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Strictly Between Us

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Strictly Between Us

JANE FALLON



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PART ONE

I

‘I should get going,’ Patrick says. I’m hardly going to argue.

I pull my red hoody on. Zip it up. Cross my arms to form a barrier.

Patrick is adjusting his clothing too. We are both looking everywhere but at each other. To be honest I can’t get him out of the flat fast enough. He’s fumbling about with his shoes and I have to stop myself from leaning over and helping him tie his laces. Keeping my distance is probably a good idea at this point.

‘Michelle . . .’ He stops himself, but the word hangs there like a flag fluttering in the breeze.

‘Of course.’

I should explain. Michelle is my best friend. Has been for twenty-odd years. More even. Twenty-five. Patrick is her husband.

And what just happened was a terrible mistake.

For the sake of my own sanity I have decided I am going to make a Bill Clinton-esque distinction. ‘I did not have sex with that man.’ Yes, there were tongues and hands and heavy breathing involved. Clothing rearranged. Sound effects worthy of a cheap porno. OK, so I had sex with him. But, thankfully we stopped short. Came to our senses before we – technically – went all the way. It’s not much of a consolation, but at the moment it’s all I’ve got.

Pretty much the worst thing I could ever do, I think you'll agree.

But it's not how it sounds. Actually, if you look at the bare facts I suppose it is. Strictly speaking it happened. It's just that it wasn't meant to. I didn't set out to do it and, I'm fairly certain, neither did he. There was no big seduction, no making eyes across their distressed oak kitchen table the last time I spent the evening round at theirs and Michelle turned away to pour us both another glass of wine.

It's not like I've ever even thought about it. Never had a guilty fantasy that left me unable to look Michelle in the eye the next day. Not since before they met anyway. It simply didn't occur to me to view Patrick in that way. He was – is – my best friend's husband, end of story. And yet here we are, at a quarter past seven on a mundane work-day Tuesday evening, entwined on my cream sofa with bits of my clothing where they shouldn't be, and I'm trying to make sense of what just occurred. But my mind is fogged by the wine I've drunk and the enormity of what just happened.

'Shit,' I say.

'I know,' Patrick mutters. Who says the art of conversation is dead?

I feel as if I should say something profound, but I can't find the words that would be adequate for the momentousness of the occasion. I want to tell him this isn't like me, I'm not the kind of person who would ever do what we have just done, but apparently that's exactly who I am now. I'm that woman. So I keep quiet. Wait. Maybe he can make some sense of it.

On the scale of how meaningful things are, this rates higher than the day I set up my own production company. Or when I first got Ron, my rescue fox terrier/Jack Russell/something-hairy cross (who I now notice is sitting in a corner of the room staring at me judgementally, his big sad eyes letting me know that I've let him down in a hundred more ways than even I can imagine). Or the time one of the shows my company makes got nominated for an award. OK, so it was for Best Sound Editing, which is hardly prestigious, and the awards were the Television Technical Awards, which no one has ever heard of, and in the end it didn't even win, but still, that was a good day in the office.

Today will not go down in history as such a good day.

I feel the need to explain myself. To go back to the beginning and try to put into words how I ended up here. I know I started out with good intentions – which is the story of my life, by the way. I meant well. Michelle needed my help and I have never not been there to help her. At least I thought she needed my help. Maybe that was my first mistake. Lesson One: leave well alone. You really don't need to interfere, to take over and try to sort out someone else's life for them.

But that's the way it's always been. I'm the decisive one, the doer. Michelle is more easy-going. She's happy for me to take charge.

I'm completely aware that my need to create order in other people's lives is some kind of diversion from the fact that my own personal life is chaotic, to say the least. It's the waving handkerchief that's meant to ensure you

don't notice the magician is palming your card. I've left a string of disastrous relationships in my wake. Sometimes it's me, sometimes it's them. Actually, technically, it's always me because I could avoid the bad ones if I wanted to, but convincing me of the merits of that would be like trying to persuade a heroin addict that he would be better off having a nice cup of tea.

Nothing I have ever done comes close to this though. I've never been a husband-stealer. Not my worst enemy's, let alone my best friend's.

'You won't tell her, will you?' I turn back to Patrick who half raises an eyebrow at me.

'No. Of course not,' he says and I breathe a small sigh of relief, although I didn't really think he was going to suggest Face Timing her right now and staging a re-enactment.

Anyway, back to my attempt to justify the unjustifiable. Here goes.

Give me a chance.

At least hear me out.

Let me fill in the basics first. Don't worry, I'm not going to bore you with my whole life history or the long drawn-out story of my immediate family (happy, nuclear, youngest of three, just in case you're interested). I'll stick to the essentials. My name is Tamsin Elizabeth Fordham, I'm a thirty-eight-year-old executive producer and co-founder of a small and not particularly glamorous TV company, mortgage-holder of a two-bedroom flat in Belsize Park, owner of a small dog, all my own teeth.

Castle Productions specializes in afternoon property shows. Long-running series where people buy houses. We produce various versions: about-to-be-divorcees having to look for two homes for the price of their one; newlyweds wanting their first nest; one where we help find both a house and a job for would-be relocators. It's basically the same programme with a slight tweak here and there. They're very popular and extremely cheap to make. Consequently we are doing well. Financially that is. We're hardly setting the arts world alight.

In context you can see why we were all so excited about the Best Sound Editing nomination. Some companies have an award shelf in their meeting room. A shrine to their success. We don't even have a meeting room. Usually we all cram into one of our offices. If there are more than six people involved we go to the pub next door.

There are two of us who run the place. Me and my partner Ian. Ian used to be my boss, and we set up together about four years ago. It works. We get on well, but not so well that we feel the need to intertwine our lives too much outside of the office. Ian is married with five kids, and he and his wife Fiona always invite me to the big events but, thankfully, are completely understanding whenever I decline. I'm not very good with all that happy-families stuff.

Then there's Anne Marie, who looks after the business side of things – the contracts and the accounts, all the fun bits. She's a bit older, early sixties, and she takes care of us all whether we like it or not. She's a big baker (I blame Paul Hollywood) and most days she brings in trays of biscuits or cupcakes that she's rustled up the night before. Which is very sweet. No one ever eats them, though. Not because we're all watching our weight, but because they're usually rock hard and taste of little more than burnt sugar. I've wondered before if she has a side business as a dentist and she's just trying to drum up trade.

There are three assistants. Lucy, who works for Ian, is a bit of a stropmy cow but he likes her efficiency. Watching her organize paper clips on her desk I always feel she would have made a great Nazi officer. There's Ashley, who sits at the reception desk but also does all the general stuff – answers the phones and does admin for Anne Marie. She's . . . I don't know, she's one of the few people in the world I have absolutely no opinion of. She's not been with us long, seems to be doing OK. She hasn't done anything to piss me off yet, anyway.

And then there's my right-hand woman, Bea. I love

Bea. I have absolutely no idea what I would do without Bea. I would marry Bea if she were a man. Actually, I'd marry her anyway if she'd have me.

And that's it. That's our little work family.

Our headquarters in trendy but cheap West London oasis Brook Green consist of two floors above a shop selling vintage home furnishings. Reception, where Ashley sits behind a desk opposite a sofa and two chairs, a smaller room housing Bea and Lucy, and the kitchen on the first floor. An office each for Ian, Anne Marie and myself on the second. Loo on the landing.

We are small but perfectly formed.

Outside of work it's just me and Ron – through choice I should add. The day that I realized I was earning enough to be able to kick my lodger out of the spare room was right up there with nomination day. I am what they call 'selectively single' at the moment. Every now and then I stick a toe back in the water, sign up for some dating site or other and spend a few miserable nights out before deciding I am better off as I am.

One of these days I guess I'd like to meet someone and settle down, get a house and a girlfriend for Ron. But I'm not in any rush. I'm definitely not going to plump for any old person just for the sake of having a partner. And as for kids, forget it. They have never been on my radar.

Michelle, on the other hand, has been struck down with a serious case of broody-itis for years. When she and Patrick got married she could hardly wait to get pregnant (doing it the other way round would have been as alien to Michelle as putting her socks on over her shoes). But

Patrick wanted to wait. They had all the time in the world, he said. They should focus on their careers for a few years, give themselves a solid foundation.

‘What’s the point of having kids and not being able to provide for them?’ he said when the subject came up at dinner one night.

‘Or you can provide for them but you never see them because you’re working all hours to try and get yourself established at work?’

Michelle shrugged. ‘We’d work it out.’

I tried to stay neutral. Patrick was having none of that, though.

‘Tamsin knows I’m making sense. Don’t you?’ He turned to me and I muttered incoherently into my forkful of mashed potato.

‘I just don’t want to leave it too late, that’s all,’ Michelle said.

‘You’re thirty-six!’ Patrick said exasperatedly. This was a couple of years ago. ‘Women are having babies when they’re fifty now.’

I snorted into my drink and even Michelle laughed. ‘Name me one woman who’s had a baby at fifty.’

‘What do you mean, name one? Of course I can’t name one. But I’ve read about it.’

‘Ah!’ I said, relieved the conversation was about to take a lighter tone. ‘Patrick’s been reading the *Sport* again. MIRACLE BABY BORN TO POST-MENOPAUSAL WOMAN.’

‘WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO OWN GRANDCHILD,’ Michelle said, and we both dissolved into fits.

‘OK, OK. Point taken. Maybe not fifty.’

‘I just don’t want to leave it late and then find out it’s

not straightforward, that's all,' Michelle said, serious again as she spooned more broccoli onto my plate despite my holding up a hand to say I didn't want it. 'What if it takes me ages to get pregnant once we start trying . . . ?'

Patrick put a hand over hers. 'We won't leave it too late, I promise. Just not quite yet.'

Now, though, Michelle's broodiness has reached critical mass. She feels as if the clock is ticking fast. Mostly because she wants to have at least three. Patrick is blissfully unaware of this fact.

Michelle and I met on the bus home from school. I'd seen her around, of course. We were in the same year but different forms, so we only crossed over in Maths, where we both languished in the lowest but one stream. We'd never spoken, though. In retrospect I realized she was shy. At the time I think I thought she was a bit of a goody-goody so I just didn't bother.

Anyway, I was on the bus home one afternoon. Michelle was sitting a few seats in front of me, head in a book as always. A couple of girls from the year above were sat behind her, messing about, being loud. I recognized them and, if I'm being totally honest, I was a bit scared of one of them – Lisa – because she was known to be something of a psycho. So I kept my head down, pretended to be engrossed in my geography homework.

After a couple of minutes they went a bit quiet and that made me look up. Psycho Lisa was wielding a pair of nail scissors and she had hold of one of Michelle's blonde plaits. She was sawing through it doggedly. At first I thought Michelle hadn't noticed so, I'm ashamed to admit,

I decided the best thing to do was to pretend it wasn't happening. But then I noticed a red flush creeping up the back of her neck. She knew exactly what they were doing, she was just too scared to say anything.

I'd love to say I stormed over, confronted Lisa and her henchman and they broke down and said sorry, promising never to bully anyone ever again. Of course I didn't, I was as frightened of them as Michelle clearly was, and I didn't want them turning their attentions on to me. Instead I got up, rang the bell, breezed up the bus as nonchalantly as I could, gurning a big smile, and slapped Michelle on the shoulder matily.

'Hey!'

The sawing stopped – I was sure only momentarily – and I could feel Lisa's mad-cow eyes boring into me, but I kept my gaze firmly on the prize and didn't even acknowledge that I'd seen her.

'I'm getting off here and going into town, want to come? There's a sale at Warehouse apparently.'

I practically hauled her out of her seat and along the aisle to the stairs before she could say anything like, 'Who the hell are you?' To be fair, I kind of knew that, given the choice between getting off the bus and pursuing her prey – which would have meant walking – or being dropped off at the stop right in front of her house, Lisa was always going to go for the option of least exertion. She wasn't known (only behind her back, of course) as Lumpy Lisa for nothing.

'You saved my life.' Michelle gave me a look that I imagine a puppy might give you when you've pulled it up from the depths of a deep dark well, where it has been

quietly starving for a week. I think I became instantly addicted to that look, I won't lie. It was like the crack of the looks world.

'They're just stupid,' I said, embarrassed at being elevated to hero status so quickly. 'You don't have to come to Warehouse with me, by the way. I don't even know if there really is a sale on . . .'

But Michelle had already linked her arm through mine. 'Let's go and have a look anyway. I'll buy you a Coke to say thanks.'

And the rest, as they say, is history.