

Unsticky

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Extract

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chapter one

‘I just don’t love you,’ he said.

It was the most brutal dumping Grace had ever had. And she’d had a few.

But if Grace was being honest with herself, which didn’t happen often, then it wasn’t a complete surprise. She’d seen the light gradually dim in Liam’s eyes like a torch with dying batteries. He’d begun to look at her in this bemused way, as if the actual dating was a major letdown after the months they’d spent skirting around each other and snogging furiously as they waited for the night bus. He’d even stopped holding her hand when they crossed the street, so Grace didn’t need to be a cartographer to read the signs: being dumped was inevitable.

But she’d never expected it to happen on her birthday. In Liberty’s. Right by the new season’s Marc Jacobs bags.

‘You’re finishing with me?’ Grace clarified, her voice metronome-steady. ‘On my birthday?’

Finally Liam found the balls to look her in the eyes, before his gaze skittered away to rest on the tomato-red, outsized Hobo she’d been admiring before he turned up and crunched the day under his tatty Converse.

Grace should have known better than to arrive at Liberty’s all quivery and expectant that maybe, just maybe, Liam had finally got his shit together and was going to buy her some serious designer real estate as a birthday present. She wasn’t

picky; she'd have settled for a key fob or a marked-down hairslide.

'I wasn't going to split up with you. Not today, anyway. But then, I don't know . . . I just saw you standing there and I couldn't hold it in any longer,' Liam said heavily, shoulders slumping under his leather jacket. It was too hot for leather jackets even if you were a wannabe indie rock star in your very wildest dreams.

Grace had often wanted to tell Liam that writing whiny mope-rock anthems for teenage boys to listen to in their breaks from wanking and GCSE revision wasn't something to aspire to, and now she watched with satisfaction as little beads of sweat sprang up on Liam's pretty face even though it was cool and closeted in Liberty's. That was one of the reasons why it was Grace's happy place. There was something civilised and genteel about the thick wood panelling that hushed the merciless, hurrying world outside. Well, that and the rail upon rail of pretty frocks, the spindly shoes that looked too delicate to walk in and the beauty hall where she wanted her ashes scattered when she died. Except Liam had just gone and trashed her happy place as well as ruining her birthday.

'Why? Why are you splitting up with me? Should I mention that it's my birthday again, or is that getting boring? Jesus, Liam, what is wrong with you?' Grace's voice was slowly edging towards the red end of the dial marked 'hysterical', but really – extenuating circumstances.

Liam gingerly touched her arm as he gnawed on his pouty bottom lip because she was making this harder than he'd expected. Generally, Grace was the kind of girl he could leave in a corner and not have to worry too much about.

'Gracie, c'mon,' he said helplessly, running a hand through dirty-blond hair, his eyes shutting tight. 'I was going to wait a few days, but it all just got too much. Things aren't good between us, y'know?'

‘Is it something I did?’ Grace asked, taking pity on him and scrabbling in her bag for her Miu Miu shades to shield her accusatory glare. ‘What did I do wrong?’

‘You didn’t do anything wrong. We just don’t fit.’ For the greatest undiscovered singer/songwriter of his generation, Liam was being annoyingly vague. Grace could see he was searching wildly for an excuse. ‘Your hair,’ he mumbled finally. ‘I don’t think you should have dyed it black.’

‘You’re splitting up with me because of my *hair*?’

They both knew that it had only five per cent to do with Grace’s hasty decision to go from honey blond to blue black after watching a series of Bettie Page shorts at a Burlesque all-dayer. It was meant to have signalled a new, edgier Grace but it had just made her look peaky and stained her Cath Kidston towels.

‘No,’ Liam prevaricated. ‘Yes – I don’t know. Look, we can still go out tonight and hook up or whatever, but I just don’t think we’re heading anywhere serious, so what’s the point of pretending any more? But I got you a card – here.’ He proffered a creased pink envelope like it was all done and they could just move along because there was nothing to see here. She was good for a ‘hook-up or whatever’, but she was never going to make his heart go pitter-patter.

‘You’re an arsehole,’ she hissed, voice quivering with the threat of tears. ‘You could have picked any other day and cobbled together some lame excuse but instead you do it now, *here*, and you don’t even have the decency to be screwing someone behind my back.’

‘Don’t make a scene, Gracie . . .’ Liam said in a shocked whisper.

‘I’ll make a bloody scene if I want to.’

Liam was shuffling his feet like he was about to bolt but Grace wasn’t done with him yet. Not when she could shove him square in the chest with two puny fists because he really, really deserved it. Liam rocked back on his heels, arms

pin-wheeling to keep his balance, and knocked the Marc Jacobs bag off its Perspex plinth.

It tottered for one terrible second before dangling forlornly from its security chain and setting off a shrieking alarm, which would have made Grace clamp her hands over her ears if she wasn't hunting in her pockets for a ratty tissue. She could feel her mascara slowly descending as tears began to trickle down each cheek.

'You want a reason for me to break up with you?' Liam snarled, deigning to lower his head so he could get all up in Grace's face. '*This* is a reason to dump you. You can be so fucking embarrassing.'

After that pithy summing-up, he gave the hapless Marc Jacobs bag a vicious punch before stalking away.

Grace carefully rubbed her thumbs under her sunglasses, not surprised that they came away streaked with black gunk as a bevy of shop assistants hurried over. Usually, Liberty's staff could be relied upon to be discreet yet friendly. Not like in Harvey Nicks where they called her 'Madam' in a condescending manner as she fingered dresses that she couldn't possibly afford. Mind you, they didn't seem quite so friendly now.

Grace had been dumped, seen her boss taking the new, suck-up intern out for coffee and had had an email from her mother, all of which added up to make the worst birthday ever. Being barred for life from Liberty's would put the icing on the cake. A mythical cake though, because no one back in the office had any plans to take her to Patisserie Valerie this afternoon.

She swallowed hard to dispel the sob that was rising up her throat. But the next one and the one after that were all cued up and Grace's frantic gulps made her start coughing and spluttering and—

'Stop crying,' someone behind her said sharply. 'You'll make everything worse.' The voice had an arm, which curved

around Grace's shoulders and ushered her towards the exit. Both his tone and grip left no room for resistance. 'Let's get out of here before they have you tried for crimes against expensive handbags.'

There were feet too, in highly polished brown brogues. Still coughing, Grace watched them walk alongside her scuffed ballet flats as she was steered past the flower stall and towards Regent Street. Her bag was banging against her hip with every step and this was just ridiculous – letting herself be frogmarched out of Liberty's, eyes watering now rather than tearing, by some nameless, faceless man who was cutting a swathe through the jostling crowds as if he was going into battle. Grace slowed down as a prelude to dodging into the oncoming traffic to escape but was propelled forward by a decisive hand.

As he delivered her safely to the other side of Regent Street, Grace ground to a halt and tugged on his sleeve. 'I'm all right now, thank you,' she said, sniffing to get rid of the snot – she'd never felt so gross and disgusting as she did at that moment.

She glanced up then, because curiosity trumped tear-streaked vanity every time. He had a thin, clever face that was all angles, blue eyes creasing up against the glare of the sun slanting between the buildings; lips quirked in something that wasn't quite a smile. Dark-blond hair peaked into little tufts that rippled in the slight breeze. It was easier to focus on his suit: cream, summer-weight wool by Dries Van Noten if Grace wasn't mistaken. And Grace never was when it came to matters of fashion.

'You don't look all right,' he noted crisply in etched-glass, public-school English. 'You look as if you need a drink.'

He was old-fashioned looking, Grace decided. Not just the suit, which made him look as though he should be taking the air in one of those fifties movies set on the French Riviera, but as if he was the second male lead in one of those same films. Not matinee-idol handsome enough to get the girl, but

good enough to be the best friend of the one who got the girl. Or the arch nemesis of the one who got the girl, who had his comeuppance ten minutes before the end credits began to roll.

Also, he was old. Or *older*. Late thirties, early forties, which made this whole situation even weirder than it already was.

‘Look, I’m really sorry about causing a scene and thank you for getting me out of there, but I’m OK now. Really.’

‘Where shall we go?’ he mused, looking around. ‘Which street are we on?’

‘Conduit, and I can’t—’ But she could – for the simple reason that his arm was back around her shoulders and he was setting off with a long-limbed stride so she had to scurry to keep up or get dragged underfoot. ‘I have to get back to work,’ she panted. ‘My boss gets really pissy if I take longer than an hour for lunch.’

‘Really? He sounds very tiresome.’

‘He’s a she,’ Grace corrected him as she struggled to keep up with his long-limbed stride. She was being abducted, not to mention manhandled, in broad daylight, and wasn’t fighting or fighting. In fact, she was even glancing in the window of Moschino as she hurried past, but obviously the shock of being dumped and now being kidnapped had made her cognitive thought processes misfire.

‘Come on, chop chop,’ the man said, pulling Grace round one corner and then another until he came to a halt outside an unmarked black door and started tapping a security code into the keypad. The fight or flight part of Grace’s brain was finally firing up and telling her to run screaming for the hills or to the nearest police station. She took a tentative step to the right but his hand, which was still on her shoulder, tightened. ‘Through here,’ he said.

There was a buzzing sound and the man slowly pushed the door open and Grace was ushered over the threshold into a dark space, walls painted a rich ruby red, polished wood

under her feet and a large set of doors slightly ajar to the right. No way was she going any further than right here where she stood, unless it was back out the way she'd come in.

Someone was walking towards her, a smiling woman in a ruffly black dress and pinny, which brought to mind Laura Ashley – if she'd ever had a Goth period. 'Good to see you again, sir,' she said to the man standing behind Grace. 'Are you here for lunch?'

'Just drinks, I think. Maybe afternoon tea,' he said, finally taking his hand off Grace's shoulder and stepping forward. His sleeve brushed Grace's arm and she flinched.

The front door finally shut with a soft but decisive thud so she had the sensation that she was cocooned in this dark red place, where people only talked in low, soothing tones as if anything louder wouldn't be tolerated. It was strangely comforting and suddenly, inexplicably, Grace started to cry again.

Or cry properly, because the tears in Liberty's had just been the warm-up act and this was the main event. Being abducted had been a great diversion, but it was still her birthday and she'd still just been dumped and her life was still sucking beyond all measure. Grace felt her chest shuddering, and then the sobs that she'd managed to mute down ten minutes before were back for their encore presentation. They sounded like death rattles as they ricocheted off the walls.

'Oh dear,' the man said softly, cupping Grace's elbow and steering her carefully down the corridor, the black-clad, ruffly woman bringing up the rear. 'I'm sure he's not worth crying over. Magda will take you somewhere to get your tear ducts under control, while I order you a glass of champagne.'

Grace shrugged, or would have, if her shoulders weren't heaving, and let herself be led through a small side door and up a narrow, curving staircase. The place was like a very red, very twisty rabbit warren. 'Bathroom's through there,' she was told in that same modulated murmur.

Diving for the nearest stall, Grace sank down on the loo so she could finally, properly, get her weep on.

The attendant averted her eyes as Grace emerged, as if she hadn't heard the muffled howling coming from the cubicle, and dabbed furiously at the shiny chrome taps as Grace washed her hands and stared despondently at her reflection in the mirror. There were dirty grey rivulets running down her cheeks, which she scrubbed away before evaluating the raw material carefully, a tube of tinted moisturiser poised and at the ready.

Parts of her face Grace liked, other parts not so much. She liked that her eyes were grey, a dark, school-uniform grey that couldn't be mistaken for blue or green or hazel, and framed by long lashes so close-edged that she always looked as if she hadn't taken off her eyeliner the night before. There were freckles, the bane of her teenage years, but which she now hoped made her look younger, and a mouth that drooped downwards, even when she was smiling. Her grandmother had constantly told her to stop pouting when she was little but actually the sulking had paid off in the permanent jut of her lower lip.

But Grace's nose was too pronounced to be excused, especially in profile where it looked alarmingly Roman; her forehead wore a deep furrow right between her brows and her chin was in a state of confusion between square and pointed.

It wasn't a face that anyone could get lost in. It was a face that needed a splash of red on the lips, a little animation to give it some distinction. Right now, it would have to settle for some light base coverage, more mascara and a dab of berry lip-stain.

'That's better,' he said when Grace arrived at his table. She'd been all ready to make a dash for the front door, but there had been another smiling, murmuring woman stationed at the foot of the stairs to guide her into the room behind the big

doors Grace had glimpsed before. The promised glass of champagne was waiting for her, along with her bossy abductor. He prodded the cleft in his chin with one long finger as she sat down with her knees tightly pressed together, back straight.

When she'd dressed this morning, Grace had been delighted with the bold seventies' floral graphic on her tunic dress. It was the perfect outfit for grubbing around all day in the fashion cupboard before spending the night crawling from one barstool to another. Now it clashed with the orange velvet of her over-stuffed armchair and made Grace feel less like she was working the Pucci revival and more like she'd failed the auditions to become a C-fucking-Beebies presenter.

'I really have to go back to work,' she muttered, glancing out of the window, almost unable to believe that there was a normal London street outside and not Munchkin Land. His amused smile, as if Grace was a performing seal with a beach ball balanced on her nose, was beginning to grate on her already frayed nerves.

'Don't be so silly,' he said lightly, as if going back to work was an alien concept. 'Drink your champagne.'

Grace decided to stay but only because she didn't want to struggle out of the sinking embrace of the chair like a demented Jack-in-the-box. Besides, she really did need a drink.

'I'm Grace,' she said, her voice sounding rusty as if she hadn't used it for weeks. He gravely shook the hand she was holding out, his fingers warm, brushing against her palm just long enough that she snatched her hand back.

'Vaughn,' he offered, before turning back to the menu.

'Is that your first name or your last name?'

He shrugged. 'Does it matter?'

It didn't really. Grace raised her glass in silent thanks before taking a sip. The bubbles, light and effervescent, evaporated on her tongue as she took three good swallows.

'I have no idea what *fleur de sel* or *grue nougatine* are,'

he remarked conversationally as he looked at a menu. 'Do you?'

'*Fleur de sel* is just a fancy kind of sea salt and *grue* are pieces of roasted cocoa beans – don't know about the *nougatine* though. I like baking,' she added defensively as one of his eyebrows arched up because second male leads always had voluble eyebrows.

'Shall we just have chocolate cake instead? And tea. We should definitely have tea. But not Earl Grey, it's too watery. Darjeeling?'

Grace instinctively knew that there was no point in arguing. 'Darjeeling's fine,' she said, picking up her glass again.

All he had to do was raise a finger, quietly and unobtrusively, to have the waitress breaking the world speed record and start scribbling away his order for four different kinds of chocolate cake.

Grace crossed her legs as the waitress scurried away. The champagne was fizzing its way down to her empty stomach, making her restless enough to jiggle her ankle and wonder what, exactly, she was doing here making stilted conversation in a polite voice that didn't sound as if it belonged to her. Her stilted conversation was all used up now anyway, so Grace looked around her.

They were sitting in a room which seemed to have been imported straight from the kind of crumbling country manor that the BBC used for period dramas. There were mismatched chairs, some upholstered, some hardbacked, gathered around scratched and scarred but deeply polished tables, yet the whole effect shrieked money rather than genteel poverty. Maybe that was down to the clientèle. Grace glanced at the last stragglers from the lunch setting as they lingered over coffee and brandy as if they had all the time in the world and no recession to worry about. Nothing to worry about at all, in fact. Grace's gaze came to rest on Liam's crumpled pink envelope lying on

the table and she couldn't help the tiny but heartfelt sigh that leaked out of her mouth.

'I'm glad that you're not crying any more,' Vaughn said, with one of those not-quite smiles. 'If you cry on your birthday then you cry every day for the rest of the year.'

'My grandmother used to tell me that too,' she confided with a not-quite smile of her own. 'Also, that it was bad luck to put new shoes on a table.'

'I think our grandmothers must have been related. Mine was quite evangelical about the dangers of chewing too fast.' It was freaky how he managed to affect such ease while pinning her down with that intent blue stare. 'So, how old are you today?'

'Twenty-three.'

When he smiled properly, Grace got an echo of what he could be. Younger, handsomer; someone that she'd get a totally inappropriate older-man crush on because he smiled as if Grace was the only other person in the world who got the joke. 'And on the twenty-third of July? That's very propitious. Did you know the number twenty-three is meant to have mystical qualities? There are twenty-three letters in the Greek alphabet, twenty-three seconds for blood to circulate around the body . . .'

'David Beckham was number twenty-three when he played for Real Madrid.' Great. Now she was talking utter shite. 'Not that it ended well for him.'

'Twenty-three is a good number,' Vaughn said emphatically, as a teapot and delicate doll-sized cups and saucers were reverently placed in front of them. 'This is going to be a very interesting year for you, I can tell.'

'Was twenty-three an interesting year for you?'

'Yes,' he said shortly. 'Will you pour? Milk, two sugars.'

Grace lifted the teapot and tested its heft before she carefully poured tea, added milk to the exact colour of a pair of American tan tights and dropped in two spoonfuls of

sugar. ‘Do people always do what you tell them to?’ she asked, before her courage exited stage left. ‘People never do what I tell them to.’

Vaughn peered critically at the cup she pushed towards him, then obviously decided that it met his exacting standards. ‘By people, you mean your ex?’

She considered the question. ‘Not just Liam. Everyone. People just push right past me like I’m not even there.’ She shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not usually like this. I mean, I’m not so mopey. I guess I’ve got a bad case of the birthday blues.’

‘You just haven’t learned how to make people take you seriously yet,’ Vaughn said lightly, leaning forward. ‘I find not saying please or thank you helps.’

‘I’m genetically programmed to say please and thank you even when I’m not pleased or thankful.’ And not to rest her elbows on the table or put the milk in first or any of the other life lessons she’d had drummed into her under the pain of death of her grandmother’s most disapproving look. No weapon forged could defeat *that*. ‘So, do you make a habit of abducting young women from department stores?’

‘I was wondering when you were going to ask me that.’

‘Well, I should probably have asked during the abduction but I was too freaked out,’ Grace said just a little snottily, so Vaughn would know that she had some backbone.

‘Anyway, I wonder if I could ask you for a small favour?’

The way he cut right across anything Grace said was annoying. Not as annoying as the sudden lightbulb moment that *this* . . . the being taken for tea and cakes and awkward chit-chat . . . had some sinister ulterior motive, which probably involved schoolgirl outfits, whips, and possibly a wife with lesbian tendencies while he filmed the whole shebang.

Grace dragged herself out of the voluminous depths of the chair as their cakes arrived. Which was a pity because the

milk-chocolate tart looked deadly. ‘I’m going,’ she announced icily. Well, it had sounded icy in her head; the reality was a little more sullen. ‘I know *exactly* what kind of favour you’re talking about and the answer’s no. A world of no.’

Vaughn flashed her a smile, which was bordering on a smirk. Grace was starting to dislike him in the way that she disliked Kiki, her boss, and Mrs Beattie, her landlord, and Dan, Liam’s best friend, and a whole cavalcade of other people who looked at her with that same blend of sneering condescension. ‘Be a good girl and sit down,’ he said calmly. ‘Haven’t you caused enough scenes for one day?’

‘Just who do you think you—’

‘I saw you in Liberty’s and decided that you were the sort of person who’d know her way around a French cuff.’ He was already pulling a small, dark purple box out of his pocket as Grace snapped her mouth shut so quickly that she bit her tongue. ‘I lost one of my favourite cufflinks this morning, popped out to buy some new ones and I think the least you can do after I’ve bought you a glass of champagne is help me attach them.’

Grace sank back down in an ungainly sprawl. ‘How did you fix your cufflinks this morning then?’ she asked suspiciously, because there was probably still a wife lurking.

‘Ineptly,’ Vaughn explained, holding up one hand so she could see an untethered shirtcuff. ‘I’d be for ever in your debt.’

Grace risked an eye roll as she snatched up the Liberty’s box and made a vague gesture in the direction of his arm. Vaughn lowered his eyes contritely, which Grace didn’t find remotely convincing, as she slipped the pair of Paul Smith cufflinks, which were the same blue as her favourite denim mini she’d lost at Glastonbury the year before, neatly out of the box. Then she took his hand.

It was a strangely intimate moment. Grace scraped her chair forwards and awkwardly patted her knee so Vaughn could rest his hand on it while she gathered up the excess

sleeve. She'd done things, countless things with countless boys under cover of darkness, then conveniently forgotten about them the next morning, but now, with her head lowered, Vaughn's pulse thudding steadily against her fingers, she could feel a blush staining her cheeks.

She did not have a father fixation. Or a thing for older men. Or the need for a strong paternal signifier. She was not that sad kind of cliché. No, she was just a girl having a bad day who'd drunk a glass of champagne on an empty stomach.

'All done,' Grace said crisply, pushing Vaughn's other hand away. He had beautiful hands – long-boned and elegant as if they spent most of their time conducting symphonies with lots of complicated arpeggios in them or performing delicate surgery on previously no-go parts of the brain. Though he had very knobbly wrists. 'I really have to get back to work,' she told him now, 'or they'll think I've been kidnapped.'

'Would you like a cake to take back with you?'

She really, really would. But . . . 'No, thank you,' she said primly, standing up.

Cutting her nose off to spite her face was a vocation with Grace. And she suspected that Vaughn knew it too, by the wry twist of his lips as he paused to admire his gleaming cufflinks. 'Well, I hope you enjoy what's left of your birthday,' he said, like he really couldn't care one way or another.

And now, Grace wasn't walking away but hanging back, the hem of her tunic catching against the arm of his chair. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you,' she blurted out. 'I'm sorry.'

'Another reason why people take me seriously is because I never apologise even when – no, *especially* when I should,' he told her coolly. 'No pleases, thank-yous or sorries – remember that and you might have that interesting year I was talking about.'

It seemed like the right time for a brisk handshake, but when Grace extended her hand, Vaughn bent his head and

kissed it. It was a proper kiss, brief and warm, that made her pull her hand away with a grunted goodbye.

Grace took her bag, hurried through the room and down the long, red corridor until she was out on the street. She stood there for a moment to get her bearings. If she could feel the pavement under her feet and smell the exhaust fumes, then she wasn't dreaming. Through the big picture window, she could see Vaughn's tufty head bent over his plate of chocolate cakes. She hoped that he fell into a fatal sugar coma right there.

Vaughn suddenly looked up to catch her staring at him. He held her gaze until Grace felt the need to raise her hand in a limp wave. Vaughn didn't wave back, but kept on looking at her as if he was taking an inventory until it suddenly occurred to Grace that she could simply walk away.

Though she tried to ignore it, the place where his lips had touched tingled for the rest of the afternoon.