

NEAL DORAN



Dan
Taylor is



Giving



Up on



Women

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Dan Taylor Is Giving Up On Women

«HarperCollins»

Doran N.

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'Dan Taylor is Giving Up on Women is witty, warm-hearted and achingly real. Neal Doran has created a love story for our times that will make you laugh, cry and fall in love with Dan Taylor. I loved it!' – Miranda Dickinson, bestselling author of Take a Look at Me Now and I'll Take New York
Perpetually single Dan Taylor is so terrible at meeting women his own mother suspects he might be gay. So best friends — and smug married couple — Hannah and Rob insist he needs some serious man management. Taking matters into their own hands, they decide to make him their 'Project' and set to work on finding him a girlfriend — one that might actually stick around long enough to meet his mother. A new wardrobe, a better haircut and a slick online profile later and an unwitting Dan is ready to be launched on the London dating scene. But miracles don't just happen, and when he does achieve some success with women, it's not in the way anyone expected. Praise for Neal Doran 'Neal Doran is a very funny writer' John O'Farrell, author of The Man Who Forgot His Wife 'A big-hearted breath of hilarious fresh-air, Dan Taylor Is Giving Up On Women is a tender, touching and terrifically funny debut. The crises, the crushes and the cringes of an honest and sharp look at a very modern romance, treat yourself.' - Richard Asplin, author of T-shirt and Genes 'Full of witty one-liners, Dan Taylor Is Giving Up On Women is a hilarious examination of the morals of modern-day dating.' - Matt Dunn, bestselling author of The Ex-Boyfriends' Handbook and A Day at the Office.

Содержание

Dan Taylor is Giving Up on Women	6
Contents	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	24
Chapter Four	30
Chapter Five	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37

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NEAL DORAN grew up in London, and the only real childhood hardship he knew was not being able to get a bedroom door sign with his name spelled properly on it. He knew he’d rather be a writer than an astronaut from the time he realised he didn’t want a job that required too much travel. He has been an editor for spoof news website Newsbiscuit, written some jokes for BBC radio, and spent a short time as Britain’s most unlikely private investigator.

Neal now lives on the south-west coast of Ireland with his wife and two sons, who still prefer their mum’s stories to his.

He can be found on Twitter, usually when he’s not supposed to be, as @nealdoran.

Dan Taylor is Giving Up on Women

Neal Doran



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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HQ

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For Jo.

Contents

[Cover](#)
[Blurb](#)
[Author Bio](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[Dedication](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
[Endpages](#)
[About the Publisher](#)

Chapter One

‘OK, so let’s review,’ said Hannah as we sat over brunch amid the pseudo-smoke-stained gloom of a chain French bistro. ‘You don’t think there’s a chance you’ll be able to get Angus to put in a word? Explain things so you can see her again?’

‘I’ve been texting him this morning,’ I explained as I gingerly nibbled dry pellets of muffin from my Eggs Benedict. ‘She’s apparently never felt so angry and lied to. And is pretty pissed off at him, as well, for getting the two of us together in the first place.’

Hannah pushed her hair behind her ears as she concentrated on developments. It was long-ish blonde-ish, not quite curly but not exactly straight. I’d once made the mistake of saying it was messy, which hadn’t gone down too well, although I’d meant it in a good way.

‘She’s probably sublimating what she feels. What she’s really angry about is that she and Angus aren’t together,’ said Rob.

‘Not everyone has as big a crush on Angus as you do, hun,’ Hannah told her husband, before turning back to me. ‘Couldn’t he fill her in on what really happened?’

‘She probably does want Angus to fil—’

‘Bup!’ Hannah’s hand went up to stop Rob’s gag so I could continue.

‘She only partly calmed down when he told her that the marketing bloke with the fashionably challenging spectacles had asked if he could have her number. So I don’t think the signs are that good.’

‘And don’t forget the text she sent you at three a.m. saying, “Don’t ever contact me again, you bastard”,’ Rob chipped in helpfully, dancing a sachet of sugar across the back of his knuckles.

‘Yeah, there was that,’ I conceded. ‘And written with proper words and punctuation instead of text speak, which these days is legally binding or something.’

‘Well, I suppose if a bloke had run off looking sick after I took my top off, I don’t think I’d be too keen on a second date,’ Hannah conceded. ‘But it’s so unfair she’s not even listening to your side of the story. I mean, you were *trying* to be nice.’

‘I’m not sure she sees it like that,’ I said.

This is probably a good time for introductions. Together, Rob and Hannah are my best ‘couple’ friends, the Harrisons. And I’m Dan, their perpetually single friend. Their reminder, when married life can start losing its sheen, that the alternatives are really no better.

Their Project.

You know the kind of thing — you may be in a couple and have a Project yourselves. Somebody you look out for, and worry about. Somebody you want to see happy but who isn’t doing such a great job on that front on their own. You want them to have what you’ve got, but also — if we’re being honest here — you enjoy this window into the world of the unattached, which is off-limits to you these days. Or at least it should be. If it’s not I suggest you stop reading this now and go and find yourself a good marriage counsellor, or shit-hot divorce lawyer.

Or maybe you’re on your own, but have couple friends. The type who always have a sympathetic ear for your problems, who are always coming up with ideas for how your life could be improved immeasurably by salsa classes or the latest trend in speed dating: ‘You’ve got two minutes in a sensory deprivation tank and, if neither of you scream in claustrophobic terror because you’ve mistaken the other person’s foot for a giant rat, they set you up on a spa day. It was in *The Guardian!*’

If that sounds like you then, I hate to break it to you, but you’re their Project.

But anyway. It was New Year’s Day and I’m reporting back with news from the frontline of singledom. The night before, I’d been involved in the latest of a series of painful skirmishes with the opposite sex, at a party thrown by our mutual friend, the lovely, and irritatingly handsome, Angus. As *When Harry Met Sally* always reminded us, New Year’s Eve was one of the toughest times of all to have no one. As I stood making desperate small talk with hipsters in the kitchen of a Bethnal Green

studio flat — more than two years after my last big break-up, and about six months after I finally got over it — I could vouch for that.

But then, despite my general distrust of the whole concept of house parties, my night had got a lot better. I'd been banging my head off the back of the fridge in boredom while talking to some guy, an 'old school guerrilla advertising man' apparently, who was explaining why it was cool not to have a television. Then Gabrielle had burst in dressed, as far as I could tell, like a fifties bobby-soxer but somehow making it look stylish. I could be getting the era wrong, I'm not really up on fashion, but I do remember thinking her two-tone black and white heeled brogues were cool.

'Come out and dance!' she'd shouted, 'They're playing my favourite song!'

I'd looked myself up and down in my crumpled cords, and white shirt that was perfect for showcasing the red wine someone had spilt on it earlier, and run a hand through my so-unfashionable-it-almost-counted-as-a-personal-look hair. I'd figured she couldn't mean me. But as I'd gestured to the guy standing next to me, who was dressed as if he were in the next big indie folk boyband, she'd grabbed my hand and pulled me out to the living-room dance-floor.

The next couple of hours had been brilliant. OK, she'd thought all my best moves were me doing some ironic dad dancing, and I'd panicked slightly when I discovered she was a student — it was OK, she was a post-grad and safely into her twenties — but aside from that we'd talked and danced and laughed and I'd thought I felt a definite spark.

And then there'd been a bit of a mix-up...

'It was a simple misunderstanding,' I moaned to Rob and Hannah. 'We were talking about birthdays, and I said how being born on twenty-eighth December is the worst possible day because when you're a kid everyone bundles it in with Christmas for presents. Then later in life people almost resent you for having a cause for celebration when it's the last thing they want to think about.'

'Oh, sorry, Dan, that reminds me—I thought Rob was bringing your present today, but he left it behind,' said Hannah.

'Yes. Left it behind. In the shop. Along with the card. Sorry.'

'Don't worry, it just adds more weight to my argument. But anyway, then Gabrielle says she can top that seeing as she was born on September eleventh. Apparently in 2001 it made for the worst ninth birthday party ever, and every year since it's not really been a time for party hats and balloons.'

'Yep, she trumped you there all right, sport,' said Rob.

'I know. But then I mentioned how for me that date will, above everything else, be the day I lost my fiancée. So there may have been a misunderstanding about the circumstances. And the year. But just because my 9/11 was in 2010 doesn't change the fact it's the same anniversary. And who's to say Gabrielle wouldn't have invited me back to hers later anyway? I didn't do anything wrong deliberately.'

'You lost your fiancée?' snorted Rob. 'You were dumped by your girlfriend and then casually linked it to one of the twenty-first century's worst terrorist atrocities but don't think you did anything slightly shady, morality-wise?'

'But I didn't make the link, she did! I...I was just talking as if it was another day, and to do anything different would mean that They Win.'

We sat in silence for a while. Rob weighing up the attraction of pushing on with a guilt trip, but also swayed by the appeal of the crass logic that could make the exploitation of others' tragedy a tool in the War on Terror. Hannah looked as if she was beginning to realise that my story probably wasn't going to be workable as an anecdote for my and Gabrielle's ruby wedding anniversary.

I sat there thinking that Kate could have been my fiancée if she'd said yes when I proposed that September morning in 2010. Instead she cried and said it was all over, and that it had been for several years, really. So on a date most remember as one where the whole world became a scarier place, I remember being left down on one knee with an improvised engagement ring crafted from a

one-carat Sugar Puff in a wholegrain Cheerios setting, while the woman I lived for went to pack up a few things. From that moment, the bigger picture hadn't meant so much.

What can I say? Honestly, I'm over it now and I'd only mentioned it to Gabrielle as I thought it was a way of bringing up the subject of whether or not she herself was single or attached. And to make it clear that I myself was very much available. But when I saw she had genuine tears in her eyes, I realised she'd mixed up the date and the day itself. I'd wanted to explain right then — not least because how old did she think I was if I had a fiancée in 2001? But then the countdown to midnight had started and all I could think was that it could be time for the big kiss, and I hoped she'd been eating the garlicky dips too.

'And by the way,' I said to Rob, rising as close to my full height as I could while sitting down, 'the reason I'm sitting here with you two and not planning a life together with Gabrielle over a casual post-coital brunch is because I wouldn't let a mix-up like that stand.'

'And you timed that beautifully,' said Rob.

Not long after midnight, Gabrielle had asked me to walk her home to Bow. Without much hope of getting a cab we walked briskly through the East London night, and at some point we kissed again, properly. It must have been at one of the few points I wasn't convinced we were going to be mugged around the next corner. We walked on with anticipation building, giggling and holding each other closer the nearer we got to the house she shared with three friends. Then we were through the door and, with only a couple of pauses for snogs, we were upstairs.

'I wanted to do this as soon as I saw you looking at me while we were dancing,' Gabrielle said as we fell together onto her bed, my hands getting lost in her skirt.

'Me too. You looked so sexy. I couldn't believe you wanted to dance with me.'

'Those sad eyes... I knew there was something.'

Fiddling with the back of her bra, I froze. Was I really here because Gabrielle thought I was some kind of War on Terror widower? A gorgeous twenty-one-year-old, with a sensationally springy body and, my God, a real way with her hands, was going to have sex with me, but under the impression that I was someone deep down that I wasn't. Wasn't there a name for doing something like that? But this wasn't my idea, and it was her flat, and my God just look at her...

'Here, you'd be for ever back around there. This one opens at the front.'

Her bra burst open and she stretched back on the bed, sexy and vulnerable hazel eyes looking at me as she lay there in nothing but a vintage skirt.

I felt physically sick.

'You look...smashing,' I said as I buttoned up my shirt all wrong, stabbed my feet back into my shoes and tried to get my flies closed without doing any permanent damage, 'but you've...I'm... I've got to go.'

Gabrielle looked confused at first as I headed for the bedroom door, but by the time I glanced back on my way out her hurt and embarrassment had quickly resolved themselves as anger.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Fuck off!'

I walked for two hours before finally getting an unlicensed cab that smelt of stale beer and sick to take me home, where for hours I tried to sleep with the idiot words 'you look smashing' echoing around my head.

'Couldn't you have tried to tell her before, y'know, you put your trousers back on?' asked Hannah. 'Made a joke of the confusion? I wish you'd called us—maybe it could have been recoverable...'

'What are we, running some kind of sex advice line now?' interrupted Rob.

'Look, I know you want to be honest,' said Hannah, ignoring Rob, 'you want to be "Nice Dan" and all that, but sometimes with women it's about saying the right thing at the right time...'

‘Are you talking about that thing he said about your hair that made you go and buy those straighteners you never use?’ Rob asked, grinning, as I spluttered into my coffee.

‘Or that other thing?’ he continued. ‘How you were really good at wearing clothes that don’t match?’

‘I meant that was cool. Bohemian!’

‘Or, what was it? That you weren’t “one of those too-skinny girls”?’

‘That— You— I— I was only trying to be nice!’

‘I think what she’s trying to say is you don’t have a great track record when it comes to talking to women.’

‘No,’ Hannah said, giving Rob her stern look, ‘what I’m trying to say, Dan, is that you try and be honest and decent, which is brilliant, really. But there’s a time and place, and it’s just a shame your timing was a bit off on this occasion. This could have been your chance to get back out there...’

‘Or rather in there,’ added Rob.

‘So, that’s it, is it?’ I moaned. ‘I’m saying the right things at the wrong time, or the wrong things at an even worse time? It’s no wonder I’m single and fed up with my life.’

‘Actually, maybe calling it a “life” is overstating it a bit,’ I continued. ‘It’s more a string of pathetic non-events. I’ve not found a single person who finds me sexually attractive since Kate. And the more I think about her, the more I think it was just this total absence of something in me that finally prompted her to leave. Apart from that brief time when we first got together it’s like who I am — me — doesn’t exist for women.’

‘You could polish up the 9/11 widower act. That nearly worked — you could get a second-hand NY Fire Department badge, maybe add in a limp...’

‘Rob...’ said Hannah, putting a hand on his knee to silence him. I looked around the room, not sure where my outburst had come from, but knowing that I meant it, and certain that if I tried to say one more thing I’d... I’d probably get something in my eye...

‘It’s not been the best start to the year for you, sweetheart, we do see that,’ said Hannah.

‘But you’ve got your worst cock-up out of the way really early too,’ reminded Rob, more kindly. ‘Things can only look up from here.’

I sat there, embarrassed, but grateful for my friends. I wasn’t usually that melodramatic, but hangovers at the best of times made me a bit emotional. I was sure, though, that under the histrionics I was still right, that there was solid reason behind what I’d said.

‘Thanks, guys. It’s always sweet — and slightly creepy — when you’re nice to me,’ I said, ‘but how many years have we sat here and said roughly the same thing? That this year will be different?’

‘That’s how New Year’s resolutions work,’ Rob said.

‘Yeah, but it’s not just New Year, is it? Every time I think I might have found someone new, after I grab the bull by the horns and ask them out, I end up round at your place wondering how I misread the signs, and asking what’s so frigging great about my friendship that no woman dares risk spoiling it. Even you must be starting to get bored by it.’

A look passed between Rob and Hannah.

‘Well, we enjoy the ten to twelve weeks before that,’ said Hannah, with a teasing glint. ‘Y’know, where we sit around and dissect every passing exchange, glance and email for signs of a come-on. It’s romantic and sweet watching you building for your run-up.’

‘Seriously,’ Rob chipped in, ‘and I’d tell you when you’re being a boring arsehole because I love you, but I enjoy picking apart the significance of some hot barista saying “morning” to every other customer that comes into the coffee shop, but saying “*good morning*” to you. It’s the little details in life...’

‘There’s a lot that goes on in the nuance,’ I agreed.

‘You gotta love the nuance,’ confirmed Rob.

For a moment, in the nostalgia of past failure, I actually started feeling better. But then the phrase ‘you look smashing’ roared back to the front of my brain, knocking my battered spirit off its feet again. I also remembered that I now have to get my coffee on the way to work from a greasy spoon that uses instant coffee and a suspiciously stained kettle, because I’m too ashamed to go back into the Costa after I turned up that morning with a bunch of flowers.

‘No, I’m done. I quit,’ I announced. ‘I’m giving up on women. I’ve had enough. I can’t do it so I’m not going to try. I’ll become a spinster. Some people have no ear for music; some people aren’t natural athletes. Some — down to some inborn absence of hand-eye coordination — can’t do things that come fairly naturally to everyone else, like riding a bike or driving a car. I’m clearly naturally deficient in the pheromones that make men attractive to women, so I’m just going to accept it, and move on.’

‘But, sport, you can’t do any of those other things either. What are you leaving yourself with?’ asked Rob.

I gave a small shrug. The idea of the romantic loner was fermenting in my head. Me in a big house, listening to Radio 4 all the time and arguing with an ethereal John Humphrys. Lots of couple friends coming over for elaborately prepared dinner parties. The neighbours admiring the slightly mysterious figure next door:

‘Never married, you say?’

‘Some say his fiancée died saving a child from a terrorist atrocity...’

‘You don’t think he’s actually, you know...?’

‘No, he just likes to look smart, and throws legendary Eurovision parties.’

‘OK, I’m not having this,’ Rob said, cutting in on my daydreaming. ‘Bollocks to this quitting talk. You’re a decent bloke, you’re kind and you care about people. Any day now your female peers are going to wake up and realise they need to stop chasing bastards, and find the kind of guy that’s going to get up to do three a.m. nappy changes and supply foot rubs on demand. And you’re going to be in your element. We know you’re a great guy, and it’s about time the rest of the world caught up. And frankly, if you do pursue a life of solitude it’s just going to mean you spend even more time at ours, which will get old very quickly.’

‘He’s got a point, you know,’ agreed Hannah, ‘not about being at ours — you’re more welcome than he is half the time — but it does sound a little drastic. And there are millions of women who’d be lucky to have you.’

‘And we’re going to find you one,’ Rob said with a finger click. ‘We’re taking control of your entire romantic life.’

‘Ooh!’ said Hannah, rapidly embracing the idea. ‘We could do that, couldn’t we?’

‘Absolutely, dollface. All decision-making taken out of your hands. All choices made by us.’

‘Oh! Oh! Oh! We can practise you doing chat-up lines and tell you what you have to wear!’

‘We handle the details. You just show up and be yourself.’

‘Yes! You’d have to come back and tell us absolutely everything!’

‘Like he doesn’t already. We’ll get you loads of dates. H’s address book must be loaded with single girls we can easily set you up with for starters.’

‘Oh.’ Hannah slammed on the brakes. ‘Well, I’m not sure how many of them are really on the lookout at the moment, or not already loved-up. But, anyway, we probably don’t want to just take the easy option, now, do we?’

To that point, my spirits had been rising again. I gave Hannah a look.

‘Don’t worry, it’ll be great!’ she continued, recovering her enthusiasm. ‘We can be Team Dan, and have a secret handshake and special T-shirts.’

The two of them started talking about how they could orchestrate a campaign that, from what I could gather, would turn me into one of London’s most eligible bachelors. And make them rich from having tumbled upon the next big reality TV transformation show.

‘I dunno, guys. I’m... I just said I’d had enough of the humiliation that goes with putting yourself out there on a limb only to be judged wanting by the opposite sex, and your plan is get out there and be humiliated more? But with you two at home taking notes to work up into a full report on the subject?’

‘That’s not it at all,’ said Hannah, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. ‘It’s really hard to find someone, and we know it’s tough out there — Christ, you should try it as a woman — but we’d be right there to support you. Nobody’s being humiliated, here.’

‘Unless we do decide to send you out to try it as a woman. That might be quite humiliating,’ added Rob.

‘I do have the best legs at this table, though,’ I pointed out.

‘I know. Bastard,’ replied Hannah with eyes narrowed to slits. With a wink she gave me a gentle kick under the table.

‘Really, sport, it’ll be cool. It’s like a big dare. But look at the qualities that make you great. You worry about other people’s feelings, and all that *nice* stuff. But that’s what stopping you getting in there with women, and where the arseholes and wankers have an edge on you. And *everybody* is an arsehole or a wanker, so you’re coming in last. Who else do you think would’ve bottled shagging a pneumatic hottie because they were worried about a case of misrepresentation?’

‘Don’t listen to him for moral advice,’ warned Hannah. ‘He’d amputate his right leg and claim to be a bomb-disposal expert to get in your position. But I would say this. You’ve been trying the same thing for years and years, and seem surprised every time it’s proved to not work. We’re just going to help you try some things that are different. What we’re doing is putting you through dating boot camp.’

They really were beginning to think of this as a TV show.

At the first sign of actually having fun, a disapproving waiter descended upon us like a soot cloud. He asked in a barely perceptible French accent — and using only marginally more polite language — if there was anything else we wanted, or would we hop it and stop spoiling the carefully designed corporate ambience of doom? We ordered lattes all round, and pulled faces behind his back.

Taking advantage of the lull in conversation, Rob grabbed his fags and headed outside for a quick smoke before his coffee.

Hannah and I sat silently for a while. It wasn’t that we didn’t have anything to say to each other — we could talk on the phone and email happily about night-out plans or just general nonsense — it was just that when we’d all been hanging out together and there was a sudden absence of Rob, the atmosphere changed. I didn’t know quite how to describe it but the mood was calmer, somehow warmer.

‘Are you all right, really?’ Hannah asked as our glasses of coffee arrived.

‘Myeh.’ I shrugged.

‘You did the right thing, you know.’

‘Hn. Eventually...I let it slide for too long. Thought she might have been into me ‘cos of my sparkling badinage and her good old-fashioned New Year’s Eve drunkenness. But I guess she was thinking of a consolation bunk-up for a sweet old near-widower.’

‘Sounds to me like you were doing all right before the “fiancée” came up.’

‘Maybe. But there’s been enough times when I’ve been the lovely guy at the party who goes off to get the cute girl’s coat so she can go home with the cocky bastard who’s drunk all the decent booze and puked in the houseplants.’

‘Cor, I remember those guys.’

‘And then you married one.’

She smiled affectionately, with the slightest hint of a blush, as we remembered the first time the three of us met — a student party in Manchester. And I’d met Hannah first.

Then she got her sympathetic-advice face back on.

‘You know, we’ve watched you trying to get back out there these last few years, and I just wanted to say — there’s being nice, and there’s being a doormat. There’s waiting for signs and hints, and there’s clutching at straws with totally the wrong women. I say that only because I want you to meet someone who’ll see the absolute doll that we’ve known for all these years. And I think you should try this idea of Rob’s. Worst comes to the worst, it could be fun and something to think back on in your lonely bachelor old age.’

‘Just spoken to Angus,’ said the returning Rob with a consoling hand on my shoulder. ‘As we expected there’s no hope of a second chance with the jailbait. But I did get a bit more on that guy who’ll be reaping the benefits of dating a twenty-one-year-old now determined to prove her breasts aren’t nauseating. That fancy job of his in marketing? He dresses up as a giant ape and hands out flyers for restaurants. More gorilla than guerrilla advertising really. Still, I hear it’s a nice little business and he even owns his own monkey suit. How were you ever going to compete with that?’ he asked, ruffling my hair, and giving me a wink.

‘Is this what I can expect from dating boot camp?’ I replied. ‘Some kind of “knock ‘em down to build ‘em up” exercise? Because I’m down to my constituent parts already. You might want to think about moving on to the good stuff if you want me to sign up.’

‘Oh, you’re signed up, buddy-boy. We’re going home to formulate our plan to turn you into a dating GOD.’

‘Say what you like, I haven’t agreed to anything yet. You can’t *make* me do anything.’

They looked at each other with another secret smile, and together turned to look at me.

Chapter Two

*Bollocks*72.

No.

*Bumflaps*69.

No.

‘Morning, Dan, how are you? Good Christmas?’

‘Not too bad, John. Quiet. You?’

‘Yeah, quiet. See ya later.’

*Studmuffin*7.

No.

It was the Wednesday morning after the New Year bank holiday and I was back to work. I was not really ready for this.

After leaving Rob and Hannah, I’d stayed up way too late watching old *Ally McBeal* and *Dawson’s Creek* box sets. I wouldn’t say it was a guilty secret that I watched these sappy old shows as part of a post-hangover ritual, but it wasn’t something I bragged about. It raised too many eyebrows and questions. It was a bit like vegetarianism, I figured: accepted — almost expected — of women, but when a guy showed an interest he was viewed with considerable suspicion. But it wasn’t as if I had a long bath, shaved my legs, and snuggled up to watch them with a big box of Hotel Chocolat truffles. Although now by even mentioning that stuff I’d created the image of me in a kimono with a towel turbaned on my head crying about Billy dying, hadn’t I?

But anyway, moving on. I was grudgingly accepting the return to the real world — a world I’d happily forgotten about since Christmas Eve. Unfortunately the forgetting had included all memory of my log-in password. My brain, still resenting its second hangover in two days, was being uncooperative as I tried to dredge up whatever combination of naughty words and numbers I’d come up with this month.

*Boobies*22.

No.

One last chance before I was locked out of the system and would have to go to IT support. I wouldn’t have minded so much if the person in charge of our computer stuff was a stereotypical IT nerd, brimming with sarcasm and distaste for anyone that found themselves in his power. But no, I’d have to call Janice the office manager, the Jill-of-all-trades in charge of virtually everything. Janice who was as beautiful as she was unhinged. And she was pretty unhinged.

I still remember the first day I started here, over two and a half years ago. She stood behind me in a blue summer dress and, smelling slightly of apricots, kept bending forward and leaning gently on my shoulder as she showed me the workings of the file management system. Sometimes her summery blonde hair tickled my neck. It was the kind of delicate incidental physical proximity that makes a man imagine so much more. It was disturbingly reminiscent of imagining myself in love with the new Cypriot girl working at my local barber’s, just because she always brushed against me softly while using the razor on the back of my neck.

That situation caused me to make a fool of myself by suggesting dinner to her after my fourth haircut in less than a month, thereby condemning me for ever after to using the expensive and not quite as good salon two doors down.

Sigh.

Anyway. Janice had followed up the lesson with a quiet gossipy chat about my predecessor, which I interpreted as a manifesto about her power in the office.

Turned out the guy whose job I now had was ‘disappeared’ one day with only mutterings about some form of inappropriate online behaviour emerging from management. I learned he’d been seeing

Janice for a while, but dumped her to go back to his ex, with whom he'd had a baby. I was invited to agree with her that this was shocking and atrocious behaviour on his part. It was shortly after this that a 'routine' review of the Internet history for his computer had discovered a cache of smut. Janice said it had to be him that was looking at *Lonely Farmers Go Wild*, as no one else would have had the passwords to get on his computer — excepting herself, of course. She darkly suggested that after he'd got back with his ex finding filthy pictures of slutty-acting old cows was to be expected. A moment had passed when it looked as if she was reliving some moment of righteous vengeance, before she brightly offered to show me where the stationery cupboard was, and invited me to the pub after work to meet some of the other guys.

No, I thought, staring blankly at my monitor, best to try not to disturb her first thing, on the first day back after a long break. Janice was not a person to disturb after a holiday.

I sat and closed my eyes and let my fingers hover over the keyboard, hoping some kind of muscle memory would kick in and my hands would fly over the right keys. 'Bigwilly90' suggested itself, and I sat there pondering pressing the return.

'Back in zis shithole, eh, Danny?'

Delphine Montagne, the new business analyst, shimmered towards my desk, and I blessed again the atrociously sexist employment policies of our creepy boss, which saw the office full of unspectacular-looking men, and decidedly above-average-looking women. Delphine was twenty-seven and gorgeous, she had a lean runner's body that meant she could wear the kind of archly fashionable high-street clothes always seen in the *Metro*, and bobbed Hollywood-red hair that must have cost a lot of money to get looking that natural. Her default facial expression was a frown that said she'd discovered the meaning of life, and wasn't too happy about it. But catch her with the right joke and you could get a girlish laugh out of her that left nearby men grinning like simpletons, and women rolling their eyes. Add to that she was French, and you basically had a combination that knocked me flat on my back, waiting for my tummy to be tickled.

'Did you get my text?' she asked.

'Text? No. Everything OK?'

'It was New Year's Eve, just wishing you a happy new year. And also to say zat Alex was being a shit again.'

'Really? That's terrible. Sorry I didn't get it — you know how it is with New Year's Eve texts...'

I now vaguely remembered having received a message, but I think it was at a point on that long dark night of the soul when I was trying to get some feeling back in my feet after walking through London for two hours in the freezing cold, and trying to work out who was more drunk and morose, me or the cab driver.

'So aside from New Year's did you have a good Christmas home in Paris?'

'Ugh. My family, Danny. My sister. My mother. And then there was Jean who thought that, seeing as I was at home, we could carry on where we left off. And Julien. I will send you an email. Later.'

With that Delphine placed her hand on the back of the hand I had resting on the mouse, and gave me a look of eternal suffering. I watched as she swayed away to her desk, absently leaning further out into the corridor to watch her go. I stayed there, long after she'd gone, with my temple rested on my hand, daydreaming about the first time I'd seen her. It was just a few weeks ago, in her kitten heels and a pencil skirt, using the aisle between the office cubicles like a catwalk, and I'd unselfconsciously stared as she disappeared from view.

Hotpatootie!

Bingo. I logged on, ready to wait all morning for an important internal email.

Lunchtime arrived, and so far work had been a pretty unproductive place to be. So I'd clearly got straight back into the swing of nine-to-five life. By midday, the majority of the office had passed my desk and, if any rivals had wanted to know how one of Europe's premier niche trend analysis

firms had enjoyed Christmas, I had the data to show it had been not only 'not bad', but also 'quiet' for nearly a hundred per cent of respondents.

I was waiting for the office-wide email that heralded the arrival of the sandwich man. You've got to be quick before all that's left is a choice of some ungodly combination involving dolphin-unfriendly tuna. While I waited an instant message from Hannah popped up on the screen.

@Hannahmatic : *Hey mister. Know any good synonyms for average?*

@aDanTaylor : *Standard? Regular? Middling? Mediocre? Run of the mill? Pedestrian? Unremarkable? Dull?*

@Hannahmatic : *In a positive mood for a Wednesday then? You're not making filling in this profile on souillyforyou.com any easier.*

@aDanTaylor : *Souilly what now?*

@Hannahmatic : *souillyforyou.com. It's an Internet dating site, for finding your soulmate.*

@aDanTaylor : *Are you sure about that? It sounds like a ready-meal range for the lonely and desperate.*

@Hannahmatic : *It looks good! It was featured in Time Out as fresh and new. Also it's free, and the alternative costs sixty quid if you actually want to, y'know, arrange a date with anyone.*

@aDanTaylor : *We're really doing this? Isn't this idea supposed to just quietly fade away like a usual drunken resolution to change your life?*

@Hannahmatic : *No chance. You're our project for keeping our marriage fresh and exciting. Rob wanted us to join the local swingers, I wanted a new puppy. You're the compromise.*

@aDanTaylor : *Jesus...And so far all you've got is average?*

@Hannahmatic : *Oh no! Now I've got mediocre height, run-of-the-mill build and pedestrian hair. But I'm putting your eyes down as Mediterranean azure to pep it up a bit.*

@aDanTaylor : *You realise everyone discounts all descriptions on these things by 20% to counter exaggeration? You're making me out to be a bug-eyed asthmatic dwarf.*

@Hannahmatic : *I was just joking, mister. I'm doing a magnificent sales job on you. Taking you down 20% would put you somewhere between Clooney and Gosling. I just realised we hadn't asked you what kind of woman you're actually looking for.*

There was a question. What was I looking for? What was my 'type'? I wasn't entirely certain. Existentially overwrought Parisians, currently juggling a string of humourless and borderline abusive international hunks?

Drop-dead gorgeous IT experts who could learn to understand that their psychopathic tendencies are to the fore just because they're in need of the love of a good man who won't mock their choice of the latest reality TV 'star' as a personal role model?

Cute PhD students that could excuse the use of a slightly exaggerated account of the loss of a girlfriend to get a hand inside their enticingly flimsy underpants?

I could probably have kept going through the qualities of every woman I'd met in the past twelve to eighteen months, but instead decided to do a quick search on Google Images for the funniest photo I could find of a bimbo with anatomically improbable breasts to send Hannah as an attachment.

What do you mean you knew that that was the time that my boss would obviously come and stand behind me for a chat?

'Dan, I can see you're very busy. But I'd like to introduce you to Jamie, our new graduate trainee. He's starting today in Pharma, and I thought you might have time to show him the ropes a bit.'

My boss, Nigel Pearson, was a scary man. When he got angry he didn't shout or go purple with rage, he just smiled a bit more. When he was really furious his eyelids also fluttered. I sat, looked at him, then at the giant tie knot dwarfing Jamie's head, then back at my computer screen with its photo of a famous glamour model, digitally enhanced with Photoshop® to take her chest way beyond the limits that nature imposed on even the most daring plastic surgeon. Turned out the image was also animated, and made giggly kissy noises while the gargantuan knockers jiggled saucily. I looked

back at Pearson, whose lips were twitching upwards as my computer kept saying, 'Mwah! Mwah! Mwah! Ooh!'

I was paralysed with embarrassment, and it was only when a new instant message from Hannah appeared saying '*Hey you! Don't be shy! I need totty details!!!*' that I managed to spring into action and shut down all the windows on my desktop.

I hoped maybe the other two hadn't seen the message, but the cooling breeze on the back of my reddening neck appeared to be emanating from just below Pearson's manicured eyebrows, and I heard a repressed snigger from the new guy.

Mumbling something about doing bespoke research as a favour to an important client, I said I'd be delighted to give Jamie the low-down on how things worked around here. Not taking my eyes off the pair of them, I then casually leaned over and sharply tugged all the leads out of the back of my computer monitor as the model's breathy exclamation, '*Ooh my, what a big boy you are! Yummy! Yummy!*' let me know I'd not properly shut down, only minimised, my browser window.

'Excellent, I'll leave you to it,' said my boss, 'and can I assume that since you've moved on to new research projects it won't be a problem getting me the presentation on the performance of lightly carbonated tropical fruit beverages against citrus-based market leaders by first thing tomorrow?'

'Absolutely, no problem,' I lied, taking like a man my punishment for spending his good money looking up smut. Pearson shimmered away with a noiseless tread, and Jamie grabbed a nearby chair and slumped down next to me, grinning from ear to ear as he swivelled from side to side. Jamie was unusual for a new guy in the office, as he appeared to be reasonably attractive. Not to me, I mean, obviously. But I wasn't so insecure that I couldn't realise what women might see in other guys without worrying that maybe I'd been suppressing a fundamental element of my sexuality for the past twenty years. I left that sort of anxiety to my mother.

He wasn't exceptionally good-looking, but women weren't that different from men, and a bit of fresh-faced youthfulness could work wonders. He had a confidence that came from being twenty-three and pretty sure, if you could get your MA in consumer responses to corporate marketing practices, you could handle anything the world threw at you. Or maybe it was the energy and enthusiasm of a chirpy ten-year-old in the body of a man that evidently still did sport rather than just watched it that would do it for him. I'll stop now, because there may be a point where I'll start thinking my mum might be right. But I'll just say that energy, positivity, and youthful physical confidence aren't words you'd use to describe the rest of the male workforce around here.

'So it's pretty laid-back around here, then?' Jamie observed.

Ah, the eager young recruit, still giddy from the job ads and interview process, imagining it was all nice doughnuts in meetings and 'working hard but playing hard too' — innocent of the horrors of frontline office politics.

'Yeah, it's a great gang,' I said.

No sense in trying to warn them; they never believed you.

I gave the new guy a quick rerun of the official spiel, told him where he could find the research library and let him in on the secrets of the sandwich man and his wares. I asked him a few questions about himself, and discovered he was the son of a business acquaintance of Nigel Pearson — which would explain how he got past the recruitment process — and that he'd just moved into a new place in Clapham with his mates from uni. They were thinking about having a party. It felt a lot longer than seven years ago when I'd been the same age, and had been planning parties with Rob and Angus for our new place. But I remembered how we felt as if we'd finally grown up.

Jamie and I had a little chat about everybody else in the office, and I cagily tried to fill him in on which of his managers were useless, which were boring, and which were weird, couching everything in as diplomatic terms as possible, in case he became pals with them or it turned out they were related. Never let it be said that I didn't learn my lesson last year after giving the new girl the inside skinny on Weird Boring Chris on what I later discovered was Bring Your Daughter to Work day. I

felt awful, but she would probably agree with my assessment of her useless, boring, weird dad in a few months anyway.

Meanwhile Jamie was most interested in asking — considerably less cagily — about the women in the office.

‘Janice seems really sweet. Is she seeing anybody?’

‘Yes, she’s a...sensitive soul. I think she’s single.’

‘And who were those two over in Mobile Phones?’

‘Monica and Jenny? Yeah, they’re really nice. Both engaged.’

‘On Reception?’

‘Jennifer and Mandy. Single, and just dumped boyfriend.’

This wasn’t so much a conversation as an intro before we both went into a full musical production of ‘Mambo No. 5’.

As Jamie continued to enquire about the office talent I distractedly started reassembling my desktop computer, deleting all traces of the glamour model. Glancing at my email, I saw that the promised message on an emotionally traumatic Christmas from Delphine had arrived.

‘And who’s the one...?’ Jamie mimed an unmistakable expression of Gallic despair, followed by a *Carry On* look of ‘phwoarr’.

‘Delphine? She’s quite new too. Her life seems complicated,’ I explained.

Just then, John the financial controller went speed-walking by us, and across the office a sudden migration towards the front door had begun. The sandwich man had come. I hustled the new guy to the door as quickly as I could manage, but we were definitely the stragglers, and would be left with the cast-offs of the more skilled lunch hunters ahead of us. Out of politeness I let Jamie have the last sandwich featuring something recognisable as ham, grabbed a tuna, cheese and coleslaw bap, and headed back to my desk to see what trauma had beset Delphine. And how I could best offer a shoulder, or any other body part of her choice, on which to cry.

It wasn’t a short email, and over a couple of pages she explained — in detail I wouldn’t have risked on our internal email — exactly why Christmas had been so rough. To summarise, she didn’t really get on with her mum, who was apparently bewildered and angry because her daughter was nearly twenty-eight and hadn’t yet started producing grandchildren. She was also critical about Delphine’s weight, and every other aspect of her appearance, which she insinuated was why she wasn’t shackled up with a husband and two cute little girls like her younger sister. The sister was apparently smug and always taking snide little digs. Dad was distant and not how he used to be when she was a child, and she suspected he was having an affair. Then there was her own man trouble. When she was home there were a couple of guys she used to go out with who always got in touch and expected to see her. From what I could gather, they’d both been successful in their pursuit, which only made things worse.

Then, back in London for New Year’s Eve, Delphine had had a huge row with her actual boyfriend, Alex, who’d abandoned her at some party. She couldn’t understand how he could be so mean. I couldn’t understand how either, mainly because he was a flabby, still acne-ridden, below-average-looking man in his mid-thirties, who was punching way above his considerable weight just by getting Delphine to speak to him.

Not that I was jealous, of course.

On top of all that she was struggling with work, claiming that she didn’t understand half of the things she was supposed to be writing about, and how stupid she felt working in English. And in a newsflash update she added that she was now starving because she’d missed the sandwich man. So overall 2013 had not had the best of starts for her.

Chewing on my lunch, I set about writing a reply to Delphine. It took me a while as I worked up a response on how to sort out all the troubles in her life; I wanted to be sympathetic and supportive while showing her that she was making a lot of mistakes with her choices in life, without too obviously

pointing to where I thought the answer might be sitting. There were compliments that I made as daring as I thought was advisable without being too obvious. I then finished with an offer to help out with her project, and what I thought was quite a good joke about British cuisine that might make her feel better about not being exposed to all the E numbers that were enhancing my tomato-sauce-flavoured crisps, the coating on which was currently making my fingers and keyboard radiate with a greasy red glow.

By the time I was finished the main office was muttering back into life. I watched as Delphine and Jenny from Mobiles walked past my desk deep in urgent conversation, with lots of tutting and sighing.

Ten minutes passed while I stared at a flashing cursor on an empty Word document and listened for a response to my message from the occupant of the cubicle four back and two across. All seemed quiet, but then I detected that rare giggle that always seemed worth working so hard for. It continued, and got louder. I must say I started to feel quite proud of how well my little ‘Cordon Bleurgh’ cooking joke was going down. I grabbed a piece of paper from my desk, and headed for the photocopier, which just happened to require walking past Delphine’s desk.

As I got closer I could still hear her laughing — it was a gag that worked on many levels, I figured. I turned the corner and saw Jamie slouched against her cubicle wall while she leaned back in her chair, swaying from side to side and grinning at whatever it was he was telling her about. I gave them an eyebrow salute as I went by, but I don’t think they noticed, and I went back to my desk the long way around after photocopying a printout of an email on the office healthy posture guidelines. I got back to see that a response had arrived from Delphine. It said, *‘Thanks, Danny, you always know to say the right things!! If you could have a look at this pear cider report and let me know where I have stupid English you would be my hero in a shitty world!! D xxx’*.

Three kisses at the end. That was two more than usual, so I felt I was making progress.

The rest of the afternoon just flew, and by the time I’d corrected a few grammatical mistakes, written a few pages of notes on the UK market for premium cider brands, added a commentary on the basic findings, and roughed out some charts, tables and graphs of available data, just to help fill out Delphine’s conclusions a little bit, it was just about home time. I headed to the kitchen for a celebratory filtered water.

‘Superman Dan!’

Janice called out to me as I sloped back to my desk. She was using her nickname for me, which was a good sign. It took a while to get the Janice matey seal of approval, but once you got a special name, it was a handy indicator of whether you were in her good books, and whether she was in a good mood. Maybe it was her work that was keeping her cheerful. She seemed to be Photoshopping® a picture of her own head onto the head of a starlet emerging from a taxi with Harry Styles. I’m not quite sure which major client that would have been needed for, though.

‘Coming to the pub?’ she asked as she adjusted the angle of her grinning face so she was looking deep into Harry’s eyes. ‘We’re going for a swift one to welcome Jamie Jammie Dodger.’

Hmm, quick work on the nickname front from Mr Dodger there.

‘Sure, the Zetland? I’ll be down in ten minutes,’ I said.

‘Luv-lee.’

Back at my desk, it was just as I started to shut down for the day that I got an email from Weird Boring Chris. He was reminding me that he was to be cc’d in on the youth market fruit beverages report that apparently was going out today. Turned out that just because I’d forgotten all about my promise to the boss that I could do a week’s work in a day, didn’t mean that Nigel had.

It was going to be a long night.

‘Good evening, Dan speaking.’

‘So according to my wife you’ve been in the office looking at porn sinceten-thirty, and you’re still there twelve hours later. There are clinics you can go to to get help with that kind of obsession, you know.’

I said something rude about his mother and a webcam. Rob snorted, and, with the conversational formalities out of the way, he got down to the business of the call.

‘So, buddy, what’re your plans for Friday night, then?’

‘Well, unless Rihanna changes her plans and decides to come over to town to go clubbing, I would imagine it’d be a pint with Mad Janice and Weird Boring Chris and home for a Mahal Palace takeaway and season two of *Glee* on box set.’

‘You’re going to have to let the starlets down, sport, and Mick the delivery guy will have to live without your awkwardly generous tip for one week. You’re coming to ours.’

‘I’ll have to let people know. The last time I wasn’t in on a Friday night the Palace sent the police around, worried I must have been dead or trapped under the takeaway menu drawer.’

‘Well, notify the appropriate authorities, and practise being spontaneous and witty, because you have got a date,’ said Rob.

My stomach plunged and an unexpected surge of adrenalin shot through me. I was quiet while my internal organs finished their virtual roller-coaster ride and Rob filled in the details.

‘A friend of Hannah’s called Niamh. You might have met her at Eurovision? Same age as us, lawyer, loves old musicals. Right up your street,’ he continued.

‘I thought Hannah didn’t really have any single friends that were my type at the minute?’

‘New Year, Dan. Turns out it’s not just you that has realised it can be a good time to have a look at their lives and decide to try and change them. They’re calling them resolutions. I think they might catch on.’

‘So, um, is she...er, nice?’

‘You’d be the one that people think are doing better out of the deal, but not so much that they’d assume you must be very rich, if that’s what you’re getting at. Hang on...’

There was a pause and I could hear, but not quite make out, Hannah saying something in the background.

‘I’m being told from the sofa to tell you she has the most beautiful skin. Because you know how all men are mainly looking for a really good epidermis.’

There was a distinct sound of a raspberry being blown in the room.

‘This is all a bit quick,’ I said. ‘I thought it was going to be looking at dating profiles and making snide remarks about the hair on the profile pictures of my rivals for a while. I’m not sure I’m ready.’

‘Not your call any more, Dan — you sold your soul, or its DNA equivalent, to us. So Friday at eight you’re at our place, deodorant applied *before* you put on your clothes. Hang on...’

More conversation from the sofa.

‘Angus and Sarah are invited too, so it won’t look too obviously like a date. Oh, and we’re also banned from saying Babah Ganoush in funny voices when Hannah’s serving her from-scratch appetisers.’

We spent a minute or two saying the names of various Middle Eastern dips and accompaniments in a range of accents and tones, just to get it out of our systems.

‘Now, how come you’ve managed to get so far behind in your work when you’ve only been back one day?’ asked Rob.

I explained the situation with Nigel and the glamour model, and how I might also have been doing a bit to help out Delphine in the day — just out of professional dedication, obviously — and that now everyone was in the pub with our new hotshot handsome colleague.

‘Helping out that saucy French one?’ Rob had met Delphine once when he’d come to meet me in the pub after work before going to the movies. We never made the movie but spent the evening squabbling over whose turn it was to go and get her jelly beans from the dispenser.

‘Good idea to free up her time so she can go and get drunk with your better-looking colleagues,’ he pointed out. ‘We’ll have to work her into our strategy though, I think. Even if it is just to get the chance to make her laugh at the mere idea. And watch her walk away.’

In the background I could actually hear Hannah's eyes rolling.

'What? I'm just saying... ' Rob asked with wounded innocence.

There was another pause while he received his further instructions before returning to the call.

'And Hannah says you still haven't answered her question from earlier for your singles account. But we only need to worry about that if Friday night goes ball-achingly badly, and you embarrass yourself, and us, in front of Hannah's hot single friend.'

There was another pause on the line, and more mumbling between the two of them.

'But I'm sure that's not going to happen,' he added, with a cough that I tried not to read as sarcastic.

Chapter Three

So it was Friday night and, at the risk of too much detail, I was testing the capabilities of modern antiperspirant technology to their limits. Since I'd found out about it on Wednesday evening, I'd spent most of my time planning for this big night.

I'd been watching the news, so I'd know what was going on in the world if the subject turned to current affairs — no chance of me joining a discussion on Osborne's latest monetary policy decision thinking it's something to do with Sharon and Ozzy at *this* dinner party. I read all the arts reviews, so if all was going well I could say to Niamh, 'I hear the Osborne revival at the National is worth a trip if you're interested,' and drop in a few salient facts about *Look Back in Anger*, so she'd know I wasn't talking about Kelly trying a pop comeback. I even read the back pages, in case she was one of those sporty gals.

All my clothes had been washed. Some of them had even been ironed. I'd tidied my place and changed the sheets, because, hey, you never knew and it was best to take precautions. Precautions! I'd even rushed and checked the use-by date on my bedside packet of condoms — I didn't even like using milk that was getting near its expiry date so I was taking no chances.

On Thursday evening I thought everything was under control.

On Friday I was certain I was woefully under-prepared.

What was I going to say? Why did my clothes all suddenly look so dull and old man-ish? Should I have got a haircut? Should I bring a present? What was I going to do about the prospect of social kissing when I arrived? What if she was taller than me? What if I really liked her?

These were questions I was still trying to deal with while I stood in Carl's Fine Wines and Spirits just down from Rob and Hannah's. I was wearing my work overcoat, my only non-work shoes, my least saggy-arsed jeans — cords were bringing back too many bad memories still — and the one shirt I felt fitted the bill as fashionable dinner party casual smart. I thought it also hinted at the wry intelligence of a kind and caring man who wanted to look good, but didn't need to try too hard to prove himself.

It was blue.

'All right,' said Carl.

'Hi!' I choked back before returning hurriedly to browsing. Why did he have to pick now to get so chatty? I ducked away to the front of the shop to have a look at the state of the flowers, and whether I could hand them over to Hannah without it appearing more insulting than complimentary.

Should I get some for Niamh too?

Oh, God. Just thinking about questions like this was sending my internal temperature rocketing. I looked at my reflection in the glass of the chilled lagers cabinet. You need to calm down, relax, and just be natural, I told myself. It's just a casual dinner. Angus and Sarah are going to be there too, to take the pressure off. She's probably more scared of you than you are of her.

Aside from a mental image of my turning up to a date with a venomous spider, my internal pep talk did go some way to calming me down. I took a deep breath, and smiled and winked at my reflection. Which I think surprised the guy stretching across me to get his cans of lager.

Feeling guilty about not nurturing my friendship with Carl the offie owner, I tried to push things forward again while I was paying.

'Busy evening?' I asked.

'Yeah, not bad, typical Friday.'

'Right.'

I felt as if everything was back on track again as I left the shop with my wine and carnations, and headed to the dinner party.

‘Ooh, Kangaroo’s Pouch Shiraz! I’ve always loved that name since I saw the shouty Jesus bloke outside Sainsbury’s drinking it.’ Hannah gave me a peck on the cheek at the door as I handed over my off-licence purchases, and we headed up the stairs to their first-floor flat’s kitchen.

‘How are you doing, Dan? All set for your big night?’ she asked. ‘You look nice — and getting better at getting that deodorant on. Hardly any marks at all.’

In striking contrast to me, Hannah was looking cool and in control, in skinny twill trousers and a groovy print T-shirt, her hair pulled back off her face.

‘You’re looking good,’ I said. ‘Is that new?’

‘Why, yes, it is,’ she said, smiling and standing a little taller. ‘Thanks for noticing. Very observant.’

‘I saw the screwed-up Zara bag sticking out of the recycling out front, and took a guess,’ I confessed.

She smiled and shook her head gently.

‘Well, good work on the compliments, anyway,’ she said, patting my arm, ‘but maybe try to keep the rubbish bins out of it when Niamh gets here.’

‘Hey, sport!’ exclaimed Rob, emerging from the kitchen brandishing a tomato-stained wooden spoon and wearing his favourite ‘lady in saucy underwear’ cooking apron. ‘Feeling lucky? Eh? Eh? Eh?’

‘Be nice to him,’ ordered Hannah. ‘He’s a little nervous, and he’s brought me flowers, which is something no other man has done for me in living memory.’

‘If I came in with flowers, dollface, it’d just give away my guilt at my tawdry affairs,’ he replied.

‘I need a drink,’ I told Rob, ‘as a matter of some urgency.’

‘You’ve missed the cocktails, and we’re out of tonic. Beer or wine?’

Grabbing a seat in the cramped kitchen, I pondered the question. When Niamh arrived would holding a beer look too loutish? White wine a bit sissy? The process of elimination left me asking for a glass of red, although a T-free G and T did have its appeals.

‘So when do Angus and Sarah arrive?’ I asked.

‘Bit of a change of plan there,’ explained Rob. ‘They were all set to leave and Angus had a disaster with the canapés he was planning for Sarah’s touch rugby team coming over for their annual piss-up tomorrow. Their evening is now going to be spent de-veining prawns, and testing his filo.’

‘But, but they were my pressure valve, my lightning conductor... It’s going to be too intense with just the four of us!’ I said, nervously swigging my wine.

‘You’ll do fine, sweetheart,’ said Hannah. ‘It probably would have become pretty obvious what was going on anyway, even with Angus and Sarah here.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ I said, ‘what do you mean it’ll *become* obvious what’s going on? Niamh does know what’s happening, doesn’t she? She’s in on this already, right? You said about resolutions... It’s not like I’m involved in some kind of ambush here, am I?’

Rob and Hannah shared another one of their looks, conclusively informing me that an ambush was pretty much exactly what I was involved with here. I took a bigger swig of my drink.

‘It’ll be fine, Dan. It’s not a big surprise at all,’ said Hannah in her best reassuring tone. ‘She phoned feeling a bit gloomy and fed up with life, and I said we were having some friends over for dinner so why didn’t she come and we could catch up.’

‘A catch up? She thinks she’s coming for a quiet meal with her old pals to moan about her family and work, and she’s going to be stuck with me babbling at her over the Babah Ganoush?’

‘Bar-barh GanoOOOOSH,’ said Rob loudly as he continued tinkering with his tomatoey sauce, throwing various dried herbs into the pot.

‘Don’t worry, it won’t be like that at all,’ said Hannah, although the way she started gulping down her own drink made me think I’d put an element of doubt in her mind.

‘Did she even say she was looking for someone?’ I asked. ‘Oh, God, she’s going to look at me, and I’m going to have to sit there while her face registers the horror of the trap she’s walked into.’

‘You’ll be fine, sport,’ insisted Rob. ‘Wow her with your sense of HUMMUS.’

‘I didn’t say anything deliberately because I know she’s looking,’ explained Hannah. ‘But Niamh’s always been someone who likes things to develop organically.’

‘Which means she expects to have a load of shit dumped on her, and has to get by without any chemical assistance,’ said Rob.

‘That’s it, I’m off. I’ve just remembered I have to peel ten kilos of kumquats and feel up my pastry before my netball squad comes to tea tomorrow.’

Halfway to my feet I froze, and so did the others, as the doorbell rang.

‘Honestly, you’ll be fine,’ said Hannah, giving my shoulder a squeeze as she headed down the stairs to the front door. I’m not sure if it was her hand, or my entire body, that was shaking. Possibly both.

‘Let me have a look at you,’ said Rob as he topped up my empty glass. ‘Looking sharp, buddy. It’s not many people that can pull off that glowing red-wine-stained-teeth look.’

At the bottom of the stairs we could hear the door open and Hannah and Niamh greeting each other enthusiastically. Niamh had a soft, friendly voice, and I remember feeling, alongside the embarrassment and awkwardness, a sense of hope that maybe this could turn into something. This could be the story about how we got together for years to come — the night Mum fell for Dad, despite his having tzatziki spilt down his best shirt.

‘Angus and Sarah can’t make it, some kind of culinary crisis ahead of a party tomorrow, so it’s just four of us,’ said Hannah as she came up the stairs, giving Niamh the chance to react to the development in semi-private, I suppose. Or make a bolt for the door before the night had even begun.

‘Ah, well. More taramasalata for the rest of us, then,’ replied Niamh, not sounding in the least fazed by the development.

The last of the stairs was approaching, and I stood myself up a little more straight as we waited for her to come into the cramped kitchen. I became very aware of all my limbs as I told myself to just be casual.

In a bustle of heavy overcoats being taken and weather being complained about, they came into the room. Hannah lightly hugged Niamh and gave her another kiss to say thank you for the rather nice-looking bottle of wine, and the noticeably undroopy and prettily wrapped bunch of flowers she handed over.

‘They’re gorgeous, thanks, babe,’ said Hannah, giving Niamh a peck on both cheeks and a squeeze around the waist as Rob stepped up, wiping his hands on his apron.

‘Happy New Year, toots! How are ya?’ Rob asked, giving her a big hug and noisy kiss.

‘This is our dearest old pal, Dan,’ said Hannah, ‘Dan, Niamh.’

I don’t know exactly what I was thinking the moment before it happened, but time slowed down as I realised I was leaning in, arms wide open, to give a total stranger an unexpected and unwelcome kiss and friendly embrace.

I knew immediately upon moving that the situation had called for a nod and hi, but caught up in the enthusiasm of greetings from Rob and Hannah I’d over-committed. I felt my life flash before my eyes as I continued on my irreversible trajectory towards Niamh; every embarrassing experience I’d ever had replayed itself in front of me, from being too slow to put my hand up when bursting for the toilet on my first day at infants’ school onwards. I watched Niamh’s face — pretty, with stylish thick, dark spectacle frames that emphasised her increasingly widening eyes — as I moved closer, arms extended. She had a frozen fixed smile as I lurched forward, brain filled with memories of the times I mistook my boss’s wife for his mother, and called my GCSE biology teacher ‘dad’.

Finally I had my arms around her, patting her back in as non-committal way as possible and giving a quick peck somewhere around her ear, while my memory brimmed with recollections of other times I'd been in such close proximity to a woman and had felt a need to be somewhat apologetic.

She stood, still smiling, with the look of someone who might have suspected that they were the only person not in on a private joke, as I leapt back to the safety of my spot against the kitchen wall.

'Um, hi, nice to meet you,' she said as she stood there, arms folded, in her straight-from-work tailored suit, braced for any further unexpected assaults.

'Well, isn't this all very friendly?' said Rob into the endless silence. 'Now, who needs a large intoxicating beverage?'

After shuffling through to the living room, with me going to extraordinary lengths to make sure there was no chance for me to be in physical contact with Niamh, we sat on different sofas and nibbled crisps while Chris Isaac crooned reassuringly in the background. Hannah and Niamh caught up on friends they have in common, and I composed myself while listening attentively and nodding along to the trials and tribulations of people I didn't know. I assured myself there was no long-term harm done, that maybe she'd just think of me as one of those larger than life characters that was always going around hugging people and sharing a bit of banter with bus drivers. I knew I just needed to pull myself together, and ease my way into the chat the two of them were having and we could start again. It wasn't long before I spotted my opportunity.

'Well, Osbourne's been at it again,' said Niamh with a tone of weary disbelief, and I mentally high-fived myself for having done my homework.

'Yes, it's another sign that this coalition government still isn't dealing with economic reality. I think at the EU summit of ministers there'll be repercussions beyond that close vote in the Commons,' I declared, while Hannah looked over, obviously seeing a new side to me.

'If only he could think less about the short term and more of his legacy — like the late John Osborne with his revival at the National Theatre. Fifty-seven years since its debut at the Royal Court, which marked the real take-off of a career that encompassed more than twenty plays and Oscar-winning screenwriting. Have you seen it?' I continued.

'Um, I meant *Ozzy*?' said Niamh. 'He burnt off his eyebrows trying to put out a fire in his LA mansion? It was in the *Metro* this morning...'

'I'll just go and see Rob,' said Hannah, getting up quickly to leave the room. 'If I don't reclaim the kitchen he'll be tinkering with that sauce all night. Talk amongst yourselves!'

Niamh and I smiled at each other nervously. After a while we established that we'd both had nice Christmases, although they'd been quiet. Also that it was very cold out today, but that was probably what you'd expect in January.

Chris Isaac was singing one of his old numbers, a kind of darkly sensuous song, best suited to somewhat later in the evening — and for two people on somewhat more intimate terms than we were on. I said I didn't know what he was up to these days. Niamh thought maybe he was doing a bit more acting. I thought she might be right, but neither of us was sure.

Niamh took a sip from her half-full glass of white wine.

'I'll get you a refill!' I said and bounded off to the kitchen.

'What are you doing in here?' muttered Hannah as she turned from putting the finishing touches to a mezze platter. 'Get back out and chat to her!'

'Don't make me go out there,' I whispered. 'I don't know what to say. It's killing me.'

'You can do it. Have you asked her about her job?' she whispered back.

'I thought that was boring!'

'You could always go and try and snog her again,' said Rob, in his usual-volume booming voice. 'Just don't HARR-ISSA her.'

'Come on, out you go,' whispered Hannah as she hustled me to the door.

‘I need the wine!’ I squeaked, and found a bottle of sauvignon blanc thrust into my hands, followed by a shove that sent me tripping into the coat rack on the wall outside the doorway to the living room. Getting back to my feet and untangling myself from a spaghetti of scarves and handbag straps, I looked over at Niamh, watching me from across the room.

‘Wine!’ I declared, holding the glistening bottle aloft as a collection of umbrellas clattered and fell around me.

I topped up her glass, and, after downing the last drops of red in mine, decided I’d switch to white, rather than risk going into the kitchen again.

‘So, you’re a lawyer?’ I asked.

‘A solicitor, yes. For a housing charity. We do a lot around helping vulnerable people to get all their entitlements, making sure families in trouble can get decent and safe accommodation, taking on dodgy landlords, that kind of thing. And you?’

‘I, um, try and find out if people like fizzy drinks, and why. And what they might look for in new fizzy drinks. I get free samples sometimes,’ I said.

‘Well, that sounds fun.’

The silence returned. I thought desperately for something else to say that’d fill the void. I pondered asking about hobbies, but was worried my pastime of sitting on the sofa with no trousers on watching box sets might not be a match for the answer of sky-diving, playing second violin in the London Philharmonic, or curing cancer that I felt certain it was going to be up against.

‘Behave yourselves, kids, I’m coming in,’ boomed Rob as he scuttled into the room bearing an enormous plate of dips, breads, stuffed vine leaves, and olives. ‘We might as well haul ourselves over to the table if you two can stop your gabbling for just a minute. And it’s a small table, so watch out. I don’t want to get my legs felt up by either of you trying to play footsie.’

Rob and Hannah’s rickety kitchen table had been set up in the corner of the living room, by the window overlooking the scenic forecourt of the local exhaust repair centre. Covered in a retro vinyl tablecloth and surrounded by a collection of fold-up stools and computer chairs, it was lit by candles mounted in old spirit bottles that were disappearing under the multi-coloured wax of atmospheric lights that had gone before. I could remember when at least one of those bottles had seen the last of its contents downed as a series of shots when a new candleholder had been needed for Hannah’s birthday dinner, and had loads of memories of meals around this quirky old table, talking and laughing until the early-shift mechanics across the way were coming into work.

I could be myself at this table, and relax and talk to anyone about anything; it was home turf. It felt as if I was getting my second wind, and I could start this evening over. I was going to be sparkly, and charming and witty and show Niamh I could hold my own at urbane dinner chat. I was back — I could almost hear the theme tune to Rocky in my head.

‘So, Dan, you’ll be pleased to know that the menu’s all old standards tonight. No specials,’ said Rob.

‘No specials?’ asked Niamh, on cue.

‘Dan here has a theory about the specials in restaurants. Actually, it’s more a belief system than just a theory.’

‘I just prefer to eat something the person who’s made it has practised,’ I said, turning to Niamh. ‘Firstly, they’re probably last week’s leftovers, and secondly, I don’t think there’s anywhere in life where you want to be paying for something that the guy making it is thinking, “Well, I’ve never tried this before...”’

‘See, I like the idea of something that’s caught the chef’s imagination on that day,’ said Rob. ‘Something spontaneous, passionate, and seasonal or freshly caught.’

‘You’ve seen the chef at the Queen’s Head where we get lunch? Anything he’s just caught is likely to require a visit to a specialist clinic.’

‘He’s a creative — you’ve got to cut him some slack. Specials are the rock bed of a good gastro-pub.’

‘Yeah, but at the Queen’s Head the missing letters after “gastro” are “-enteritis”.’

‘So why do you keep going?’ Niamh chipped in.

Rob gave her his best ‘what are you, new?’ look.

‘We totally own the quiz machine in there. Get this fellow on a good run on TV and movies and lunch practically pays for itself. Including the Gaviscon you need from Boots after.’

‘What I can’t stand is when they read the specials out to you,’ she continued. ‘What are you supposed to do while that’s happening?’

‘Exactly!’ I jumped in. ‘I never hear what the waitress is saying, I’m just working out when to nod and go “mmm”. I’m only listening out for them to say “pan-fried”, or “jus”.’

‘I like to react to finding out the soup of the day like it’s a whodunit,’ she replied, her eyes sparkling. Although that might have been the candles reflecting off her trendy glasses. ‘Of course! It’s the carrot! With the coriander! And there was me thinking it was going to be the leek and potato...’

I looked across and smiled at Niamh, who smiled back warmly. I felt as if we were both relieved that the evening might be levelling off after a bumpy take-off.

Hannah came into the room, rattling slightly as she handed out cool mismatched seventies side plates loaded with starters. ‘This looks fantastic,’ I said as Rob topped up everybody’s glasses. ‘You simply must give me the recipe. Or at least the directions to the shop where you bought it all.’

I got a playful cuff around the head from Hannah for that. ‘Watch it or I’ll sneeze on your falafel,’ she said.

‘FAR-LAFF-ELL,’ intoned Rob, while nobody paid him much attention and everyone dived in to the food.

‘The stuffed vine leaves are delicious,’ said Niamh. ‘I can still never quite believe that you make your own dolmades.’

Cued up like that, all of us except Hannah joined together in declaring, ‘DOLL-MAH-DESSS’. Any lingering tension was finally gone. We all chatted happily over the mezze starter, with the names of various items around the table deemed worthy of exaggerated repetition, stretching far beyond Middle Eastern and Mediterranean foodstuffs.

It was when we were all laughing over Niamh and I simultaneously shouting ‘NAP-KINS’ that I sat bolt upright in shock as I felt an unshod foot sliding itself up my right calf. It was the shock that caused me to swallow suddenly the unstoned olive I had just flipped casually into my gob, and which lodged itself firmly in what is known as ‘the wrong way’.

I started to heave and panic as I realised I couldn’t breathe, and pushed myself back from the table. The ‘ack-ack’ noises I was making first prompted giggling from those around me, but as I fumbled and grabbed at my neck I saw the smiles drop and mouths fall open in surprise.

‘Dan, are you OK?’ Hannah’s voice had an edge of panic too.

Stupidly trying to answer made me panic more. I tried to get to my feet, but instantly buckled under my weight and fell to the floor. I felt as if I was beginning to lose consciousness, my mind racing for ways to tell them I needed help.

The last thing I remember is realising that the seductive foot had been on my right calf, the wrong side of the table for it to have been Niamh’s. I couldn’t believe that that bastard Rob was going to kill me with a wind-up.

Chapter Four

It was Sunday morning in the gym, crowded with the usual influx of fair-weather members. People still in that burst of New Year enthusiasm and all convinced that this was the year they really would get in shape. People like me. With the loud dance music and rhythmically clanking machinery it felt like a cross between a nightclub and a Victorian textile mill, and about as much fun as either.

As I walked between the aisles of whirring treadmills, and pumping step machines, I saw that Rob was already in place, over by the weights apparatus, finishing a series of reps on the lats machine. He was slyly adding twenty kilos to the weight as he left it for the next guy to use.

‘Sport! You made it alive and in one piece,’ he said in greeting as I found a free spot on a chest press.

‘I’ve been eating nothing but soup since Friday,’ I said, ‘which is a strange thing to have for Sunday breakfast.’

As you might have gathered, I didn’t die on Friday night. Some quick thinking from Rob cleared the Mediterranean blockage, but I still hadn’t quite forgiven him yet for causing me to choke in the first place. After I’d got back on my feet I’d made my excuses and a pretty quick exit before I nearly died again of humiliation. I’d hidden myself away since then, but after I received the text from Rob, all but daring me to chicken out of our planned fitness drive, I decided it was time to face the — annoyingly high-NRG — music.

‘So have you two heard from Niamh at all since I, y’know...?’

‘Since I saved your life, do you mean?’ asked Rob.

I let the press’s weights clang back into place as I finished my reps and swapped over with Rob, who watched and waited as a young blonde, glimmering from a spin class, walked past chugging greedily on a water bottle.

‘I mean, since I had a little embarrassing difficulty with a morsel of food,’ I said.

‘You make it sound like you had a bit of spinach in your teeth — that’s gratitude.’

‘Anything at all from her?’ I asked, doing my best not to get involved in the argument over heroics.

‘She left straight after you. Yesterday she may have phoned and spoken to H. There may have been some questions as to the state of your health after your NEAR DEATH experience. And there may have been some sniggering after that.’

‘The evening didn’t go too well, I guess.’

‘Oh, you didn’t think so?’

‘It was just as we were starting to click,’ I offered hopefully.

‘Pal, it was brutal in there. When you collapsed I seriously had to consider whether it would’ve been kindest to let you slip away peacefully.’

‘You know how I am,’ I said. ‘It takes a while for me to get relaxed around new people. But I thought she was beginning to see the real me.’

‘Oh, really? The “real you”? Is that the “you” I had to straddle from behind and Heimlich around the living-room floor?’

‘We both did that thing with napkins at the same time,’ I continued, ignoring the flashback Rob’s reminder had caused.

‘Or maybe it was “the real you” that fainted after that.’

‘I thought the way she smiled at me then showed that she could be someone who really gets me.’

‘Perhaps it was the “you” that slowly came around and was slightly delirious.’

‘There were probably things she said that she felt a bit foolish about afterwards too.’

‘The “you” who was babbling, “Miss Brown, the puddle was under my chair when I got here!”, and, “He’s not my dad, I meant Sir!” and, “I don’t suppose you’d take it as a compliment?”’

Reading between the lines, I could see that the tiny hope I'd been nurturing that this could become a charming story for a future wedding, where Niamh and I served Middle Eastern canapés in ironic recognition of the time we got together, was not likely to become a reality.

I'd turned up at the gym mainly embarrassed to be speaking to Rob in person since he'd managed to jerk the olive stone from my windpipe — the stone that we'd all watched in silence for a few moments as it floated to the bottom of Niamh's wine glass — but also kinda hoping that Niamh would have sent a message saying maybe we could try and have dinner again some other time. Perhaps with a cheeky little suggestion that we'd have to be chaperoned by a qualified first-aider. If the situation had been reversed it would be what I would have wanted to do. I think it comes from watching too much television.

We worked our way through the rest of our chest exercises silently, me focused on not having my arms wrenched from their sockets by the equipment, Rob focused on the spin-class blonde, now doing — admittedly quite distracting — exercises on a sit-down machine I thought was intended to tone and firm up inner thighs. Whatever its fitness benefits were, Rob was mesmerised by the enormous efforts she was taking to keep her tanned, lean legs wide open. I could see what he saw in her — a litness you usually only saw in models in adverts for expensive sports watches. But for me, seeing someone who looked like that, I couldn't get out of my head the thought, 'I bet she'd look at you like you'd murdered someone if you suggested phoning for a pizza and watching *MasterChef*'.

'She could crack a man's skull like a walnut with those legs,' Rob mused.

'Relax, you're happily married,' I reminded.

'Define happily. And anyway, I'm allowed to objectively observe that she's moving like she's in a smutty music video by some anonymous dance act.'

'What do you mean "define happily?"'

Rob didn't answer my question; he was miming a series of gestures to the Spin Siren pointing to her, and then at his crotch, or rather the seat it was rested on, establishing that she wanted to use the chest press next after we were finished. Getting up to go, he towelled down the seat and sneaked the weight up again, this time by another forty kilos.

'Come on, let's do some cardio,' he said.

As we walked across the gym Rob stretched his arms and expanded his chest when we crossed paths with his new gym buddy. 'Phew! Helluva way to get the blood pumping on a Sunday morning!' he said as we passed. Sizing Rob up, she smiled back at him.

I smiled and was glad that I'd shifted the weight setting on the press to its lowest level just as we'd walked away.

Side by side on the treadmills, we began a brisk jog, which shifted down quite quickly to a slow jog. At this pace we could keep going without sounding like heavy breathing dirty phone callers — although I suspect we were being overtaken by the couple of red-faced older ladies speed-walking on the aisle next to us. Rob was uncharacteristically quiet, which for more than ten years had been the sign he was waiting for me to ask him if he had a problem. Which he would then deny before discussing in some detail.

'So,' I said, 'things OK at the minute for you and Hannah?'

'Sport, admiring a broad with an arse that could launch ships in the gym on a Sunday morning does not make for a marriage in crisis. And anyway, you've seen what Hannah gets like in here when the pilates guy walks by...'

'I haven't been to the gym with Hannah since she got told off by the manager because her staring was disrupting the rugby team's conditioning training.'

'Tight shorts on a big man do get her a bit primal.'

'As if I wouldn't normally feel awkward showering with the ruggie team, being lectured by an eighteen-stone athlete about how he has a PhD in social studies and doesn't appreciate being treated like a piece of meat by "my missus" didn't really help.'

We jogged on for a minute or two, glancing across the silent large-screen TVs distracting people from the boredom of exercising by showing soap omnibuses, and cheap, showy ads offering to buy unwanted cheap, showy jewellery. Usually we tended to spend a lot of time looking at the financial news channel, grunting at news of the rises and falls of shares we didn't own, and complaining about decisions by the Fed that we didn't even begin to understand.

'We've been having a few...spats lately,' Rob dropped in.

'Just usual stuff for us old married types. You swinging young singles probably wouldn't understand.'

The 'wise old marrieds' was a regular routine for Hannah and Rob, going back to the time they scandalised us all when we were still students by getting hitched. Barely nineteen, and having only known each other for three months, they took me, and Hannah's best friend at the time — I can't even remember her name — to Manchester Town Hall. It was a Thursday morning in December, and we were bunking off our last lectures of our first university term. I've still got a photo of us arriving at the grand Victorian steps of the building, me and the bridesmaid in almost-matching duffle coats and standard-issue DMs. Rob freezing in the damp Manchester cold in his loudest lime-green bowling shirt and bluest turned-up Levi's. Hannah was in a short scarlet charity-shop cocktail dress that was probably just a fraction too small for her, oozing second-hand glamour from her head to her knees. Below the knees she was still wearing the tartan Converse high-tops Rob had bought her at the end of their first weekend together.

In a cavernous council hall, in front of row upon row of empty polyester-covered chairs, they nervously giggled their way through a ten-minute ceremony, Hannah discreetly slapping away Rob's hand while he tried to pinch her arse as the officious civil servant read a standard text on the solemnity of the vows they were taking. Hannah's friend and I shuffled anxiously behind them, feeling as if any minute someone would come in and stop the whole thing, and tell us off for being naughty. But nobody came in. Rob made a surreptitious fart noise at the point when everything paused to see if there were any objections to the marriage, which sparked more suppressed giggles for a couple of minutes, but then it was done. They were married.

A council official played the CD provided by the couple to mark the close of the ceremony — 'It's the End of the World as We Know It' by REM — and Rob and Hannah snogged and danced around for three minutes while I worried about the noise in a place where people were working. Then Hannah gave the registrar a big hug to say thank you, and we went to the student union to get pissed, and show anyone we knew — and many people we didn't — the finest alternative wedding rings that the student craft market could provide. The afternoon passed in a blur of booze and congratulations, the four of us being cheered and bought drinks by strangers. After a wedding dinner of Abdul's kebabs we went to an end-of-term indie night for what would be the evening reception. In the few months we'd been at university, Rob and Hannah seemed to have got to know everyone and were circulating sharing their news between rushes to the dance floor for their favourite songs.

Caught up in the romance and the all-day drinking, I remember I tried to get off with Hannah's friend — Andrea! That was her name — but spent the next three hours talking about her boyfriend back home instead. She was worried he would think she'd changed too much since she'd gone to university, now she was drinking pints, and into indie and dance music instead of the chart stuff they'd both liked when they were kids — six months ago.

At the end of the evening Hannah charmed the DJ until he played their REM song again and, through a cloud of beer-mat confetti, Rob carried her in his arms to a cab, taking them back to halls for their first night together as a married couple. Then I walked Andrea home, reassuring her that 'her Matt' would still love her even though she wore boots instead of trainers, and was experimenting with dark, alternative-looking eyeliner.

From then on, the subject of the marriage was one that would come up regularly amongst our friends, and the consensus was that really they'd been quite immature and irresponsible actually.

While Rob and Hannah were off in the flashy married couple's accommodation they'd swung from the uni, assembled under-twenties would shake their heads sadly and say that they'd regret the decision when they were older and wanted to get married to their true life partners, starting out with a divorce already on their records.

They were also depriving themselves of the opportunity to really enjoy the university experience by tying themselves down, we'd concur as we sat dragging out a pint in an old man's pub with an out-of-order pool table. But, as far as I could tell, all the rationalising was hiding the fact we'd have been too terrified to even think of doing something similar. The rest of us broke out in a cold sweat at the idea of explaining to our mums we'd got spontaneously married to a girl we barely knew.

I knew I was a bit jealous too. While outwardly toeing the party line that the grand old age of twenty-eight would be the right time to think about settling down to marriage, the idea of finding the person of your dreams at such a young age and being able to take on the world together seemed incredibly exciting and romantic — too many American sitcoms at an impressionable age, I imagine. From when I was fourteen I don't think there was ever anyone that I fancied where I didn't spend a lot of time daydreaming about how we'd be an old married couple together. If I couldn't see that happening, I'd lose interest in them pretty soon. Oh, all the carefree short-lived sexual adventures I missed out on because of my overly idealised notions of love and relationships...

OK, there were none, but there might have been if I'd tried harder.

Rob and Hannah, with all the drama of big rows, threats of divorce, occasional drunken dalliances with strangers at parties, and emotional reconciliations that followed on from their big day at the town hall, had done what I wished I had the guts, and the opportunity, to do.

And here we were more than a decade later, Rob and I. Him still married, me, still a bit jealous and idealistic.

'What kind of spats?' I asked.

'It's the kids thing. I don't think she's going to shift on it.'

'You don't think a bit more time?'

'We've been having this conversation for how long now? Three years? She's getting more stubborn on it, not less. She doesn't want them, she never has. And I knew all this when I signed up, she reminds me. Which is a frigging stupid thing to say. When I "signed up", as she puts it, she was vehemently certain the future of rock and roll was Ocean Colour Scene. She managed to change her mind on that.'

Rob stabbed the panel on his treadmill and upped his running pace to a point where breathing, never mind talking, was a challenge, but male pride meant I had to try and catch up. I accelerated and was soon matching pace for pace, which meant he went faster. So I went faster again, until we were both virtually sprinting. I managed a nod to the old ladies next to us, who looked back sympathetically at the wheezy young man having a hot flush.

As suddenly as he had started, Rob finished his sprint, thumping the stop button and levitating himself off the track with his arms. I hit stop too, but just slumped on the control panel as the mill slowed down, face resting on the cold plastic while the rubber under me dragged my feet backwards.

'You know the main thing though, sport?' asked Rob, closer to being his peppy usual self, as we trudged back to the changing-room showers. 'I have a terrible responsibility now. Like the noble red Indian...'

'Native American,' I corrected.

'Right, Tonto. Like the noble native American indigenous tribesman and casino magnate, I believe that saving someone's life makes you responsible for protecting it in the future. And so I have to redouble our efforts to find the woman to make your life worth living. Or at least get you laid.'

'You know, I'm still not sure about this,' I told Rob as we battered life back into our limbs in the showers. 'I tell you, I could be getting a lot of stuff done if I just avoided situations that leave me hugging myself in a foetal position of shame and embarrassment.'

‘Bollocks to that. The last thing anyone wants to see is you taking up knitting as a hobby. The only way to get you out of that foetal position is to get you into some more erotic ones. Oh, hi, Darren.’

Darren, one of the big body builders, spun on his heel and decided perhaps he’d wait for his shower until he got home.

‘But what if I’ve had all my luck? What if I’ve had my one grand affair and my destiny now is to go on alone?’

‘Destiny? Luck? I don’t need to get the tarot cards out to know that that’s double bollocks. Scraping the bottom there, sport, when you should be out there grabbing them,’ Rob said as we headed to the lockers to get dressed.

‘No, you’re our baby now. And if I can prove to Hannah we can look after you, maybe she’ll think we could manage a real one, which would probably involve less puking and high-pitched crying. So stay by your phone because once I get home we’ll be getting stuck into the next phase of the project to get you sorted. Unless Hannah’s decided there’s nothing more arousing than a man still glistening and pumped from a hard physical workout — see you later, Tom, bye — and can be convinced to go for another set of twenty reps. But let’s work on one miracle at a time.’

We finished getting dressed and wearily grabbed our bags, heading for the exit. As we opened the door into the lobby the muffled throb of motivational dance music got louder and we edged past a group of fitness instructors and regulars working on timetables for their chosen methods of torturing themselves. Out in the surprising cold of the car park, Rob pulled up.

‘I’ve forgotten something. You go on ahead. I’ll call you later. Remember, stand by your phone.’

I wandered on, not paying much attention, distracted as I was by my phone. A text message from Delphine.

Maybe things were looking up.

Chapter Five

Alex is such a bastard. I'm so stupid. :-)

In case the message itself weren't enough, the emoticon let me know that Delphine was not happy this Sunday morning. But what other significance did the message have? I'd spent the walk home pondering what it might have meant, and how I would reply. It was terrible when someone you knew and liked was so obviously unhappy, and going through a difficult emotional time. But hey, the upside was she was telling me about it.

My stomach got a jitter of excitement at the thought I might be the person she turned to at these times. It crossed my mind that I should let Rob and Hannah know what was going on — this fell into their responsibilities under our wager after all. But they had their own stuff to deal with, and I thought it'd be cool if, as they slaved away trying to find the right person for me, I could turn around and say, actually, I've got myself sorted, thanks. So let me buy you that dinner and let's crack open the champagne and toast my gorgeous, interestingly angst-ridden, extraordinarily bendy, French girlfriend.

But just maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, I thought. It was eleven o'clock by the time I got home, meaning the message had come in thirty-five minutes ago. I had to reply quickly now to be sure the window of opportunity didn't close.

You're not stupid! Are you OK?

I hadn't exactly managed to hone the one hundred and forty characters that'd solve all her problems and make her fall into my arms in one text, but I figured this would be just the start. An opening move in text chess, and I'm a grandmaster. I poured a big bowl of chocolate Shreddies®, made an oversized mug of tea, and switched on the *Cheers* marathon on the comedy channel as I settled down and waited for the next move. I felt the buzz through the arm of the sofa as my mobile vibrated and beeped to say I had a new message.

I am not OK and he's a bastard. And I AM Stupid

Yes! I thought to myself, we have a live situation here. Now I can make her feel better, and wow her with what a sympathetic young man I am. I muted the TV so I could concentrate on my replies without the benefit of the laughter of a live studio audience.

Right. All the thickoes I know are bilingual...

Within seconds of my reply going out, another message came right back in.

If I'm so smart how come I let him make me feel so unhappy? Why is it me always bending over on my back for him?

I think this was one of those times when an idiom hadn't quite been mastered. But what if it was intentional? My fingers flew over a response.

Now there's an image. ;-)

I hesitated slightly as I entered the characters for a winking emoticon, and my hand hovered over the send button. Was this what had become of me? Was I really a person who used little smiley faces in saucy texts? But what else could I do with a remark like that? An exclamation mark would have seemed too excitable, and just dots might have left it ambiguous on whether I thought it was a nice image. Did the text itself make me look like a seedy pervert? Maybe so, but the smiley bracket meant I was at least a friendly one.

I held my breath and sent the message — and that was why I loved the invention of the mobile phone. I couldn't say something like that to someone in real life. Being mildly flirtatious never seemed to work so well if you had to repeat yourself because you were mumbling slightly, and were blushing uncontrollably because you'd paid someone a compliment. God forbid, they might actually think that you 'like' them.

Minutes passed, and I watched the silent TV as I fretted. Sam Malone, the bar owner, was chatting up twin college students while the posh barmaid looked on despairingly at his behaviour. Had I gone too far? Been too tacky? Perhaps I should send another message, explaining that, despite the impression given by my comments, I wasn't objectifying her by thinking about her in heels and lingerie leaning seductively over a giant bed like an *FHM* cover girl.

Although now, of course, I was.

On the TV, Sam returned to the bar to collect drinks for the two young women and was being looked upon with awe by Norm and Cliff the postman from their usual barstools. A wink and a wisecrack and he was back to the table with the early eighties' hotties, while I was left waiting with a mildly suggestive text message hanging in the air. I checked my outbox to be sure that it actually went. It did, six minutes ago.

Oh, God, I thought, she's been looking for words of consolation from a friend when she's genuinely upset about the conduct of a man she might actually love, and I've been acting like a leering chimp. While Sam was taking a phone call, Cliff had approached the two young students and was making a clumsy play, trying to look cool in his postie uniform with the trousers slightly too short for him. All he got for his troubles was a derisory laugh from the girls and a clip around the head from barmaid Carla. It was no less than us half-witted buffoons deserved.

Then my phone beeped.

Oi! Cheeky!! :-p. He's just come in to collect his shoes, he's spending the whole day watching football at the pub with his stupid mates :-)

I thought I'd got away with it.

Choosing to leave you to go out to watch 22 sweaty men spit and scratch themselves in high definition? Madness!

Sam cruised back to the girls, who finished their drinks and they all left the bar together. As I waited to hear what Delphine had to say next, I pondered what my own next message should be — in text chess you've got to be thinking several moves ahead. I was thinking that now I'd highlighted some of Alex's faults as a putative boyfriend, I should probably lay off him to not look bitter. I did think about mentioning the fact he was wearing the same stinky socks two days in a row, and was probably using her toothbrush, but that looked a bit petty.

No, I decided my next move should be to raise the prospect that she could be doing something more fun with her Sunday afternoons than hanging around at home while the bloke she'd been expecting to see got pissed.

Then, next week in the office I could casually mention the cinema listings in the *Metro* during a coffee break, and get an idea if there was something she'd like to see. That day I could go by myself to see the latest nihilistic psychodrama with subtitles the French seemed to watch for fun, and maybe send a text on my way home saying whether it was any good or not.

After that, I'd just need to keep a track of the film listings in *Time Out* to monitor whenever there was a Gallic Despair season on at the Everyman. Then, the next time she was looking for textual sympathy because she'd been let down by a spotty oik, I'd be able to leap in and suggest we forget about him and cheer ourselves up with Canal Plus's latest romantic comedy about the suicidal paraplegic and the bi-polar single mother.

From there it was just a matter of casually suggesting we grab a bite at a hot new tapas bar afterwards and getting sufficiently drunk on San Miguel to suggest we do it again some time on a proper date. Our superficial office-based friendship would then be out there in the real world.

Checkmate in a few simple moves.

I jumped as my mobile beeped at me again:

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