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HER

EYES

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SHOCKING
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ALL YEAR**

SARAH PINBOROUGH

Sarah Pinborough

**Behind Her Eyes: The Sunday Times
#1 best selling psychological thriller**

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Behind Her Eyes: The Sunday Times #1 best selling psychological thriller / S. Pinborough — «HarperCollins»,

Don't Trust This Book Don't Trust These People Don't Trust Yourself And whatever you do, DON'T give away that ending... Sunday Times bestseller Behind Her Eyes has been called the new Girl on the Train and Gone Girl. This is one psychological thriller you will not want to miss. 'One of the biggest thrillers of 2017' RED MAGAZINE Louise Since her husband walked out, Louise has made her son her world, supporting them both with her part-time job. But all that changes when she meets... David Young, successful and charming – Louise cannot believe a man like him would look at her twice let alone be attracted to her. But that all comes to a grinding halt when she meets his wife... Adele Beautiful, elegant and sweet – Louise's new friend seems perfect in every way. As she becomes obsessed by this flawless couple, entangled in the intricate web of their marriage, they each, in turn, reach out to her. But only when she gets to know them both does she begin to see the cracks... Is David really is the man she thought she knew and is Adele as vulnerable as she appears? Just what terrible secrets are they both hiding and how far will they go to keep them? Fully realized characters, peerless writing, a tank of a plot that sustains the suspense right to the end, and a whammy of a finale. It takes a lot to catch me out, but this one did. It'll get you too...' Joanne Harris

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Behind Her Eyes

Sarah Pinborough



HarperCollins*Publishers*

Copyright



Published by HarperCollins *Publishers Ltd*

1 London Bridge Street

London, SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Publishers* 2017

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Cover design © HarperCollins *Publishers Ltd* 2017

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A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

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Source ISBN: 9780008131999

Ebook Edition © January 2017 ISBN: 9780008131982

Version: 2017-11-02

PRAISE FOR BEHIND HER EYES

‘Set to be one of the most talked-about books of 2017’

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

‘Fantastically creepy’

GUARDIAN

‘Original and compelling,
this is the very definition of a page-turner’

SUN

‘In a really crowded thriller market,

Behind Her Eyes leaves its competition
trailing in the dust’

RED

‘Everyone will be talking about this book’

STYLIST

Dedication

For Tasha,

Words just don't cover it. All I can say is thanks for everything and the drinks are on me.

Three can keep a secret if two are dead.

Benjamin Franklin

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PART ONE

1 THEN

Pinch myself and say I AM AWAKE once an hour.
Look at my hands. Count my fingers.
Look at clock (or watch), look away, look back.
Stay calm and focused.
Think of a door.

2 LATER

It was nearly light when it was finally done. A streaky grey wash across the canvas of sky. Dry leaves and mud clung to his jeans, and his weak body ached as his sweat cooled in the damp, chill air. A thing had been done that could not be undone. A terrible necessary act. An ending and a beginning now knotted up for ever. He expected the hues of the world to change to reflect that, but the earth and heavens remained the same muted shades, and there was no tremble of anger from the trees. No weeping whisper of wind. No siren wailed in the distance. The woods were just the woods, and the dirt was just the dirt. He let out a long breath and it felt surprisingly good. Clean. A new dawn. A new day.

He walked in silence towards the remains of the house in the distance. He didn't look back.

3

NOW

ADELE

There's still mud under my fingernails when David finally comes home. I can feel it stinging against my raw skin, deep under the beds. My stomach twists, wringing fresh nerves out as the front door shuts, and for a moment we just look at each other from opposite ends of the long corridor of our new Victorian house, a tract of perfectly polished wood between us, before he turns, swaying slightly, towards the sitting room. I take a deep breath and join him, flinching at each of the hard beats of my heels against the floorboards. I must not be afraid. I need to repair this. *We* need to repair this.

'I've cooked dinner,' I say, trying not to sound too needy. 'Only a stroganoff. It can keep until tomorrow if you've already eaten.'

He's facing away from me, staring at our bookshelves that the unpackers have filled from the boxes. I try not to think about how long he's been gone. I've cleaned up the broken glass, swept and scrubbed the floor, and dealt with the garden. All evidence of earlier rage has been removed. I rinsed my mouth out after every glass of wine I drank in his absence so he won't smell it on me. He doesn't like me to drink. Only ever a glass or two in company. Never alone. But tonight I couldn't help it.

Even if I haven't entirely got the dirt out from under my nails, I've showered and changed into a powder blue dress and matching heels, and put make-up on. No trace of tears and fighting. I want us to wash it all away. This is our fresh start. Our new beginning. It has to be.

'I'm not hungry.' He turns to face me then, and I can see a quiet loathing in his eyes, and I bite back a sudden urge to cry. I think this emptiness is worse than his anger. Everything I've worked so hard to build really is crumbling. I don't care that he's drunk again. I only want him to love me like he used to. He doesn't even notice the effort I've made since he stormed out. How busy I've been. How I look. How I've *tried*.

'I'm going to bed,' he says. He doesn't look me in the eye, and I know that he means the spare room. Two days into our fresh start, and he won't be sleeping with me. I feel the cracks between us widen once more. Soon we won't be able to reach each other across them. He walks carefully around me and I want to touch his arm but am too afraid of how he will react. He seems disgusted by me. Or perhaps it's his disgust at himself radiating in my direction.

'I love you,' I say, softly. I hate myself for it, and he doesn't answer but unsteadily clambers the stairs as if I'm not there. I hear his footsteps recede and then a door closing.

After a moment of staring at the space where he no longer is, listening to my patchwork heart breaking, I go back to the kitchen and turn the oven off. I won't keep it for tomorrow. It would taste sour on the memory of today. Dinner's ruined. We're ruined. I sometimes wonder if he wants to kill me and be done with it all. Get rid of the albatross around his neck. Perhaps some part of me wants to kill him too.

I'm tempted to have another glass of forbidden wine, but I resist. I'm tearful enough already and I can't face another fight. Perhaps in the morning we'll be fine again. I'll replace the bottle and he'll never know I've been drinking at all.

I gaze out into the garden before finally flicking the outside lights off and facing my reflection in the window. I'm a beautiful woman. I look after myself. Why can't he still love me? Why can't our life have been as I'd hoped, as I'd wanted, after everything I've done for him? We have plenty of money. He has the career he dreamed of. I have only ever tried to be the perfect wife and give him the perfect life. Why can't he let the past go?

I allow myself a few minutes' more self-pity as I wipe down and polish the granite surfaces, and then I take a deep breath and pull myself together. I need to sleep. To properly sleep. I'll take a pill and knock myself out. Tomorrow will be different. It has to be. I'll forgive him. I always do.

I love my husband. I have since the moment I set eyes on him, and I will never fall out of love with him. I won't give that up. I can't.

4

LOUISE

No names, okay? No jobs. No dull life talk. Let's talk about real things.

'You really said that?'

'Yes. Well, no,' I say. 'He did.'

My face burns. It sounded romantic at four thirty in the afternoon two days ago with the first illicit afternoon Negroni, but now it's like something from a cheap tragi-romcom. Thirty-four-year-old woman walks into a bar and is sweet-talked by the man of her dreams who turns out to be her new boss. Oh God, I want to die from the awfulness of it all. What a mess.

'Of course *he* did.' Sophie laughs and immediately tries to stop herself. '*No dull life talk*. Like, oh, I don't know, the small fact I'm married.' She sees my face. 'Sorry. I know it's not technically funny, but it sort of is. And I know you're out of practice with the whole men thing, but how could you not have known from *that* he was married? The new boss bit I'll let you off with. That is simply bloody bad luck.'

'It's *really* not funny,' I say, but I smile. 'Anyway, married men are your forte, not mine.'

'True.'

I knew Sophie would make me feel better. We are funny together. We laugh. She's an actress by trade – although we never discuss how she hasn't worked outside of two TV corpses in years – and, despite her affairs, has been married to a music exec for ever. We met at our NCT classes, and although our lives are very different, we bonded. Seven years on and we're still drinking wine.

'But now you're like me,' she says, with a cheery wink. 'Sleeping with a married man. I feel less bad about myself already.'

'I *didn't* sleep with him. And I didn't know he was married.' That last part isn't quite true. By the end of the night, I'd had a pretty good idea. The urgent press of his body against mine as we kissed, our heads spinning from gin. The sudden break away. The guilt in his eyes. The apology. *I can't do this*. All the tells were there.

'Okay, Snow White. I'm just excited that you nearly got laid. How long's it been now?'

'I *really* don't want to think about that. Depressing me further won't help with my current predicament,' I say, before drinking more of my wine. I need another cigarette. Adam is tucked up and fast asleep and won't move until breakfast and school. I can relax. He doesn't have nightmares. He doesn't sleepwalk. Thank God for small mercies.

'And this is all Michaela's fault anyway,' I continue. 'If she'd cancelled *before* I got there, none of this would have happened.'

Sophie's got a point though. It's been a long time since I've even flirted with a man, let alone got drunk and kissed one. Her life is different. Always surrounded by new and interesting people. Creative types who live more freely, drink until late, and live like teenagers. Being a single mum in London eking out a living as a psychiatrist's part-time secretary doesn't exactly give me a huge number of opportunities to throw caution to the wind and go out every night in the hope of meeting anyone, let alone 'Mr Right', and I can't face Tinder or Match or any of those other sites. I've kind of got used to being on my own. Putting all that on hold for a while. A while that is turning into an inadvertent lifestyle choice.

'This will cheer you up.' She pulls a joint out of the top pocket of her red corduroy jacket. 'Trust me, you'll find everything funnier once we're baked.' She sees the reluctance on my face and grins. 'Come on, Lou. It's a special occasion. You've excelled yourself. Snogged your new married boss. This is genius. I should get someone to write the film. I could play you.'

‘Good,’ I say. ‘I’ll need the money when I’m fired.’ I can’t fight Sophie, and I don’t want to, and soon we’re sitting out on the small balcony of my tiny flat, wine, crisps, and cigarettes at our feet, passing the weed between us, giggling.

Unlike Sophie, who somehow remains half-teenager, getting high is not in any way part of my normal routine – there isn’t the time or the money when you’re on your own – but laughter beats crying any time, and I suck in a lungful of sweet, forbidden smoke.

‘It could only happen to you,’ she says. ‘You hid?’

I nod, smiling at the comedy of the memory imagined through someone else’s eyes. ‘I couldn’t think of anything else to do. I dived into the toilet and stayed there. When I came out, he’d gone. He doesn’t start until tomorrow. He was getting the full tour from Dr Sykes.’

‘With his wife.’

‘Yep, with his wife.’ I remember how good they looked together in that brief, awful moment of realisation. A beautiful couple.

‘How long did you stay in the toilet for?’

‘Twenty minutes.’

‘Oh, Lou.’

There’s a pause, and then we both have the giggles, wine and weed buzzing our heads, and for a little while we can’t stop.

‘I wish I could have seen your face,’ Sophie says.

‘Yeah, well, I’m not looking forward to seeing *his* face when he sees my face.’

Sophie shrugs. ‘He’s the married one. It’s his shame. He can’t say anything to you.’

She absolves me of my guilt, but I can still feel it clinging, along with the shock. The gut punch of the woman I’d glimpsed by his side before I dashed into hiding. His beautiful wife. Elegant. Dark-haired and olive-skinned in an Angelina Jolie way. That kind of mystery about her. Exceptionally slim. The opposite of me. The snapshot of her is burned into my brain. I couldn’t imagine her ever panicking and hiding in a toilet from *anyone*. It stung in a way it shouldn’t have, not after one drunken afternoon, and not only because my confidence has reached rock bottom.

The thing is, I’d liked him – *really* liked him. I can’t tell Sophie about that. How I hadn’t talked to anyone like that in a long time. How happy I’d felt to be flirting with someone who was flirting back, and how I’d forgotten how great that excitement of something potentially *new* was. My life is, as a rule, a blur of endless routine. I get Adam up and take him to school. If I’m working and want to start early, he goes to breakfast club. If I’m not working, I may spend an hour or so browsing charity shops for designer cast-offs that will fit the clinic’s subtly expensive look. Then it’s just cooking, cleaning, shopping, until Adam comes home, and then it’s homework, tea, bath, story, bed for him and wine and bad sleep for me. When he goes to his dad’s for a weekend I’m too tired to do anything much other than lie in and then watch crap TV. The idea that this could be my life until Adam’s at least fifteen or so quietly terrifies me, so I don’t think about it. But then meeting the *man-in-the-bar* made me remember how good it was to *feel* something. As a woman. It made me feel alive. I’d even thought about going back to that bar and seeing if he’d turned up to find me. But, of course, life isn’t a romcom. And he’s married. And I’ve been an idiot. I’m not bitter, merely sad. I can’t tell Sophie any of these things because then she’d feel sorry for me, and I don’t want that, and it’s just easier to find it all funny. It *is* funny. And it’s not like I sit at home bemoaning my singledom every night, as if no one could ever be complete without a man. In the main, I’m pretty happy. I’m a grown-up. I could have it way worse. This was one mistake. I have to deal with it.

I scoop up a handful of Doritos and Sophie does the same.

‘Curves are the new thin,’ we say in unison, before cramming the crisps into our mouths and nearly choking as we laugh again. I think about me hiding in the toilet from him, full of panic and disbelief. It *is* funny. Everything is funny. It might be less funny tomorrow morning when I have to face the music, but for now I can laugh. If you can’t laugh at your own fuck-ups, what can you laugh at?

‘Why do you do it?’ I say later, when the bottle of wine is empty between us and the evening is drawing to a close. ‘Have affairs? Aren’t you happy with Jay?’

‘Of course I am,’ Sophie says. ‘I love him. It’s not like I’m out doing it *all* the time.’

This is probably true. She’s an actress; she exaggerates for the sake of a story sometimes.

‘But why do it at all?’ Strangely, it’s not something we’ve really talked about that much. She knows I’m uncomfortable with it, not because she does it – that’s her business – but because I know and like Jay. He’s good for her. Without him, she’d be screwed. As it were.

‘I have a higher sex drive than he does,’ she says, eventually. ‘And sex isn’t what marriage is about anyway. It’s about being with your best friend. Jay’s my best friend. But we’ve been together fifteen years. Lust can’t maintain itself. I mean, we still do it, sometimes, but it’s not like it was. And having a child changes things. You spend so many years seeing each other as parents rather than lovers, it’s hard to get that passion back.’

I think of my own short-lived marriage. The lust didn’t die with us. But that didn’t stop him leaving after four years to be with someone else when our son was barely two years old. Maybe she has a point. I don’t think I ever saw my ex, Ian, as my best friend.

‘It just seems a bit sad to me.’ And it does.

‘That’s because you believe in true love and happy ever after in a fairy tale way. That’s not how life is.’

‘Do you think he’s ever cheated on you?’ I ask.

‘He’s definitely had his flirtations,’ she says. ‘There was a singer he worked with a long time ago. I think maybe they had a thing for a while. But whatever it was, it didn’t affect us. Not really.’

She makes it sound so reasonable. All I can think of is the pain of betrayal I felt when Ian left. How what he did affected how I saw myself. How worthless I felt in those early days. How ugly. The short-lived romance he left me for didn’t last either, but that didn’t make me feel better.

‘I don’t think I’ll ever understand it,’ I say.

‘Everyone has secrets, Lou,’ she says. ‘Everyone should be allowed their secrets. You can never know everything about a person. You’d go mad trying to.’

I wonder, after she’s left and I’m cleaning up the debris of our evening, if maybe Jay was the one who cheated first. Maybe that’s Sophie’s secret at the heart of her hotel-room trysts. Maybe it’s all done to make herself feel better or to quietly get even. Who knows? I’m probably over-thinking it. Over-thinking is my speciality. Each to their own, I remind myself. She seems happy and that’s good enough for me.

It’s only a little past ten thirty, but I’m exhausted, and I peer in at Adam for a minute, a soothing comfort to be found in watching his peaceful sleep, curled up tiny on his side under his *Star Wars* duvet, Paddington tucked under one arm, and then close the door and leave him to it.

It’s dark when I wake up in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror, and before I’ve really registered where I am, I feel the sharp throb in my shin where I’ve walked into the small laundry basket in the corner. My heart races, and sweat clings to my hairline. As reality settles around me, the night terror shatters, leaving only fragments in my head. I know what it was though. Always the same dream.

A vast building, like an old hospital or orphanage. Abandoned. Adam is trapped somewhere inside it, and I know, I *just know*, that if I can’t get to him, then he’s going to die. He’s calling out for me, afraid. Something bad is coming for him. I’m running through corridors trying to reach him, and from the walls and ceilings the shadows stretch, as if they’re part of some terrible evil alive in the building, and wrap themselves around me, trapping me. All I can hear is Adam crying as I try to escape the dark, sticky strands determined to keep me from him, to choke me and drag me into the endless darkness. It’s a horrible dream. It clings to me like the shadows do in the nightmare itself. The details may change slightly from night to night, but the narrative is always the same. However many times I have it, I’ll never get used to it.

The night terrors didn't start when Adam was born – I've always had them, but before him I would be fighting for my own survival. Looking back, that was better, even if I didn't know it at the time. They're the bane of my life. They kill my chances of a decent night's sleep when being a single mum tires me out enough.

This time I've walked more than I've done in a while. Normally I wake up, confused, standing either by my own bed or Adam's, often in the middle of a nonsensical, terrified sentence. It happens so often it doesn't even bother him if he wakes up any more. But then he's got his father's practicality. Thankfully, he's my sense of humour.

I put the light on, look into the mirror, and groan. Dark circles drag the skin under my eyes down, and I know foundation isn't going to cover them. Not in full daylight. Oh good. I remind myself that it doesn't matter what *the-man-from-the-bar* aka *oh-crap-he's-my-new-married-boss* thinks of me. Hopefully, he'll be feeling embarrassed enough to ignore me all day. My stomach still clenches though, and my head thumps from too much wine and too many cigarettes. *Woman up*, I tell myself. *It'll all be forgotten in a day or so. Just go in and do your job.*

It's only four in the morning, and I drink some water, then turn the light out and creep back to my own bed hoping at least to doze until the alarm goes off at six. I refuse to think about the way his mouth felt on mine and how good it was, if only briefly, to have that surge of desire. To feel that connection with someone. I stare at the wall and contemplate counting sheep, and then I realise that under my nerves I'm also excited to see him again. I grit my teeth and curse myself as an idiot. I am *not* that woman.

5

ADELE

I wave him off with a smile as he leaves for his first proper day at the clinic, and the elderly lady next door looks on approvingly as she takes her small, equally frail dog out for his walk. We always appear such a perfect couple, David and I. I like that.

Still, I let out a sigh of relief when I close the door and have the house to myself, even though that exhalation feels like a small betrayal. I love having David here with me, but we're not yet back on whatever even ground we've created for ourselves, and the atmosphere is full of everything unsaid. Thankfully, the new house is big enough that he can hide in his study and we can pretend everything is fine as we cautiously move around each other.

I *do*, however, feel slightly better than I did when he came home drunk. We didn't discuss it the next morning, of course; discussion is not something we do these days. Instead, I left him to his papers and went to sign us both up at the local health club, which is suitably expensive, and then walked around our new chic area, absorbing it all. I like to lock locations in place. To be able to *see* them. It makes me feel more comfortable. It helps me relax.

I walked for nearly two hours, mentally logging shops and bars and restaurants until I had them safely stored in my head, their images summonable at will, and then I bought some bread from the local artisan bakery, and some olives, sliced ham, hummus, and sun-dried tomatoes from the deli – all of which were decadently expensive and drained my housekeeping cash – and made us an indoor picnic for lunch, even though it was warm enough to sit outside. I don't think he wants to go into the garden yet.

Yesterday we went to the clinic, and I charmed the senior partner Dr Sykes, and the various other doctors and nurses we met. People respond to beauty. It sounds vain, but it's true. David once told me that jurors were far more likely to believe good-looking people in the dock than average or ugly ones. It's only the luck of skin and bones, but I've learned that it does have a magic. You don't even have to say very much, but simply listen and smile, and people bend over backwards for you. I have enjoyed being beautiful. To say anything else would be a lie. I work hard to keep myself beautiful for David. Everything I do is for him.

David's new office is the second largest in the building from what I could see, the sort I would expect him to have if he'd ever take up a position in Harley Street. The carpet is cream and plush, the large desk is suitably ostentatious, and outside is a very luxurious reception area. The blonde and attractive – if you like that sort of thing – woman behind *that* desk scurried away before we could be introduced, which annoyed me – but Dr Sykes barely seemed to notice as he talked at me and blushed when I laughed at his terrible half-jokes. I think I did very well given how much my heart was aching. David must have been pleased too, because he softened a little after that.

We are having dinner at Dr Sykes' house tonight as an informal welcome. I already have my dress picked out and know how I will do my hair. I fully intend to make David proud of me. I can be the good wife. The new partner's wife. Despite my present worries. I feel calmer than I have since we moved.

I look up at the clock whose tick cuts through the vast silence in the house. It's still only eight a.m. He's probably just getting to the office now. He won't make his first call home until eleven thirty. I have time. I go up to our bedroom and lie on top of the covers. I'm not going to sleep. But I do close my eyes. I think about the clinic. David's office. That plush cream carpet. The polished mahogany of his desk. The tiny scratch on the corner. The two slim couches. Firm seats. The details. I take a deep breath.

6

LOUISE

‘You look lovely today,’ Sue says, almost surprised, as I take off my coat and hang it in the staffroom. Adam said the same thing – in the same tone – his small face mildly confused by my silk blouse, new to me from the charity shop, and straightened hair as I shoved toast into his hand before we left for school this morning. Oh God, I’ve made an obvious effort, and I know it. But it’s not *for* him. If anything it’s *against* him. War paint. Something to hide behind. Also, I couldn’t get back to sleep and I needed something to do.

Normally, on mornings like this, I’d take Adam to breakfast club and then be first at the clinic and have everyone’s coffee on before they got in. But today, was, of course, one of those days when Adam woke up grumpy and whining about everything, and then couldn’t find his left shoe, and then even though I’d been ready for ages, it was still an irritated rush to get to the school gates on time.

My palms are sweating and I feel a bit sick as I smile. I also smoked three cigarettes on the walk from the school to the clinic. Normally I try not to have any until coffee break time. Well, I say normally. In my head I don’t have any until coffee, in reality I’ve usually smoked one on my way in.

‘Thanks. Adam’s at his dad’s this weekend so I might go for a drink after work.’ I might *need* a drink after work. I make a note to text Sophie and see if she wants to meet. Of course she will. She’ll be itching to see how this comedy of errors turns out. I try and make it sound casual, but my voice sounds funny to me. I need to pull myself together. I’m being ridiculous. It’s going to be way worse for him than it is for me. I’m not the married one. The pep talk sentences may be true, but they don’t change the fact that I don’t *do* these things. This is not normal for me like maybe it is for Sophie, and I feel totally sick. I’m a mess of jittering emotions that can’t settle on one thing. This situation may not be my fault, but I feel cheap and stupid and guilty and angry. The first moment of potential romance I’ve had in what feels like for ever and it was fool’s gold. And yet, despite all that, *and* the memory of his beautiful wife, I also have a nugget of excitement at the prospect of seeing him again. I’m like a ditzzy, dithering teenager.

‘They’re all in a meeting until 10.30, or so Elaine upstairs tells me,’ she says. ‘We can relax.’ She opens her bag. ‘And I didn’t forget it was my turn.’ She pulls out two greasy paper bags. ‘Friday bacon butties.’

I’m so relieved that I’ve got a couple of hours’ reprieve, that I take it happily, even though it’s an indication of how mind-numbing my life routine is that this Friday breakfast is a highlight of my week. But still, it *is* bacon. Some parts of a routine are less demoralising than others. I take a large bite, enjoying the buttery warm bread and salty meat. I’m a nervous eater. Actually, I’m an eater whatever my mood. Nervous eating, comfort eating, happy eating. It’s all the same. Other people get divorced and lose a stone. It worked the other way for me.

We don’t officially start work for another twenty minutes, so we sit at the small table with mugs of tea, and Sue tells me about her husband’s arthritis and the gay couple next door to their house who seem to be constantly having sex, and I smile and let it wash over me and try not to jump every time I see someone’s shadow fall across the doorway from the corridor.

I don’t see the ketchup drop until it’s too late and there’s a bright red dollop on my cream blouse right on my chest. Sue is there immediately, fussing and dabbing at it with tissues and then a damp cloth, but all she achieves is to make a great chunk of the material see-through and there’s still a pale outline of washed-out red. My face is over-heating, and the silk clings to my back. This is the precursor for the rest of the day. I can feel it.

I laugh away her well-meaning attempts to clean me up and go to the toilet and try and get as much of my shirt under the hand dryer as possible. It doesn't dry it totally, but at least the lace trim of my bra – slightly grey from the wash – is no longer visible. Small mercies.

I have to laugh at myself. Who am I kidding? I can't do this. I'm more at home discussing the latest storyline of *Rescue Bots* or *Horrid Henry* with Adam than trying to look like a modern, sophisticated woman. My feet are already aching in my two-inch heels. I always thought it was something you grew into, that ability to walk perfectly in high heels and always dress well. As it turns out – for me anyway – there was a small phase of that in the nightclubbing years of my twenties, and now it's mainly jeans and jumpers and Converse with a ponytail, accessorised with life-envy of those who can still be bothered to make the effort. Life-envy of those with a *reason* to make the effort.

I bet she wears high heels, I think as I adjust my clothes. More fool me for not sticking with trousers and flats.

The phones are quiet this morning, and I distract myself from the clock ticking steadily around to ten thirty by highlighting the case files on the system for Monday's appointments, and making a list of those coming up in the rest of the week. For some – the more complex cases – he already has copies of their notes, but I want to be seen as efficient, so I make sure the full list is found. Then I print out the various emails that I think might be valuable or important or forgotten by the management, and then also print out and laminate a list of contact numbers for the hospital and police and various other organisations that he might need. It's actually quite calming. *The-man-from-the-bar* is fading in my head and being replaced with *my-boss*, even if his face is mashing up rather alarmingly with old Dr Cadigan, who he's replaced.

At ten, I go and put the print-outs on his desk and turn the coffee machine on in the corner so there will be a fresh pot waiting. I check that the cleaners have put fresh milk in the small fridge hidden in a cabinet like a hotel mini-bar, and that there's sugar in the bowl. After that, I can't help but look at the silver-framed photos on his desk. There are three. Two of his wife standing alone, and an old one of them together. This one draws me in and I pick up it. He looks so different. So young. He can only be maybe early twenties at most. They're sitting on a large kitchen table and have their arms wrapped around each other and are laughing at something. They look so happy, both so young and carefree. His eyes are locked on her as if she's the most important thing on the whole planet. Her hair is long, but not pulled back in a bun as it is in the other pictures, and even in jeans and a T-shirt she's effortlessly beautiful. My stomach knots. I bet she never drops ketchup on her top.

'Hello?'

I'm so startled when I hear the slight Scottish brogue that I almost drop the photo, and I struggle to straighten it on the desk, nearly unbalancing the neat pile of papers and sending them tumbling to the floor. He's standing in the doorway, and I immediately want to throw up my bacon roll. Oh God, I'd forgotten how good-looking he is. Almost-blond hair with a shine I'd kill for on my own. Long enough at the front to be able to run your fingers through it, but still smart. Blue eyes that go right through you. Skin you just want to touch. I swallow hard. He's one of those men. A breathtaking man. My face is burning.

'You're supposed to be in a meeting until ten thirty,' I say, wishing a hole would open in the carpet and suck me down to shame hell. I'm in his office looking at pictures of his wife like some kind of stalker. Oh God.

'Oh God,' he says, stealing the words right out from my head. The colour drains from his face and his eyes widen. He looks shocked and stunned and terrified all rolled into one. 'It's you.'

'Look,' I say, 'it was really nothing and we were drunk and got carried away and it was only a kiss, and, trust me, I have no intention of telling anyone about it, and I think if we both do our best to forget it ever happened then there's no reason we can't just get along and no one will ever know ...' The words are coming out in a gibbering rush and I can't stop them. I can feel sweat trapped under my foundation as I fluster and overheat.

‘But’ – he’s looking somewhere between confused and alarmed as he quickly closes the door behind him and I can’t blame him – ‘what are you doing here?’

‘Oh.’ In all my rambling, I’ve forgotten to say the obvious. ‘I’m your secretary and receptionist. Three days a week, anyway. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. I was putting some things on your desk and I saw ...’ I nod to the pictures. ‘I, well ...’ The sentence drains away. I can hardly say *I was having a really close look at you and your beautiful wife like a crazy lady would.*

‘You’re my secretary?’ He looks as if he’s been punched hard in the guts. ‘*You are?*’ Maybe not his guts. Maybe somewhere lower. I actually feel a bit sorry for him.

‘I know.’ I shrug, and pull some no doubt godawful comedy face. ‘What are the odds?’

‘There was another woman here when I came in last month to talk to Dr Cadigan. Not you.’

‘Older, slightly uptight-looking? That would be Maria. She does the other two days. She’s semi-retired now, but she’s been here for ever, and Dr Sykes loves her.’

He hasn’t moved much further into the room. He’s clearly having a hard time getting this to sink in.

‘I really *am* your secretary,’ I say more slowly. Calmly. ‘I’m not a stalker. Trust me, this is not great for me either. I did see you yesterday when you popped in. Briefly. Then I sort of hid.’

‘You hid.’ He pauses. The moment seems endless as he processes all this.

‘Yes,’ I say, before adding to my shame with, ‘in the toilet.’

There’s a long pause after that.

‘To be fair,’ he says eventually, ‘I’d have probably done the same.’

‘I’m not sure both of us hiding in the loo would have served the right purpose.’

He laughs then, a short unexpected sound. ‘No, I guess not. You’re very funny. I remember that.’ He comes behind his desk, looking down at everything I’ve laid out there, and I automatically move out of his way.

‘Anyway, that top print-out is a list of the files you need to go through for Monday. There’s coffee on—’

‘I’m really sorry,’ he says, looking up with those gorgeous blue eyes. ‘You must think I’m a bastard. *I* think I’m a bastard. I don’t normally – well, I wasn’t there *looking* for anything, and I shouldn’t have done what I did. I feel terrible. I can’t explain it. I really don’t do that sort of thing, and there are no excuses for my behaviour.’

‘We were drunk, that’s all. You didn’t really do anything. Not really.’

I can’t do this. I remember the shame in his voice as he pushed away from me and walked off in the street, muttering apologies. Maybe that’s why I can’t think too badly of him. It was just a kiss after all. It was only in my stupid brain that it was anything more than that. ‘You stopped, and that counts for something. It’s not a thing. Honestly. Let’s forget it. Start from today. I really don’t want to feel awkward any more than you do.’

‘You hid in the toilet.’ His blue eyes are sharp and warm.

‘Yes, and one way to stop making me feel awkward would be never to mention that again.’ I grin. I still like him. He made a stupid, in the moment, mistake. It could have been worse. He could have come home with me. I think about that for a second. Okay, that would have been great in the short term, but definitely worse in the long.

‘Okay, so friends it is,’ he says.

‘Friends it is.’ We don’t shake on it. It’s way too soon for physical contact. ‘I’m Louise.’

‘David. Nice to meet you. Properly.’ We have another moment of awkward embarrassment, and then he rubs his hands together and glances back down at the desk. ‘Looks like you mean to keep me busy. Are you local by any chance?’

‘Yes. Well, I’ve lived here for over ten years if that counts as local.’

‘You think you could talk me through the area? Problems and hot spots? Social divides, that sort of thing? I wanted to take a drive around, but that’s going to have to wait. I’ve got another meeting this afternoon with someone from the hospital, then early dinner with the other partners tonight.’

‘I can certainly give you a rough outline,’ I say. ‘Layman’s view as it were.’

‘Good. That’s what I want. I’m thinking of doing voluntary outreach work on some weekends, so it would be good to have a resident’s perspective on possible causes of addiction issues that are specific to here. It’s my specialism.’

I’m a bit taken aback. I don’t know any of the other doctors who do outreach. This is an expensive private clinic. Whatever problems our clients have, they don’t tend to suffer from underprivilege, and the partners are all experts in their fields. They take referrals of course, but they don’t go out into the wider community and work for nothing.

‘Well, it’s North London, so in the main it’s a very middle-class area,’ I say. ‘But south of where I live there’s a big estate. There are definite issues there. High youth unemployment. Drugs. That kind of thing.’

He reaches under his desk and pulls up his briefcase, opening it and taking out a local map. ‘You pour the coffee while I make space for this. We can mark out places I need to see.’

We talk for nearly an hour, as I point out the schools and surgeries, and the roughest pubs, and the underpass where there have been three stabbings in a year and where everyone knows not to let their kids walk because it’s where junkies deal drugs and shoot up. I’m surprised at how much I actually know about where I live, and I’m surprised about how much of my life comes out while I talk him through it. By the time he looks at the clock and stops me, not only does he know that I’m divorced, he knows I have Adam and where he goes to school and that my friend Sophie lives in one of the mansion blocks around the corner from the nicest secondary school. I’m still talking when he looks at the clock and then stiffens slightly.

‘Sorry, I need to stop there,’ he says. ‘It’s been fascinating, though.’ The map is covered in Biro marks, and he’s jotted down notes on a piece of paper. His writing is terrible. A true doctor’s scribble.

‘Well, I hope it’s useful.’ I pick up my mug and move away. I hadn’t realised how close together we’d been standing. The awkwardness settles back in.

‘It’s great. Thank you.’ He glances at the clock again. ‘I just need to call my ...’ he hesitates. ‘I need to call home.’

‘You can say the word *wife*, you know.’ I smile. ‘I won’t spontaneously combust.’

‘Sorry.’ He’s more uncomfortable than I am. And he should be really. ‘And thank you. For not thinking I’m a shit. Or at least not showing that you think I’m a shit.’

‘You’re welcome,’ I say.

‘Do you think I’m a shit?’

I grin. ‘I’ll be at my desk if you need me.’

‘I deserve that.’

As things go, I think as I get back to my desk and wait for my face to cool, *that could have been a whole lot worse*. And I’m not at work again until Tuesday. Everything will be normal by then, our small moment brushed under the carpet of life. I make a pact with my brain not to think about it at all. I’m going to have a decadent weekend of *me*. I’ll lie in. Eat cheap pizza and ice cream, and maybe watch a whole box set of something on Netflix.

Next week is the last week of school and then the long summer holidays lie ahead, and my days will be mainly awful playdates, using my salary for my share of the childcare, and trying to find new ways to occupy Adam that aren’t giving him an iPad or phone to play endless games on, and feeling like a bad parent while I try and get everything else done. But at least Adam is a good kid. He makes me laugh every day, and even in his tantrums I love him so much my heart hurts.

Adam’s the man in my life, I think, glancing up at David’s office door and idly wondering what sweet nothings he’s whispering to his wife, *I don’t need another one*.

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