and to make the song scan, I've had to Brangelina you as "Charlack", hope that's OK, guys.'

Song? Every pair of buttocks in the room clenched.

'So, on one, two, THREE ...'

The other two – blushing, literally – bridesmaids simultaneously produced handbells and started shaking them in sync. They wore the expressions of people who had come to terms with their fate a while ago, yet the moment was no less powerfully awful for it.

Lucie began singing. She had a good enough voice for a cappella, but it was still the shock of a cappella that was sending the whole room into a straight-backed, pop-eyed rictus of English embarrassment. To the tune of Julie Andrews' 'My Favourite Things', she belted out:

*Basset hounds and daffodils and red Hunter wellies
Clarins and Clooney films on big HD tellies*

*Land Rover Explorers all covered in mud
These are a few of Charlack's totes fave things!*

Edie found it hard to comprehend that someone thought this fell into the category of a good idea. That there'd been no shred of doubt during the conceptual process. Also, 'Charlack' sounded like a *Doctor Who* baddie. A squirty one.

*Cotswolds and cream teas and scrummy brunches
Meribel and Formula One and long liquid lunches
These are a few of Charlack's totes fave things!*

*Fresh paint and dim sum and brow dyes and lashes
Rugger and Wimbledon and also The Ashes
These are a few of Charlack's totes fave things!*

Edie couldn't risk her composure by glancing at Louis, who she knew would be almost combusting with delight. The top table simply stared.

*... When the work bites!
When the phone rings!
When they're feeling totes emosh
They can simply remember these totes fave things
and then they won't feel so grooossssss*

Edie held her expression steady as Lucie fog-horned the last word, arm extended, and hoped very hard this horror was over. But, no – Lucie was counting herself into the next verse.

In the brief lull, the hearing-aid man could be heard speaking to his wife.

'What *IS* this dreadful folly? Who told this woman she could sing? My God, what an abysmal din.'

Lucie carried on with the next verse but now the room was transfixed by the entirely audible commentary offered by hearing-aid man. He apparently didn't realise that he was shouting. Desperate shushing from the wife could also be heard, to no avail.

'Good grief, whatever next. I came to a wedding, not an amateur night revue show. I feel like Prince Philip when he's forced to look at a native

display of bare behinds. Oh nonsense, Deirdre, it's bad taste, is what it is.'

The spittle-flecked *shhhhhhhh!* of the spousal shushing reached a constrained hysteria, while laughter rippled nervously around the room.

Eddie could feel that Louis had corpsed, his whole body convulsing and shaking next to her.

*Ad land and glad hand and smashing your goals
Jet planes and chow mein with crispy spring rolls
Tiffany boxes all tied up with ribbon
These are a few of Charlack's totes fave thiiingssssss*

'... Will this ordeal ever end? No wonder this country's in such a mess if this sort of vulgar display of your shortcomings is considered suitable entertainment. What? Well I doubt anyone can hear me over the iron lung yodellings of Kiri Te Canary. This is the sort of story which ends with the words, "Before Turning The Gun On Himself."'

Eddie didn't know where to look. Having the heckler on her table made her feel implicated, as if she might be throwing her voice or feeding him lines.

Eddie's eyes were inexorably drawn to Jack, who was staring right back at her, palm clamped over mouth. His eyes were dancing with: *what's happening, this is insane?!*

She might've known – he not only found this funny, he singled Eddie out to be his co-conspirator. Eddie almost smiled in reflex, then caught herself and quickly looked away. Oh no you don't. Not today, of all days.

Just nipping to the loo, Eddie muttered, and fled the scene.

While she washed her hands, Edie pondered the mounting conviction that she shouldn't have accepted her invite today. She'd rehearsed all the reasons for and against, and ignored the most important one: that she would hate it.

When the 'Save the Date' dropped into her email, the struggle had begun. It would be easy enough to have a holiday. She needed to say so quickly, though – a break booked immediately after she'd received it could look suspicious.

Though like anyone up to their necks in something they shouldn't be, she found it very hard to judge how much she was giving away. Perhaps her absence would barely register, or perhaps there'd metaphorically be a huge flashing game show arrow over her seat saying HMMMM NO EDIE EH, I WONDER WHY.

So she uhmed and ahhed, until Charlotte said: 'Edie, you're coming, aren't you? To the wedding? I haven't had your RSVP?' while they were standing at the lukewarm-water in-crackly-cup dispenser. In the background, Jack's head snapped up.

Edie smiled tightly and said: 'Oh yes of course I'm really looking forward to it thanks.'

Once her fate was sealed by her stupid mouth, she promised herself that attending wouldn't just be politically astute, it'd be *good for her*. As if approaching social occasions like they were a Tough Mudder corporate team package had ever been a good idea.

As the happy couple exchanged vows, and rings, Edie predicted she'd not feel a thing. Her feelings would float away like a balloon and it'd draw a line

under the whole sorry confusion. Hah. *Right*. And if her auntie had a dick she'd be her uncle.

Instead she felt numb, tense, and out of place. And then as the alcohol flowed, it was as if there was a weight of misery sitting on her chest, compressing it.

Edie removed her hands from underneath the wind turbine of a hot-air drier. One of her false eyelashes had come unstuck and she pressed it back down, between finger and thumb.

If she was honest, the reason she was here was her pride. Avoiding it would've been one giant I Can't Cope red flag. To herself, as well as others.

There was something about seeing herself in a bathroom mirror – the 'Amaro' magic cloud gone, make-up melting, eyeballs raspberry-rippled by booze – that made Edie feel very contemptuous of herself. What was wrong with her? How did she get here? No one sensible would feel like this.

She took a deep breath as she yanked the toilet door open and told herself, *only a few hours until bedtime*. With any luck, Lucie would have stopped singing.

As she headed back through the bar, instead of braving the restaurant, she was drawn to the sounds from the garden, and the still-warm fresh air.

Edie could do with some solitude, but was conscious that drifting around the gardens, appearing melancholy, wasn't the look she was aiming for.

Aha, the mobile as useful decoy – on the pretext of taking a panoramic of the hotel, Edie could wander the grounds. No one noticed that someone was on their own, if they were fiddling with their phone.

She picked her way delicately across the grass in her violent footwear. Lucie's jihadist mission appeared to be over, Sade's 'By Your Side' was floating from the open doors to the restaurant-disco.

A few of the Murder Mystery pensioners were having a sneaky fag on the benches. It was quite a lovely scene, and she wished she could enjoy it. She wished other peoples' happiness today wasn't like a scouring pad on her soul. This is the beginning of getting better, she told herself.

Edie was far enough away from the hotel to feel apart from it all now, watching the wedding as a spectator. The distance helped calm her. She turned her phone on its side and held it up in both hands, to capture the hotel at dusk. As she played with the flash and studied the results, cursing her

shaky hands and trying for another shot, she saw a figure moving purposefully across the grass. She lowered the phone.

It was Jack. She should've spotted it was him sooner. Was the groom really tasked with herding everyone inside to watch the first dance? Edie had hoped to *whoops-a-daisy* accidentally miss that treat.

Reaching her, Jack thrust his hands inside his suit pockets.

'Hello, Edie.'

'... Hello?'

'What are you doing over here? There are toilets inside if you need to go.'

Edie nearly laughed and stopped herself.

'Just taking a photo of the hotel. It looks so pretty, lit up.'

Jack glanced over his shoulder, as if checking the truth of what she said.

'I came to say hi and couldn't find you anywhere. I wondered if you'd disappeared off with someone.'

'Who?'

'I didn't know. Instead you're skulking around on your own, being weird.'

He smiled, in that way that always felt so adoring. Edie had thought 'made you feel like the only person in the room' was a figure of speech, until she met Jack.

'I'm not being weird!' Edie said, sharply. She felt her blood heat at this.

'We need to discuss the elephant,' Jack said, and Edie's heart caught in her throat.

'What ...?'

'The Pearl Harbor-sized atrocity that was committed back there.'

Edie relaxed from her spike of shock, and in relief, laughed despite herself. He had her.

'You left before she got the bridesmaids jazz scatting. Oh God, it was the worst thing to ever happen in the whole world, Edie. And I once walked in on my dad with a copy of *Knave*.'

Edie gurgled some more. 'What did Charlotte think of it?'

'Amazingly, she's more worried her Uncle Morris upset Lucie with the comments about her singing. Apparently he's got "reduced inhibitions" due to early stage dementia. That didn't make anything he said inaccurate, to be fair. Maybe he's not the one with dementia.'

'Oh no. Poor Uncle Morris. And poor Charlotte.'

'Don't waste too much sympathy on her. Uncle Morris is tolerated because

he's absolutely nosebleed rich and everyone's hanging in there for a slice of the pie when he dies.'

Edie said, 'Ah,' and thought, not for the first time, that she was not among her people. She had thought there was at least one of 'her people' here, and yet apparently, he was one of their people. Forever, now.

'It's bizarre, this whole thing,' Jack said, waving back at the hubbub from the yellow glow of the hotel. '*Married*. Me.'

Edie felt irritated at being expected to join in with rueful, wistful reflection on this score. Jack had stopped copying her into his decision-making processes a long time ago. In fact, she was never in them.

'That's what you turned up for today, Jack. Were you expecting a hog roast? A cat's birthday? Circumcision?'

'Haha. You will never lose your ability to shock, E.T.'

This annoyed Edie, too. Unwed Jack never found her 'shocking'. He found her interesting and funny. Now she was some filthy-mouthed unmarriageable outrageous oddball. Who nobody chose.

'Anyway,' Edie said, sweetly but briskly. 'Time we went back inside. You can't miss the most expensive party you'll ever throw.'

'Oh, Edie. C'mon.'

'What?'

Edie was tense again, wondering why they were stood in the gloaming here together, wondering what this was about. She folded her arms.

'I'm so glad you came, today. You don't know how much. I'm happier to see you than pretty much anyone else.'

Apart from your bride? Edie thought, though she didn't say it.

'... Thank you.'

What else could she say?

'Please don't act as if we can't be good mates now. Nothing's changed.'

Edie had no idea what he meant. If they were always just good mates, then obviously marriage changed nothing. It struck her that she'd never understood Jack, and this was a problem.

While she hesitated over her response, Jack said: 'I get it, you know. You think I'm a coward.'

'What?'

'I go along with things that aren't entirely me.'

'... How do you mean?'

Edie knew this wasn't the right thing to ask. This conversation was disloyal. Everything about this was grim. Jack had married someone else. He shouldn't be saying treacherous things to a woman he worked with, by some shrubbery. There was nothing, and no one, here of value to be salvaged. She'd known for some time now he was a bad person, or at least a very weak one, and this behaviour only proved it.

But Jack was dangling the temptation of talking about things she'd wanted to talk about for so long.

'Sometimes you don't know what to do. You know?' Jack shook his head and exhaled and scuffed the toe of a Paul Smith brogue on the grass.

'Not really. Marrying is a pretty straightforward yes or no. They put it in the vows.'

'I didn't mean ... that, exactly. Charlie's great, obviously. I mean. All of this. Fuss. Oh, I don't know.'

Edie sensed he was several degrees drunker than she'd first realised.

'What do you want me to say?' Edie said, with as little emotion as possible.

'*Edie*. Stop being like this. I'm trying to tell you that you matter to me. I don't think you know that.'

Edie had no reply to this and in the space where her answer should be, Jack murmured, 'Oh, God,' stepped forward, leaned down, and kissed her.



We hope you enjoyed that exclusive extract from *Who's That Girl?*

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Author's Note

The greatest moment as a writer is when ~~you win the Bailey's Prize For Fiction as they finally wake up to their responsibilities~~ readers get in touch to ask 'What happens next?!' I love that question. To think characters you invented have gone on to mean something to someone else, and they're alive in another imagination: it's all you could wish for.

With the power of a Godlike deity, if deities were still in their pyjama trousers at half ten, I can provide that reassurance, in 140 characters or fewer every day on Twitter: the cast still wander around my mental attic. I don't mean that in a Fritzl-y way. That was a cellar.

And I get the 'Where are they now?' question about Ben and Rachel, the star-crossed English Lit students who took ten years to get it together, from *You Had Me At Hello*, more than any other.

It seems there was something about the pair of them that particularly resonated with people. Is it that the 'what if?' question about the one who got away is so universal? Was it the joke about a bag lady's downstairs hair looking like giving birth to Ken Dodd? I simply don't know. But as my firstborn book, those two will always have a special place in my heart. And I loved their friends just as much.

Therefore, in the spirit of *why the hell not*, this mini story is what I think Ben and Rachel – and their 'world' – did next. Is it possible to fan fic yourself? I've explored that the hard way. Obviously, the risk of satisfying the wish for an update is that some readers will shout NO NO NO THIS ISN'T WHAT I PICTURED THEM DOING AT ALL. Well, then this simply never happened.

For those of you who are at peace with these notions as the next instalment in the life of Ben and Rachel, I hope you enjoyed it. The rest of you can say: 'Isn't it a shame they never made sequels to *The Matrix*, oh, and also *You Had Me At Hello*?'

Mhairi x

About the Author

Mhairi was born in Scotland in 1976 and her unnecessarily confusing name is pronounced Vah-Ree.

After some efforts at journalism, she started writing novels. *Who's That Girl?* is her fourth. She lives in Nottingham with a man and a cat.

Also by Mhairi McFarlane

You Had Me At Hello
Here's Looking At You
It's Not Me, It's You
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