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Written by Katy Regan

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KATY REGAN

How We Met

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PROLOGUE

August 2006

Ibiza

Outside the bar, the silence rings in my head; like the delayed echo of a lone guitar string. The air is warm and gluey and smells of sea salt and those flowers again – they’re everywhere you go. Cancan skirts of frothy pink blooms.

I kick off my shoes and, carrying them, take the stone steps down to the sand. It’s still warm and sugar-soft after another baking day. Behind me, I can still hear the throb of the music. Ba-doom! Boom! Faint laughter from further down the beach. Lasers streak the sky.

I’m walking quickly towards the sea now. The moon is high and fat as a pumpkin. It’s bleeding pearly light across the sky and across the water but there’s not much time left for it now, today will soon be gone. And then there’ll be tomorrow. Another brand-new day.

I don’t bother to take off my clothes at first, I just

wade straight in. The water's cool and delicious around my thighs, my stomach, my chest, and now I am swimming out, out towards the light.

And it's beautiful. So beautiful. The cool water; the black, silky sky. At either side of me, the cliffs rise up and glitter in the moonlight, like giant-sized precious stones. The water dances with a million needles of white light. It makes me think of music, of notes alive on paper, and every molecule of me tingles with pleasure, so much that I have to stop and catch my breath.

Push, glide, I am swimming beneath the water with every stroke now – like a mermaid. Except I'm not a mermaid because my white dress has ballooned around me so that I must look like a giant jellyfish, shifting and morphing, a glowing orb in the middle of the sea; alone but not lonely. Not wanting now. I'm swimming further out now, I slide the straps of my dress down and slip out of it, as if I'm shedding a skin. And suddenly I am totally free, the water caressing every inch of me, my dress floating alongside me, in my hand. I can still hear the throb of the music back on shore and when I put my head beneath the water, the b-dum-dum of my heart. I turn onto my back; I am floating, weightless. I imagine the stars are tiny pinprick holes, windows into another universe, a world where people are dancing and smiling too and don't know, don't care, where one day starts and another begins. And then they start to go off – the small explosions, deep in my belly, little bubbles of light working their way to my throat and out across my mouth and I make a mental note that this, THIS is what it tastes like. For the first time ever, I know this is it.

Life has brought me so much more than I ever

imagined. So much more than I ever thought possible. Friends I could *marry*, whom I'd die for. What did I do to deserve that? I imagine them now, dancing like those in the world above me; one great universe of dancing people and me, in the middle, dancing in the sea. I think of him back at the bar, hands pumping the air now. That grin across his face, the beautiful almond-shaped eyes. Lost in music. It makes me smile.

I swirl and tumble, feel the seaweed feather my skin. The moon is sending iridescent rays of light through the water; it's like electricity darting through my legs.

I should feel tiny out here but I don't, I feel bigger than ever, every last cell of me filled right up. I imagine the deep green bed beneath me, and the domed sky above, and imagine I am suspended, held in the centre of it all. A tiny being, spinning in orbit.

The music has stopped now, so it's just the sound of the waves and me and everything feels perfect. Everything feels right.

Above me, stars are going out, one by one. Night is giving way to day. Any time now, a brand-new day and I can't wait. I CAN'T WAIT.

THINGS TO DO BEFORE I AM THIRTY

1. Sleep with an exotic foreigner – (in an ideal world, Javier Bardem). Night of heady, all-consuming passion: getting lost, snogging amongst lemon groves and being drunk on something thick and hugely alcoholic that I can't pronounce.
(*Do this without becoming completely neurotic about what it's supposed to 'mean'.)
2. Learn to do SOME sort of dance: jive, tango, birdie . . .
Don't tell anyone am having classes then wow them at random event and watch as they go, 'Oh, my God, Liv, you didn't tell me!'
3. Learn a foreign language.
4. Learn how to make a Roman blind.
5. And the perfect Victoria sponge . . .
6. Read all works by William Wordsworth and be able to recite lines at will. (Not including 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'.)
7. Use up all seven Scrabble letters in one fell

- swoop! BUFFOON, for example, which would be great.
8. Go to Venice, properly this time, and have a bellini at Harry's Bar.
 9. French kiss in Central Park.
 10. Climb Great Wall of China and learn a bit of Chinese (should be able to do this whilst climbing the Great Wall).
 11. Vegas, baby!
 12. Live in Paris, listen to Edith Piaf, smoke Camels, drink pastis and have a torrid affair. Then leave, crying eyes out in Paris Gare du Nord.
 13. Learn how to pluck eyebrows so that they 'frame the face'.
 14. Swim naked in the sea at dawn.
 15. Get a six-pack (or at least a two-pack) Something better than the one-pack I currently sport.
 16. Learn how to meditate. To live in the moment.
 17. Have a massive party for my wonderful, wonderful friends. Just because . . .
 18. Learn how to use chopsticks. Asking for cutlery is getting embarrassing at twenty-seven.
 19. Go to airport, close eyes and pick a destination at random, then GO! Even if it's to Stuttgart or Birmingham.
 20. Make homemade porn video. Can't believe I just said that.
No really, I can't.

ONE

6 March 2008

Williamson's Park, Lancaster

Mia put the brake on the buggy, walked around the front and checked on Billy. Thank God for that, *finally* he was asleep. His fat little cheeks red with cold, a puddle of drool collected in his chin.

With any luck, she might have time for a cheeky half outside the Sun on the way back home. It was her best friend's birthday after all and, 'be rude not to, Woodhouse, be rude not to . . .' She knew what her best friend would have to say about that.

'Hi, Liv.'

Mia took off her rucksack, sat down on the bench and took in the view for a second, once again congratulating herself on finding this corker of a spot, Ashton Memorial white and gleaming in the sun, like a provincial version of the Taj Mahal. The whole of the city laid out below; the River Lune a snaking, silver ribbon through

the middle of it all and, in the distance, the Lakeland hills. She often thought they looked like big hairy mammoths from some ancient land.

She took the pint glass and bottle of water out of the rucksack and the tulips from the Morrisons bag. She set the glass down on the floor, poured in the water and tried to arrange the yellow flowers. She tutted at herself for not thinking to bring scissors, since the stalks were too long and so they didn't sit in the glass at all, but splayed all over the place, most of them toppling out onto the grass.

She leant back on the bench and looked at them.

'Well that looks shit, doesn't it?' Then she laughed, mainly at the predictability of it all. Where was Olivia Jenkins when you needed flowers arranging?

Mia moved right to the other end of the bench so she was nowhere near the buggy and took the packet of Golden Virginia and the Rizlas out of her jacket pocket. She pulled her hoodie over her knees – bloody hell it was freezing, why hadn't she worn a coat?

She was often doing this of late, already being out somewhere before realizing she was wearing completely inappropriate clothes for the weather. Last week, she'd looked down in the Post Office to see she was wearing odd shoes.

She rolled a cigarette, glanced at the back of the buggy, felt a slight tug of guilt but pressed on. 'Must press on!' as Olivia would say. Frankly, what with Billy's fascist policy regarding sleep lately (i.e. allowing her to have none, ever), it was either the odd fag to keep her sane, or adoption. Put like that, she felt much better and lit it.

‘So it’s your birthday today, Olivia Jenkins. Happy bloody Birthday.’

She blew the smoke up into the clear March sky, which seemed to hum, it was so cold.

‘Now, I know what you’re going to say. You should be ashamed of yourself, Mia Woodhouse, smoking now you’re supposed to be a responsible mother. But honestly, Liv, after the week I’ve had with David Blaine over there – the baby that resists sleep for so long, he should do a show so people could come and watch – you’d let me off. And actually I can now inform you with confidence . . .’ she inhaled enthusiastically . . . ‘this is what you would, at one time, have called a twenty-quid fag.’

She laughed, then began to cry when with no warning whatsoever – this was also happening more often of late – she had a sudden memory: Liv, lying on Fraser on the beach in Ibiza, topped by that ridiculous visor she’d insisted on wearing for the whole fortnight, so she looked like an OAP from Florida, coming out with just that: ‘Twenty-quid fag, this.’ A fag so good she’d pay twenty quid for it.

Everyone had laughed and laughed.

‘D’you remember how you always used to say that, Liv?’

‘Anyway, I’ve got news on that front.’ She pulled herself together. It could easily go one of two ways up here, especially when she was suffering from acute sleep deprivation and she wanted to keep it light and entertaining. It was Liv’s birthday, after all. ‘Fraser’s given up! Would you believe it? I’d be happy for him if he wasn’t so smug. Honestly, it’s *killing* me. The other day, he called me at seven a.m. – just as Billy had gone back off to sleep; I

could have murdered him had he not been two hundred and fifty miles away – to say, “Guess where I am? Go on, guess, guess!”

‘I was like, “Dunno, a police station? The zoo? Buckingham Palace?” And he was like, “No. Hampstead Heath.”

‘And so I said, “Oh, well done. So clearly you haven’t been to bed yet after some brilliant night out and are just ringing to nauseate me. That’s not very nice.” But *he* said, “No. I’m at Hampstead Heath Running Track.” Then he said it again, just in case I hadn’t heard: “RUN-NING TRACK. I’ve just been for a RUN.”

‘He didn’t sound very out of breath, which I pointed out, and then he hit me with it: “Ah, but then I wouldn’t be, would I? Because I’ve given up smoking. Three weeks, and five days!”

‘Which turned out to be the real reason he was calling me at that hour.’

‘Like I said, just unbearable. Horribly, horribly smug. It was all I could do not to be sick in a bag.’

‘So that’s Fraser.’

She looked around just to check she was alone. She had to admit, she did feel moronic on occasions, sitting here, talking to herself. But it was the only real place she had to come – a place that was Liv’s (unless she wanted to traipse all the way to the cemetery in Peterborough every month. She knew what Liv would have to say about that too.) She also knew, if this were the other way round, Olivia would have rallied the troops, weeks in advance, marched them all up that killer hill to Williamson’s Park, bringing cake, candles – probably a personal choir, knowing her. She could picture them all

now: Liv at the front carrying everything, Melody struggling behind in heels and a slightly too-tight skirt-suit, complaining that the cake was too chavvy, why didn't we get one from Marks's? Norm at the back, breaking into a light jog, Anna . . . Well, Anna probably wouldn't be there yet, having only left some random bloke's bed in Tooting about an hour ago, and finally Fraser – lovely Fraser Morgan . . . what would he be doing? Probably pegging it to the nearest offy, having decided right at the last minute that this occasion called for booze.

Mia thought of Fraser now, alone in his flat in Kentish Town – the one he used to share with Liv – and felt a rush of love. Poor Frase – she must give him a call as soon as she was finished up here, because today would be extra tough for him. She imagined him waking up, the date hitting him and then the aching absence of Liv in the flat and the memories, flooding back, more acute and painful than ever. It was at times like this that she wished Fraser would move back to Lancaster, just so she could keep an eye on him.

'So what else is new . . .?'

Mia pulled her sleeves down over her hands and blew on them to keep them warm. 'Oh, yes . . . Billy. My son. Almost forgot! He's almost eight months old now, I can't believe it, Liv. Where the hell has the time gone since July? I look back and I can't remember anything. Must have blanked it out. Anyway, the good news is, he hasn't got my bacon ears or prominent chin – yet . . . although it's hard to tell since currently his entire jaw line is covered in fat. The bad news is, he's got Eduardo's everything else. Literally, he is his double, which as you can imagine, I am seething about: same beautiful green eyes, same Brazilian monobrow, same permanent look of

wounded entitlement. I just hope to God he doesn't inherit total disrespect for women, too.

'Oh, Olivia, why didn't I listen to you when you said never trust a man who wears sunglasses inside?

'So, Eduardo has turned out to be a useless cock – no surprises there – although I suppose, in some part of my tiny pea-brain I did, at one point, think he might change. Sadly not. Since I've had Billy, he's seen him eight times. *Eight* times in nearly eight months! Pathetic or what . . .?'

Mia could feel the familiar rage bubbling up inside her, the sort that made her want to punch a wall – no, actually, just Eduardo's stupid, face; the maddening sense of injustice she always got when she thought about Eduardo. What really got her goat was that Eduardo was meant to be a summer fling, not the (useless-at-that) father of her child. She'd been seeing him for getting on a year by the time she fell pregnant, but Mia had always just thought he was 'good enough for now', that they'd eventually fizzle out. If she were really honest, she was kind of banking on that.

They rowed constantly for a start, but although she was ashamed to admit it now, part of her had thought that was cool and romantic. If she couldn't have a tumultuous, impulsive relationship with a hot-headed Latino in her twenties, when could she? She imagined them in one of those black-and-white foreign films she dreamed of writing one day, where nothing much happened except for two, very beautiful people shouting at each other in a spartan room in Provence or Andalucia or, well . . . somewhere very hot, anyway. It didn't quite translate into a flat in Acton that smelled permanently of ragù,

but then she'd got pregnant. If it had been up to her she would have had a termination, but Eduardo's Catholic upbringing had suddenly made an appearance. It made her feel guilty: It's a life, Mia, as soon as those cells start to divide. She'd fallen for it at the time, she thought he actually wanted this baby, that it might even bond them. Now she realised he was calling her bluff. Well that backfired pretty spectacularly.

'Anyway . . .' She told herself to rein it in. She'd promised herself this birthday visit to Liv's bench today was not just going to turn into a rant-athon about Eduardo but, look at her, she was at it already.

' . . . The thing is, whatever I think of him, he's still Billy's dad, isn't he? And I want Billy to have a relationship with his dad. It's just I'm not that sure his dad wants to have a relationship with him, which is the most heart-breaking thing of all, do you know what I mean?

'But hey, let's see, he's promised me he'll be here at five p.m. today to take Billy off for the night because everyone's arriving for YOUR do.

'Which brings me onto everyone. I guess you'll be wanting an update:

'One. Anna. You'll be glad to know everything is exactly as it was in Twelve Station Road days, Livs, except she's gone north of the river now and inflicts it on some other poor, unassuming flatmates in Islington. She still has dubious hygiene, walks round with toothpaste on her spots, picks plaque from her teeth when she thinks you're not looking and eats gherkins straight from the jar. And yet still scrubs up to look like Florence Welch – how is that?

'She still reads *The Economist* in bed, too – like we

were ever impressed – and I still maintain she hasn't got the faintest clue what it's on about, but we love Anna Spanner, she's good value. Oh, and she's still single, *obvs*.

'Who else? Melody and Norm . . . Well, it's all change in that camp, Melody having almost completed her total transformation from Indie mosher to hotshot lawyer (as you will know, Norm was far more impressed with the Indie mosher version). They're doing really well for themselves: Norm's 'Entertainment Correspondent' for the *Visitor* these days. I know! Get him. It pays peanuts, of course, and occasionally he has to go and cover groundbreaking front page stories about people turning a hundred, but the rest of the time he gets to go to free gigs, so he's not complaining. They've got a swanky, three-storey townhouse up on that posh estate by the university. Clearly, it's only a matter of time before all those rooms are filled up with mini-Normantons. Fraser reckons they'll have twins: a boy who looks like Melody and a girl who looks like Norm.

It's bizarre though, Liv, it's like Melody came back from travelling and Ibiza, started her law course and said, "Right, I want to be a grown-up now." The fags went, the drugs went – although you'll be pleased to know she still drinks inordinate amounts of cider. Nowadays, if you go round to theirs, it's like a beauty spa waiting room.

'She's got that room-fragrance, joss-stick thing going on – you can smell lily of the valley from half a mile away and everything's beige, sorry *stone*. And I do not just mean the house. Gone are the Arctic Monkeys and Green Day and the Foo Fighters, now it's Norah Jones all the way. Even I – musical Philistine – know you would not be impressed.

‘Oh, and she does these “Pampered Chef” parties now, sort of Tupperware parties but with kitchen implements where you’re forced to pay fifty quid for a garlic press. Norm’s still the same, thank God – he’s usually in some mild stage of intoxication to block it all out – but the “change” has already begun on him too. She’s started buying him clothes from places like Aquascutum and Gap (she calls it THE Gap) and so you’ve got Norm, 90s but cool with his lamb-chop sideburns in a chino and a moleskin jacket. Wrong, in so many ways.

‘Other than that, motherhood’s treating me well, even if it’s like living with a fascist dictator, and sometimes I actually catch a whiff of my own BO because it’s very hard to have a shower of a morning with a baby hanging off you, I can tell you. But he does make me laugh, Liv. And he is *really* cute, even if he looks like his dad. If I was to describe motherhood to you, I’d say imagine what it’s like to want to throw someone out of the window one second, and eat them up with love the next. And as Mrs Durham said to me the other day (Mrs Durham is an old dear I look after on a Tuesday. She’s pretty revolting. I found a pellet of cat poo in her knicker drawer the other day . . .) “You’re never—”

Then Mia stopped. She stopped because what Mrs Durham had said hit her. ‘You’re never really a grown-up until you’ve had a child yourself.’

But then, of course, some people didn’t get the chance to grow up at all.

Billy was still asleep when Mia left the bench. It was 1 p.m. – he’d been asleep half an hour; if she played her cards right, she probably had another half-hour yet. She

held tight onto the buggy as she walked down the steep hill from Williamson's Park, the wind blowing so hard from behind, it made her break into a run. It was one of her greatest fears: accidentally letting go of the buggy and watching helplessly as Billy careered into the traffic. It made her breathless with panic just thinking about it.

She walked down through town. It was the start of the Easter holidays and all the students had gone home. Mia liked Lancaster best like this – vacated of eighteen-year-olds with far too much confidence for their own good. Then she could pretend this was her town again; their town, when the six of them had been brimming with confidence and it felt like they owned it all too.

Same day

Kentish Town, London

'Sssh, don't move.'

Still half asleep, Fraser Morgan had the vague notion that he was being held up at gun point in his own bed. Something was pressing firmly into his back. And he had an erection, which was a *bit* odd. He could even get an erection when his life was in danger?

'That nice hun? Mm?'

It was only when the voice spoke again, whispered into Fraser's ear, a warm flood of breathiness that *Jesus Christ* that *stank* of booze, that he woke up, with a start, the awful truth hitting him in the face. Or was that the back?

KAREN. Fraser's eyes shot open.

Karen from the Bull was in his bed. She was naked,

pressing her pelvis into him and playing with his cock, which went without saying was really quite pleasant.

Fraser lay there, motionless, blinking into the half-light, staring at the radio alarm clock on his bedside table: 10.53 a.m., 6 March 2008.

Sixth of March.

He closed his eyes again.

How? How could he have let this happen? Exactly at what point of last night did he ever think this was a good idea?

'I said, is that nice . . .?' She was purring, kissing the nape of his neck now. Breathing pure alcohol fumes into his skin. Fraser tried to speak but it came out a couple of octaves higher than intended, so that he sounded like a pre-pubescent boy on the brink of his voice breaking. He cleared his throat and tried again.

'Yeah, that's um, yeah, very nice.'

Fuck it. Fuck IT! Panic consumed him. How the hell was he going to get out of this? How had he even got *into* this?

'Good, good, very glad to hear it. Well don't go away, handsome, I'm just popping to the loo but I'll be right back to carry on the good work.'

Karen leant over, pecked him on the cheek and got out of bed.

Fraser turned his head, very slowly. Ow, that *killed*. Why did his neck hurt? Just in time to see what was – it had to be said – a rather sizeable arse disappear round his bedroom door.

Thank fuck for that. Fraser turned onto his back, pulled the duvet over his head and let out the breath he'd been holding since he woke up. GOD he felt tragic.

His heart was palpitating, his head throbbing as he tried to piece together the events of last night. It was all very vague, involving beer, wine, tequila and, at one point, her showing him her yogic headstands, which he'd then tried too, before breaking the coffee table, and very nearly his neck. Oh, that's why his neck hurt.

He vaguely remembered coming to his senses for one brief moment after that – must have been the rush of blood to the head – to say to her, 'Come on, you don't want to go to bed with some drunken stranger . . .' just as she was removing her blouse (he'd noted with some alarm that that was *definitely* what you'd call a blouse). But she'd just sat on his bed in the white bra that Fraser imagined he could fit his head into and said: 'Oh, I think I do.'

So at least he'd made some effort to avoid this. However, the fact remained that he'd slept with her. He'd slept with Karen from behind the bar of the Bull – was this really the end of the world? She wasn't a horror story; in fact she was a perfectly lovely girl. God knows, she'd scraped him off the floor of that pub enough times in the past eighteen months, chucked him in a cab well past closing time after another night of him drowning his sorrows and talking shit to whoever he could find in there – mainly her.

But she was also forty-two. Shitting hell, forty-two! That was practically middle-aged. Old enough to be his mother in some parts of her home town of Hull, Fraser felt sure. As old as . . . Fiona Bruce.

He winced as he remembered a conversation – the bit where she'd asked him how old he thought she was and

he'd said (thinking he was being flattering, this was before beer goggles took over and he'd even considered doing anything with a woman in her forties), 'Don't know, Forty-two? Forty-three?' And she'd blinked at him and said, 'Forty-two,' which was followed by a nasty silence before he moved swiftly onto . . . DOLPHINS! Oh, God, how could he forget the dolphins? Karen from the Bull had two-inch nails with dolphins painted on them. Was this a normal girl thing to do and he'd just never seen it before?

He winced again as bits of that particular conversation also came back to him: her telling him she'd adopted a dolphin from a sanctuary in Florida, that this dolphin was like the baby she'd never had, and he, in an effort to appear interested and engaged, telling her he once swam with dolphins in Zanzibar. Which was a lie. A pointless, outright lie. He'd never even been to Zanzibar. Why the fuck had he said that?

Oh, God, she was back now, padding towards the bed, naked except for a pair of lacy, black knickers that had largely disappeared up her behind and clutching her massive, Christ, GIGANTIC breasts. Fraser sat up, pulled the duvet right up to his chin and arranged himself in the most asexual, un-come-to-bed position he could muster. But she got in anyway, so he moved right up against the wall.

'So,' he said, brightly. 'Coffee?'

Brilliant. There was no better feeling, decided Mia, ten minutes later, than sitting down with a half of Carling and a baby still asleep – even if it was minus five and blowing a gale. This is how she got through the week, these days, by finding the odd little pocket of time to

herself and guarding it with her life. At least there was that about being a single mother – you really got to appreciate your own time. What on earth had she done with it all before she had a baby? Work and drink she imagined. And lots of face-packs.

Sometimes, Mia dreamt of her old life, before she'd moved in with Eduardo in Acton – not one of her better ideas – and Liv had moved in with Fraser to start her new teaching job in Camden, when she, Liv and Anna had shared a flat in Clapham and she was working all hours God sent for Primal Films as an art department assistant.

She'd wake up when it was still dark, thinking she was back in her old bedroom on the Ikea futon and that she had ten minutes to chuck on some clothes before jumping in the car and driving through the silent city to Shepperton Studios for another thirteen-hour day. She'd loved those days. She loved the exhaustion she'd felt, an excited kind of exhaustion, totally different to the tiredness that comes with motherhood.

Barely conscious, she'd then imagine the noise she could hear was Liv and Anna making a racket downstairs in their gloomy Victorian kitchen with the huge table all six of them had spent so many hours drinking at. Then she'd come to, realize it was Billy crying and that it was just the two of them, alone in their boxy new-build flat in Lancaster with its woodchip and ubiquitous laminate.

Still, things had improved lately. Yes, definitely, things had improved. She still wondered occasionally if her son didn't rate her that much, or wasn't that impressed with the whole set-up, really, what with it being just the two

of them in a poky flat and a dad who only turned up when he felt like it.

She still didn't really know how to talk to him and found herself stuck for words when it was just him and her. She marvelled at mothers who seemed to be able to cooie-coo so naturally in public, whereas she just felt like a dick a lot of the time. Then Billy would get that look of wounded entitlement on his face as if to say, 'Seriously, is this all you've got?' And she'd wonder if she was really cut out for this motherhood thing at all.

But at least the panic had gone. She didn't worry about him dying every night any more, which was something, and now Melody and Norm had moved back up North to Lancaster, they sometimes offered to help, which was really sweet, even if Melody drove her mad by suggesting single motherhood was somehow 'romantic', that Mia was like J. K. Rowling, writing an award-winning film script in a freezing cold flat she couldn't afford to heat, when in reality she wasn't writing anything at all, was reading *OK!* magazine and tucking into the wine in a flat she couldn't afford to heat and feeling thoroughly guilty that her brain was probably half dead by now.

Mia put her hood up, took a sip of her lager and took her mobile out of her pocket so she could text Fraser to see if he was still on track for tonight, and check he was surviving the day so far. When she looked at her phone, however, there was a text from Anna:

*was at a party in Kidderminster last night so there's
a SMALL chance I might be late but WILL BE
THERE I promise. Start without me.
Spanner x*

Mia rolled her eyes; she knew ‘a SMALL chance’ translated as ‘am still in Kidderminster and will be two hours late’, and composed her message to Fraser, wondering whether she had time for another rollie.

Then her mobile went. It was Eduardo. Her heart sank. Do not do this to me, she thought. Please, please, do not do this to me. Not tonight. To add insult to injury, him calling had also woken Billy.

She picked up.

‘Hi, Eduardo.’

‘It’s me.’

‘I gathered that.’

She told herself to keep the tone neutral, but it was hard – so very, very hard.

‘What’s going on?’ he said.

Oh, fuck off, she wanted to say. Why did he always have to use that accusatory tone?

‘Nothing’s “going on”.’

‘Why is Billy crying then?’

Because I’m strangling him, what the hell?! He was a baby. Babies cried. He’d know that if he spent any time with one.

‘Where are you?’ said Eduardo, sharply, before she had time to answer.

‘At the pub.’

He snorted.

‘The pub?’

Yes. We’re having a pint – three in fact – and we might follow that with a tequila chaser. She thought better of it. She wasn’t in a position to piss Eduardo off. She needed him, that was the most galling thing of all.

Eduardo sighed, in that martyred way he did. She knew just from that sigh what was coming next.

‘Anyway, look Mimi . . . ?’

Mimi? Stop calling me bloody Mimi.

‘. . . work have just called and—’

‘Er, NO.’ Mia felt the rage rise like bile in her chest.

‘Come on, Eduardo, you are not doing this to me.’

Billy was wailing now, rubbing his eyes. Mia pushed the buggy back and forth.

‘You know how important tonight is, what day it is today, you’ve known for ages.’

Silence.

‘Mia, this is not about choice, is it?’

She hated how he did that. Always put ‘is it?’ on the end of everything, so subtle and yet so successful in making her doubt herself. ‘I need the money. I’m late on my rent, I’m fucking desperate here, I don’t have the luxury—’

Luxury? HA! Don’t fucking talk to me about luxury, thought Mia, you total lying, manipulative bastard, but she stood there, the wind howling, Billy crying now, and she knew it was pointless.

‘Whatever, Eduardo,’ she said. ‘I can’t be arsed any more. Go. You go to work.’

Then she hung up, tears of frustration already running down her face. And what she really wanted to do was to call her best friend, but of course she couldn’t.

Where were those fags? He could have sworn he’d hidden a couple in here. Fraser was now in his freezing kitchen, rummaging futilely in the kitchen drawer in his dressing gown. The fridge. Maybe he’d put them on top of the

fridge? Right at the back so he wouldn't be tempted but they'd still be there, just in case of real emergencies like this one he was currently facing, a moment of true, genuine need.

He patted his hands on top but couldn't feel anything. Perhaps they'd fallen down the back? He steadied his feet and wrapped his arms around the fridge to move it, giving it an enormous hug, relishing the coolness against his hot, toxic skin, thinking maybe it would be nice just to stay here for a few minutes, just him and the fridge in their cool embrace. He pulled and pulled but he was too weak, too sleep-deprived, too fucking hungover to manage it. When he finally let go, the door flew open and a cucumber shot out, hitting him on the chest like a missile.

He gave up, leant against the kitchen worktop, breathless, his head pounding, thinking what to do next. Maybe he could go to the corner shop for cigarettes? Then just do a runner? Just not come back! Ah, that only really worked when you were in someone *else's* house though, didn't it?

Fuck it. Fuck it, you moron.

He was giving himself a talking-to now, firm but sort of kind. He knew who that reminded him of.

He held the heels of his hands to his face, stretching the skin outwards, watching his reflection in the greasy microwave door as if, if he did it for long enough, he might actually be able to escape his own skin. He thought of tonight, of approximately eight hours from now, of walking into the pub to face his mates. God, he wanted to hurl.

What was really bothering Fraser was how comfortable Karen seemed to be in his bed. How *happy*. No sign of post-bender jitters whatsoever.

If she'd just been some flirty barmaid who'd wanted a bit of sexy time then that would have been fine. Not fine, but *finer*; he would have felt less guilty. But she liked him, she'd liked him for ages, she'd told him last night. Which was just brilliant, just the absolute best.

He considered his options:

- Be nice, go for breakfast with her, ask for her number then never call her. Of course all this meant that he could never drink in the Bull again; or, if he did, he'd have to wear a disguise. He briefly went through how this might work in his head and decided it never would.
- Say he was going out (which he was, just not for another four hours but Karen didn't need to know that . . .) wait till she was safely out of view then go back to bed. The thought of bed, alone, right now, was amazing. Truly amazing.
- Tell her the truth: Say he's sorry, she's a lovely girl but he was drunk, he's still grieving his girlfriend and it should never, ever have happened. Can they be friends?
- Fuck that. He didn't want to be friends!

Anyway, right at this point, all three sounded hideous. Especially the last. He felt sure the last would guarantee tears and the last thing he could handle today – especially today – were tears from a barmaid he barely knew.

Norm. That's who he wanted right now: simple, unjudgemental, chilled-out Norm. Norm, who he'd known since he was nine.

He took his phone off the side, sank down onto the kitchen floor in his dressing gown and texted him:

So guess who woke up today in bed with Karen from the Bull? What a cock. Head in bits. Need some Norm wisdom.

A reply buzzed immediately:

You cock.

Fraser groaned and half laughed at the same time – he knew Norm didn't really mean it, that that level of genuine harshness was beyond him.

He texted back:

I know, it's not normal. Today. Any day but today! What's wrong with me?

He held the phone in his hand, waiting for a reply, and something caught his eye: the photo of Liv held against the fridge door with a magnet in the shape of a beer bottle. He reached forward and took it in his hand. This was his favourite photo of her. They were at a fancy dress party – Anna's twenty-third birthday. It was a 'come as a London Underground Station' party and Liv had gone as Maida Vale.

'I *simply* made myself a veil . . . !' she'd said, standing on his front doorstep, in a voice like a posh, wooden TV presenter from the 1970s . It made Fraser giggle even now.

He stared at the photograph. She was wearing her

homemade veil and a French maid outfit that revealed her comely thighs – she always had fantastic legs – and which plunged at the neck (her cleavage was pretty fantastic too). She was holding a cocktail with an umbrella in it and standing in a naughty-postcard-type pose, doing an exaggerated wink, her wide mouth half open, revealing her lovely teeth. Liv had the best teeth: big, naturally white teeth with a tiny gap in the middle. That was his favourite bit of her – that little sexy gap. Fraser smoothed out the frayed corners of the photo, kissed it and put it back.

A text from Norm:

*Mate, chillax. Nothing's normal for any of us today.
See you at 8 in the Merchants, you oaf. Cuddles and
kisses Norm x*

Fraser smirked and shook his head. Cuddles and kisses? Norm was such a plonker. Then he stood up, rather too quickly so that the blood rushed to his head and he had to put his head between his knees so he didn't pass out, climbed the stairs to his bedroom, and prepared to face the music with Karen.