

Rumour Has It

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Published by Headline Review

Extract

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First published in 2009
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 2817 8 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7553 2818 5 (trade paperback)

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed in the UK by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette Livre UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

Chapter 1

How weird that you could push open your front door and know in an instant that something was wrong.

Tilly stopped in the doorway, her hand fumbling for the light switch. Back from work at six o'clock on a cold Thursday evening in February, there was no reason to believe that anything should be different.

But it was, she could feel it. She could *tell*.

Flick went the light switch, on came the light. So much for spooky sixth sense; the reason opening the door had felt different was because the hall carpet had gone.

The hall *carpet*? Had Gavin spilled something on it? Mystified, her heels clacking on the bare floorboards, Tilly headed for the living room.

What was going on? She gazed around the room, taking everything – or rather the lack of everything – in. OK, they'd either been targeted by extremely picky burglars or . . .

He'd left the letter propped up on the mantelpiece. Gavin was nothing if not predictable. He had probably consulted some etiquette guru: Dear Miss Prim, I'm planning on leaving my

girlfriend without a word of warning – how should I go about explaining to her what I’ve done?

To which Miss Prim would have replied: Dear Gavin, Oh dear, poor you! In a situation such as this, the correct method is to convey the necessary information in a handwritten letter – not in an email and *please* not in a text message! – and leave it in the centre of the mantelpiece where it can’t be missed.

Because, in all honesty, what other reason could there be? Tilly conducted a rapid inventory. Why else would the DVD recorder – hers – still be there, but the TV – his – be missing? Why else would three-quarters of the DVDs be gone (war films, sci-fi and the like), leaving only the slushy make-you-cry films and romantic comedies? Why else would the coffee table given to them by Gavin’s mother have vanished while the—

‘Tilly? Coo-eee! Only me!’

Damn, she hadn’t shut the door properly. And now Babs from across the landing was doing her exaggerated tiptoeing thing as if that made barging into someone else’s flat somehow acceptable.

‘Hello, Babs.’ Tilly turned; maybe Babs had a message for her from Gavin. Or maybe he’d asked her to pop round and check that she was *all right*. ‘Did you want to borrow some tea bags?’

‘No thanks, petal, I’ve tea bags coming out of my ears. I just wanted to see how you’re doing. Oh, you poor thing, and there was me thinking the two of you were so happy together . . . I had no idea!’ Bright green earrings jangled as Babs shook her head, overcome with emotion. ‘Love’s young dream, that’s what Desmond and I used to call you. Bless your heart, and all this time you’ve been bottling it up. I wish you could’ve told me, you know I’m always happy to listen.’

Happy to listen? Babs *lived* to listen to other people’s woes. Gossip was her middle name, her number one hobby. Then again,

you couldn't dislike her; she was a good-hearted, well-meaning soul, in an avid, meddling kind of way.

'I would have told you,' said Tilly. 'If I'd known.'

'Oh my GOOD LORD.' Babs let out a high-pitched shriek of disbelief. 'You mean . . . ?'

'Gavin's done a runner. Well,' Tilly reached for the letter on the mantelpiece, 'either that or he's been kidnapped.'

'Except when I saw him loading his belongings into the rental van this afternoon he didn't have any kidnappers with him.' Her expression sympathetic, Babs said, 'Only his mam and dad.'

The commuter-packed train from Paddington pulled into Roxborough station the following evening. It was Friday, it was seven fifteen and everyone was going home.

Except me, I'm escaping mine.

And there was Erin, waiting on the platform, bundled up against the cold in a bright pink coat and waving madly as she spotted Tilly through the window.

Just the sight of her made Tilly feel better. She couldn't imagine not having Erin as her best friend. Ten years ago when she had been deciding whether to do her degree course at Liverpool or Exeter, she could have chosen Liverpool and it would never have happened. But she'd gone for Exeter instead – something about the seaside feel to it and possibly the fact that a friend of a friend had happened to mention that there were loads of fit boys at Exeter – and there had been Erin, in the room next to hers in the halls of residence. The two of them had hit it off from day one, the platonic equivalent of love at first sight. It was weird to think that if she'd gone to Liverpool instead – where there would surely have been hordes of equally fit boys – she would have a completely different best

friend, a tall skinny triathlete, say, called Monica. God, imagine *that*.

‘Oof.’ Erin gasped as Tilly’s hug knocked the air from her lungs. ‘What’s this in aid of?’

‘I’m glad you aren’t a triathlete called Monica.’

‘Blimey, you and me both.’ Shuddering at the thought, Erin tucked her arm through Tilly’s. ‘Come on, you. Let’s get home. I’ve made sticky toffee pudding.’

‘You see?’ Tilly beamed. ‘Monica would never say that. She’d say, “Why don’t we go out for a nice ten-mile run, that’ll cheer us up!”’

Erin’s flat, as quirky and higgledy-piggledy as the properties that lined Roxborough’s High Street, was a one-bedroomed affair situated on the first floor above the shop she’d been running as a dress exchange for the last seven years. Working in a shop hadn’t been her dream career when she’d graduated from Exeter with a first-class degree in French, but Erin’s plans to work in Paris as a translator had been dashed the month after her twenty-first birthday when her mother had suffered a stroke. Overnight, Maggie Morrison had been transformed from a bright, bubbly antiques dealer into a fragile, forgetful shadow of her former self. Devastated, Erin had given up the dream job in Paris and moved back to Roxborough to nurse her mother. A complete ignoramus where antiques were concerned, she converted the shop into an upmarket dress exchange and did her best to combine caring for Maggie with keeping the business afloat.

Three years after the first stroke, a second one took Maggie’s life. Grief mingled with relief which in turn engendered more guilt-fuelled grief, but this was when the inhabitants of Roxborough had come into their own. Having always intended to move back to Paris once the unthinkable had happened, Erin

realised she no longer wanted to. Roxborough, an ancient market town in the centre of the Cotswolds, was a wonderful place to live. The people were caring and supportive, there was real community spirit and the business was doing well. This was where she was happy and loved, so why move away?

And now, almost four years on, Erin had even more reason to be happy with her decision to stay. But she wouldn't tell Tilly yet, not while she was still reeling from Gavin's disappearing act. That would definitely be insensitive.

Although it had to be said, Tilly didn't seem to be reeling too badly. It had come as a shock, of course it had, but discovering that her live-in boyfriend had moved out appeared to have left her surprised rather than distraught.

'I phoned him this afternoon,' Tilly said now, between spoonfuls of sticky toffee pudding. 'Honestly, you wouldn't believe it. He couldn't face telling me in person in case I cried, so doing a bunk was the only thing he could think of. He's moved back in with his parents and he's sorry, but he just didn't feel we were going anywhere. So he left!' She shook her head in disbelief. 'Which leaves me stuck with a flat there's no way I can afford on one salary, and I can't even advertise for a flatmate because there's only one bedroom. I mean, talk about selfish!'

'Would you have cried? If he'd told you face to face?'

'What? God, I don't know. Maybe.'

'*Maybe?* If you're madly in love with someone and they dump you, you're supposed to cry.' Erin licked her spoon and pointed it at Tilly. 'You're supposed to cry buckets.'

Tilly looked defensive. 'Not necessarily. I could be heartbroken on the inside.'

'Buckets,' repeated Erin. 'Which makes me think you're not actually that heartbroken at all. In fact, you might actually be quite

relieved Gavin's gone. Because secretly, deep down, you *wanted* him to finish with you because you couldn't bring yourself to do the deed yourself.'

Tilly flushed and said nothing.

'Ha! See? I'm right, aren't I?' Erin let out a crow of delight. 'It's Mickey Nolan all over again. You really liked him to begin with, then it all got a bit boring and you didn't know how to chuck him without hurting his feelings. So you did that whole distancing yourself thing until he realised the relationship had run out of steam. And Darren Shaw,' she suddenly remembered. 'You did the same with him. You feel guilty about finishing with boyfriends so you force them to finish with you. I can't believe I never spotted it before.'

It was a light bulb moment. 'You could be right,' Tilly admitted.

'I *am* right!'

'Did I ever tell you about Jamie Dalston?'

'No. Why, did you do it to him too?'

'No, we went out for a couple of weeks when I was fifteen. Then I realised he was a bit weird so I dumped him.' Tilly paused, gazing into the fire as she dredged up long-forgotten memories. 'That was when it started getting awkward, because Jamie didn't want to be dumped. He used to phone the house all the time, and walk up and down our road. If I went out, he'd follow me. Then, when it was my birthday he sent me some quite expensive jewellery. My mum took it round to his mum's and the police got involved. I don't know exactly what happened but I think he'd stolen the money to buy the jewellery. Anyway, his family moved away a couple of weeks later and I never saw him again, but it frightened the living daylights out of me. And reading in the papers about ex-boyfriends turning into stalkers always creeps me out. I suppose that's why I'd rather let the other person

do the dumping. That way, they're less likely to stalk you afterwards.'

'So you are actually quite glad Gavin's gone,' said Erin.

'Well, it wasn't working out. He was so set in his ways. I did feel kind of trapped,' Tilly confessed. 'But his mother kept telling me what a catch he was and I didn't have the heart to say, "Yes, but couldn't he be a bit less boring?"'

'But you moved into the flat with him,' Erin pointed out. 'Was he boring from the word go?'

'That's just it! I don't know! I think he probably was, but he hid it well. He definitely didn't tell me he belonged to a model aeroplane club until after I'd moved in,' said Tilly. 'And he completely forgot to mention the bell-ringing. Oh God, I'm so ashamed. How could I have gone out with someone for six months and not known they were a secret bell-ringer?'

'Come on,' Erin's tone was consoling as she put the empty pudding bowls on the coffee table and stood up. 'It's stopped raining. Let's go to the pub.'

Chapter 2

The joy of living at one end of Roxborough High Street was that the Lazy Fox was situated at the other end of it, far enough away for you not to need earplugs at home if they were having one of their karaoke evenings but close enough to stagger back after a good night. Tilly enjoyed the atmosphere in the pub, the mix of customers and the cheerful staff. She loved the way Declan the landlord, upon hearing her just-been-chucked story from Erin, said easily, ‘Fellow must be mad. Come and live in Roxborough. Fresh country air and plenty of cider – that’ll put hairs on your chest.’

Tilly grinned. ‘Thanks, but I’m a townie.’

‘Damn cheek. This is a town!’

‘She means London,’ said Erin.

‘That’s a terrible place to live.’ Declan shook his head. ‘We’re much nicer.’

‘I’ve got a job up there,’ Tilly explained.

He looked suitably impressed. ‘Oh, a *job*. Prime Minister? Director General of the BBC?’

Erin gave his hand a smack. ‘Declan, leave her alone.’

‘Our newspapers have proper news,’ Tilly riposted, entertained

by his sarkiness and poking at the copy of the *Roxborough Gazette* he'd been reading between customers. 'What's that on your front page? Cow falls through cattle grid? On your front page!'

'Ah, but isn't it great that we aren't awash with terrorists and murderers?' Declan winked at her. 'That's why I like it here. And I lived in London for thirty years.'

'What happened to the cow anyway?' Tilly leaned across but he whisked the newspaper away.

'Oh no, anyone who laughs at our headlines doesn't get to find out how the stories turn out. Was the cow winched to safety by the fire brigade, lifted up out of the grid like a parachutist on rewind? Or was it left dangling there to die a horrible death? Now that's what I call a *moo*-ving tale . . .'

Declan relented as they were leaving two hours later, folding the *Gazette* and slipping it into Tilly's green and gold leather shoulder bag. 'There you go, you can read the rest yourself. It may not be the *Evening Standard* but our paper has its own charm, you know. In fact in some ways it's *udderly* compelling.'

The awful thing was, after three pints of cider Tilly secretly found this funny. Somehow she managed to keep a straight face.

'So that's why you were drummed out of London. For making bad puns.'

'Got it in one, girl. And I'm glad they did. In fact,' said Declan, 'I'll be for-heifer grateful.'

Once outside on the street, closing time hunger pangs struck and they were forced to head up the road to the fish and chip shop. While they waited to be served, Tilly unfolded the paper and read that the cow – a pretty black and white Friesian called Mabel – had indeed been winched to safety by the Roxborough fire brigade and reunited with her calf, Ralph. Ahh, well that was good to hear. Better than a lingering death with its legs

dangling through the grid and poor baby Ralph mooing piteously . . .

‘Oh sorry, one haddock and chips, please, and one cod and chips.’

Back out on the pavement, Tilly greedily unwrapped the steaming hot parcel and tore off her first hunk of batter.

‘Mm, *mmm*.’

‘I’m going to save mine until we get home,’ said Erin.

‘You can’t! That’s what old people do! Fish and chips taste a million times better in the open air.’

‘I’m twenty-eight,’ Erin said happily. ‘I’m knocking on. And so are you.’

‘Cheek!’ Outraged, Tilly threw a chip at her. ‘I’m not old, I’m a spring chicken.’

A couple of teenage boys, crossing the street, snorted and nudged each other. Tilly heard one of them murmur, ‘In her dreams.’

‘For heaven’s sake!’ Indignantly Tilly spread her arms. ‘Why is everyone having a go at me tonight? Twenty-eight isn’t geriatric. I’m in my prime!’

The other boy grinned. ‘In two years’ time you’ll be thirty. *That’s* geriatric.’

‘I can do anything you can do,’ Tilly said heatedly. ‘Pipsqueak.’

‘Go on then, try peeing up against that wall.’

Damn, she hated smart kids.

‘Or do *this*,’ called out the first boy, taking a run-up and effortlessly leapfrogging the fixed, dome-topped litter bin just down from the chip shop.

Oh yes, this was more like it. Peeing up against walls might be problematic but leapfrog was practically her specialist subject. On the minus side she was wearing a fairly short skirt, but on the plus side it was nice and stretchy. Dumping her parcel of fish and

chips in Erin's arms, Tilly took a run up and launched herself at the bin.

Vaulting it went without a hitch; she sailed balletically over the top like Olga Korbut. It was when she landed that it all went horribly wrong. Honestly, though, what were the chances of your left foot landing on the very chip you'd earlier thrown at your best friend after she'd called you old?

'EEEEYYYYYAAA!' Tilly let out a shriek as her left leg scooted off at an angle and her arms went windmilling through the air. She heard Erin call out in horror, 'Mind the—' a millisecond before she cannoned into the side of the parked car.

Ouch, it might have broken her fall but it still hurt. Splattered against it like a cartoon character, Tilly belatedly noticed that it was an incredibly clean and glossy car.

'Hey!' yelled an unamused male voice from some way up the street.

Well, it had been incredibly clean and glossy up until five seconds ago. Peeling herself away from the car, Tilly saw the marks her fish-and-chip greasy fingers had left on the passenger door, the front wing and the formerly immaculate side window. With the sleeve of her jacket she attempted to clean off the worst of the smears. The male voice behind her, sounding more annoyed than ever, shouted out, 'Have you scratched my paint-work?'

'No I haven't, and you shouldn't have been parked there anyway. It's double yellows.' Glancing over her shoulder and checking he was too far away to catch her, Tilly retrieved her fish and chips from Erin, then did what any self-respecting 28-year-old would do and legged it down the road.

'It's OK,' panted Erin, 'he's not chasing us.'

They slowed to a dawdle and Tilly carried on eating her chips.

As they made their way together along the wet pavement she said, 'Lucky there was no one around to take a photo. In a place like this, getting greasy fingers on a clean car could've made the front page of next week's *Gazette*.'

'You know, Declan's right. You'd like it here.' Erin, who was still saving her own chips, pinched one of Tilly's. 'If you wanted to give it a go, you can stay with me for as long as you like.'

Tilly was touched by the offer but knew she couldn't. During the years of nursing her mother, Erin had slept on the sofa in the living room while Maggie occupied the only bedroom. It hadn't been ideal by any means. She knew how claustrophobic Erin had found it. Coming down for the weekend and staying for a couple of nights was fine, but the flat was small and anything more would be unfair.

They'd reached the bottom of the High Street. All they had to do now was cross the road and they'd be home. Still greedily stuffing chips into her mouth, Tilly waited next to Erin for a bus to trundle past, followed by a gleaming black car—

'You sod!' Tilly shrieked as the car splashed through a puddle at the kerbside, sending a great wave of icy water over her skirt and legs. Leaping back – *too late* – she glimpsed a flash of white teeth as the figure in the driver's seat grinned and raised a hand in mock apology before accelerating away.

'It was him, wasn't it?' Shuddering as the icy water soaked through her opaque tights, Tilly hugged her bag of fish and chips for warmth. 'The one who yelled at me.'

'It's the same car,' Erin confirmed. 'Some kind of Jag.'

'Bastard, he did that on purpose.' But she was inwardly impressed. 'Quite clever though.'

Erin gave her an odd look. 'Clever how?'

Tilly pointed at Erin's unsullied cream coat, then at her own

soaked-through skirt and tights. ‘The way he managed to avoid you and only get me.’

The next morning Tilly woke up on the sofa with a dry mouth, cold legs and the duvet on the floor. It was ten o’clock and Erin had tiptoed past her an hour ago in order to head downstairs and open the shop. Later Tilly would join her for a while before taking off for a wander around Roxborough, but for now she would enjoy being lazy and spend a bit of time wondering what to do with the rest of her life.

Tilly made herself a mug of tea and a plate of toast before hauling the duvet back on to the sofa and crawling under it. Next she switched on the TV, then rummaged through her bag for her phone, to see if there were any messages on it. No, none, not even from Gavin. Which was just as well really, because the last thing she needed was for him to start having second thoughts and regretting his decision.

Plumping up the pillows and taking a sip of tea, Tilly pulled the *Roxborough Gazette* out of her bag and smoothed out the creases where it had been scrunched up. The cow story still made her smile.

She leafed through the paper and learned that two sets of twins had been born to women living in the same street. Now how was that not a front-page newsflash? There was a piece about a tractor auction – be still, my beating heart – and a whole page devoted to a charity bazaar at Roxborough Comprehensive. Tilly flicked past photos of wedding couples, an article about an overhanging tree branch that could be really quite dangerous if it snapped off and landed on someone’s head, and another about a bus breaking down in Scarratt’s Lane, causing the road to be blocked for – gasp! – three and a half hours. There was even a photograph of the

broken-down bus with offloaded passengers standing alongside it looking suitably downcast, apart from one lad of about five who was grinning from ear to ear.

Actually, it was quite sweet. The worst thing that appeared to have happened in Roxborough in the last week was that a man had collapsed and died while digging up potatoes in his allotment, but he'd been ninety-three so what did he expect? Sipping her tea, Tilly turned the page and came across the jobs section. Garage mechanic required, washer-upper needed in a restaurant, bar staff wanted for the Castle Hotel, lollipop lady required for the crossing outside the infants' school. She skimmed through the rest of the list – office work . . . taxi driver . . . cleaner . . . gardener . . . hmm, that could be the widow of the 93-year-old needing the rest of her potatoes dug up.

Tilly's attention was caught by a small box ad at the bottom of the page.

Girl Friday, fun job, country house, £200 pw.

That was it, brief and to the point. Tilly wondered what fun job meant; after all, some people might call Chancellor of the Exchequer a fun job. John McCririck might regard working as his personal slave a fun job. Or it could be something dodgy like entertaining slimy businessmen.

She took a bite of toast, turned over the page and began reading the articles for sale – a size eighteen Pronuptia wedding dress, never worn . . . an acoustic guitar, vgc apart from toothmarks on the bottom . . . fifty-nine-piece dinner service (one plate missing – thrown at lying, double-crossing ex-husband) . . . complete set of *Star Trek* DVDs: reason for sale, getting married to non-Trekkie . . .

Tilly smiled again; even the ads had a quirky charm all their own. Finishing her toast, she scooted through the Lonely Hearts

column – male, 63, seeks younger woman, must love sprouts – then the houses for sale, all of them out of her league financially, then the boring sports pages at the back.

She reached the end, then found herself turning back to the page with *that* advert on it.

Almost as if it was beckoning to her, calling her name.

Which was ridiculous, because it didn't even say what the job involved and the money was rubbish, but a quick phone call to find out wouldn't do any harm, would it?

Scooping up her mobile, Tilly pressed out the number and listened to it ringing at the other end.

'Hello,' intoned an automated voice, 'please leave your message after the . . . ?'

'Tone,' Tilly prompted helpfully, but the voice didn't oblige. All she got was silence, no more voice, no tone, nothing. The answer-phone was full.

Oh well, that was that. Whoever had placed the ad had been inundated with calls and was beating potential employees off with a stick. It was probably a vacancy for a topless waitress anyway.

Better get up instead.