

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

My
Other
Husband

'Master of the
jaw-dropping
twist'

S Magazine

She escaped
him once,
can she do
it again?

Prologue

‘Cleo Forsum Pryce, I am arresting you on the suspicion of attempted murder.’

No. They can't do this. Not right now.

‘You do not have to say anything.’

I need to find her before it's too late.

‘But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court.’

Because if I don't do whatever I'm told, she's going to die. He's going to kill her.

‘Anything you do say may be given in evidence.’

‘Please, I didn't do this. I promise you, I didn't do this. And you have to let me go.’ *You have to let me go. It's a matter of life or death.*

Part 1

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8 AUGUST, 2022

OFFICES OF BURRFIELD & CO., BRIGHTON

AFTERNOON

‘You really didn’t have to come in to the office to see me about your divorce, you do realise that, don’t you, Ms Forsum?’

I nod. ‘I know. I know I could do it all online, that it’d be cheaper and probably quicker, but I didn’t want a paper trail – or online trail.’

Jeff Burrfield frowns at me, confused all of a sudden. ‘I thought you said your husband knows about this?’ He starts flipping through his notes, probably scared now that he’s wrongly attributed this nugget of information to the desperate woman in front of him who is checking out of her relationship. ‘You said that he was on board and . . . ah, yes – ’ his finger runs along the line where he has made his initial observations – ‘he couldn’t wait to get rid of you. And he couldn’t believe he’d spent so many years of his life with a heartless cow like you.’ He raises his balding head and we lock gazes.

‘To be fair to me, I did make it clear that he never actually said all that,’ I offer in a pathetic voice. ‘That was my interpretation of the situation as seen by him. Possibly.’

‘But he does know you’re divorcing him?’

‘Yes, he does know.’ *He doesn’t know why but he does know*, I add in my head.

‘Oh good,’ Mr Burrfield murmurs, visibly relieved that there is no subterfuge. ‘Things are always a *bit* less unpleasant if everyone involved is apprised of the situation.’

‘My husband would never say anything like that, it’s not his style or nature. He’s very much a peace, love, hope-to-all-beings kind of person.’

‘And you’re not?’

‘Yes, yes I am. Within reason.’

A ghost of a smile haunts Mr Burrfield’s lips and I feel sorry for him. It can’t be pleasant or even vaguely fun to be this close to human relationships as they disintegrate. Does it make you cynical? It must do. You can’t sit on that side of this type of desk, listen to all those stories of things going awry and *NOT* wonder why people bother in the first place. His ring finger is bare so I’m assuming he hasn’t married or, if he has, that it’s gone awry. I don’t get the feeling he is long-term attached, but I could be wrong. Either way, he gives the impression that he is someone who would prefer all of this ‘unpleasantness’ not to exist, but since it does, he’ll continue on with the forbearance needed to guide lost, separating souls through it.

‘Can I ask you something, off the books, as it were?’ I say. I need to get a definitive answer to this, this question that has been circling my mind for many, many years. This question that I get a million different answers to whenever I’m brave enough to search the internet.

‘What do you mean, “off the books”?’ he replies, drawing back a little from me. Not very noticeably, just slightly. Just enough to let me know on an unconscious level that I won’t be getting anything for nothing out of him.

‘I mean, not something you should probably write down in my file there since it doesn’t really relate to me.’

‘Who does it relate to, then?’

Good question. Obvious question. So why don’t I have a ready answer? Because every answer will sound fake, every reply will be a lie. ‘I mean, well, a friend of mine. A close friend of mine.’

Mr Burrfield puts down his pen, shuts his file, removes his glasses. Now he is out from behind his glasses, he looks much younger but more mature. Much more worldly than the long-suffering, slightly bumbling solicitor I originally sat down with. I’d picked his name from the internet. Trawled through until I found one near enough to where I am currently working so I could base my break around this meeting, but also far enough away that no one will see me going in to these offices and find out before the rest of my family about the irretrievable breakdown of my marriage.

‘What is it your close *friend* would like to ask?’

‘Well, it’s kind of awkward and she feels extremely silly, but what would happen if she’d . . . no, no, let me start again. What if my friend, at some point in the past, had gone to another country and just, on a whim, got married? If she didn’t register that marriage when she came back to England all those years ago and then got married again to someone else, would it be OK or would she, potentially, be in trouble?’

Mr Burrfield looks like I have smacked him square in the face right after I’ve sworn at him. He doesn’t move or even seem to breathe for a few seconds, he just sits with shock and horror drenching his face as he stares at me. Eventually, he looks down at the file in front of him, at its mottled beige cardboard that holds the early details of the dissolution of my marriage. ‘Your *friend* would not be *potentially* in trouble,

she would be in a huge amount of trouble. Bigamy, which this is, carries a prison sentence of up to seven years.'

Seven years! SEVEN years. Those words have turned my stomach, have made me want to vomit right here on his nice, neat desk. SEVEN years.

'But if it wasn't registered, does it count?'

'Assuming your *friend* followed all the legal requirements when getting married in whichever foreign country she chose for the ceremony to take place – that is, she had all the required documentation and then signed a marriage licence or register – then the marriage is considered legal and binding here in the United Kingdom.'

'Even if it wasn't registered?'

'Foreign marriages are not "registered" as such. What you're referring to is the commonly misunderstood situation where the foreign marriage is "recorded", almost a case of letting the Government know the marriage exists at the General Register Office and letting them keep a copy of the licence so that you can have access to it if you require for any reason – such as proof that you are indeed married. This would ensure that while your marriage would not be "registered" in the same way a marriage of UK citizens getting married here would be, there would be a record of it and you would be able to get a copy of your wedding certificate. However, this practice was discontinued in 2014. No foreign marriages are "recorded" at GRO any more. And in any case, whether the marriage occurred before or after 2014, your *friend* would still be married with or without the marriage being "recorded" at the GRO.'

Oh. Oh. 'Seven years you said, yes?'

His nostrils flare briefly before he nods gravely.

‘OK, good. Fine. Thank you. I’ll be sure to tell my friend to, you know, not get married until the old marriage is sorted out.’

‘You do that,’ he states before slipping his glasses back into place and picking up his short, stubby fountain pen. ‘You should also warn her not to tell anyone about it. If she has indeed married while already married, that is a criminal offence. Not something to shout about.’

‘She wasn’t shouting about it, she was just asking . . . Me . . . Asking me to ask you.’

‘Indeed,’ he replies sourly. ‘I’ll make sure I’m in touch later this evening about the papers. I have a feeling this divorce needs to be expedited.’

I couldn’t argue with that. At all.

Horsforth, 1996

‘That guy’s staring at you,’ Trina stated with a mixture of puzzlement and disdain.

The university common room where we sat often made me feel like we were sitting in the Colosseum – little groups of five or six gathered at small, low circular tables, waiting for the show to begin in the centre. Some groupings had more members and they spilled out, no matter how close they tried to fit themselves together. Other people had fewer companions, some were on their own – but all of us noisily crammed in here sat around the large expanse with its well-worn, shiny parquet floor, apart but together.

At the end of the canteen by the large glass doors, which opened out to the grass-and-concrete quad, was a serving hatch where cut-price teas and coffees, snacks and cold cans of pop were sold by the people

who ran the Students' Union. Cut-price instant coffee in a Styrofoam cup and a bag of Maltesers had become my daily 'poison'.

Trina and I, first-year students who lived on campus, had one of the better seating areas. Our table and seats were wedged slightly behind one of the smooth stone circular pillars, creating a sort of nook where we could see everything.

'Which guy?' I asked distractedly. I was concentrating on watching the first Malteser of the pack disintegrate into my coffee, to which I'd already added five sugars. The Malteser bobbed along the surface, seemingly impervious to the heat, acting as if it could possibly survive the hot milky end that was fast approaching.

'First of all, that's disgusting,' Trina said, screwing up her beautiful face and pointing one of her glossy sea-blue nails at what I was doing to the chocolate and the coffee, 'and second of all, the guy with the jacket and the dimples.'

I knew who she meant. 'Oh, him.'

'You haven't even looked up.'

'Don't need to. Jacket and dimples – how you can see them from here I don't know – describes him perfectly. There's only one guy with a jacket of note who stares at me.'

'So you know he stares at you?' She was really puzzled now.

'Yes. He's in my Psychology class.'

'So you know him beyond the staring?'

'Yes, he's in my Psychology class.'

'And you know his name?'

'Yes, he's in my Psychology class. How many times do I need to say it?'

'And you know why he stares at you?'

I shrugged half-heartedly. I suspected I knew why, but to be honest,

it wasn't something that happened to me on a regular basis. Or at all, really. Not unless the starrer was a creepy older man who thought . . . well, actually, I tried to avoid wondering about creepy older men as much as I could.

'Have you spoken to him?' Trina asked.

'Don't make me say it, Trina,' I told my next-door-neighbour-in-halls.

'Oh shut up! You might be in the same class as him but never spoken to him. Like, have I spoken to half the freaks in my Maths classes? I think not.'

'Yes, I've spoken to him. We're working on a project together in class.'

'Oh . . .' she said knowingly. 'Ohhhhh . . . It's like *that*.'

'It's like what?' I asked, abandoning the disintegrating Malteser to its fate to look at her.

She flicked a few of her black-and-royal-blue plaits over her left shoulder, then smoothed her hand over them, twisting them together to sit over her right shoulder. 'You and him are making the beast with two backs.'

'What? No! NO. Absolutely not.'

'*Really?* Why not?'

'We're just not.'

'Well, with the way that man is staring, I guess you're RCing him.'

I side-eyed my friend. I had *NO* idea what she was on about. 'What is RCing?' Knowing Trina, we were about to go off on a tangent so sharp the original point would be completely forgotten.

'Oh please, like you don't know,' she scoffed.

'I totally do not know. You need to tell me what RCing is and tell me quick.'

'You're Romantic Comedying him. You know how it goes: you don't

know he exists or you hate him and then you end up having to “work together” and you start to see a different side to him and decide to give him a chance. That chance turns into you falling for him. You have a few weeks or months of sickly, kissy-kissy bliss. And then something big happens which means he discovers that you didn’t feel for him like he felt for you and you split up. You both mope around for a bit, then you have to make some huge, grand gesture to get him back.’ To complete her soliloquy, she flicked her plaits back over her shoulder and then snatched up her coffee cup, took a gulp and realised too late she’d actually picked up my cup and now had a mouthful of sugary coffee and half-melted Malteser. Her gagging face was so funny it was almost worth having to buy a new coffee to start Malteser-melting again.

‘I know what romantic comedies are, thank you,’ I told her. Trina kept opening her mouth and sticking out her tongue, obviously trying to get rid of the taste. Trina and I had never discussed our mutual love for those movies and books, and I couldn’t believe she was crowbar-ring the dude with the jacket into my tried-and-tested, loved-and-adored framework. It was a heinous act on her part as far as I was concerned. I pointed briefly in his direction. ‘He is not and never will be the star of my rom-com life. All right?’ I looked around the room. ‘I can’t see anyone in here who’s going to be a part of it.’ I returned to eyeing her distastefully again as she glugged water, trying to wash away the taste. Trina was being overdramatic – Malteser-flavoured coffee wasn’t *that* bad. ‘And if you keep going on about that guy, you’re not going to be my sassy best friend.’

Trina stopped mid-gulp and slowly lowered her water as she spun on her seat to look at me. ‘I am *no one’s* sassy best friend. I am the main character. *Always.*’

‘Well, I am, too, so . . .’

‘I’ve always wondered what happens when the two people who are traditional sidekick characters are friends? How do they negotiate the thorny subject of who gets to main character and who gets to sidekick?’

‘The first one to get a long-term love interest, I guess.’ I shrugged and rummaged in my pockets for change. I was careful with my coffee-and-Malteser money. I only brought out the exact amount of money so I wouldn’t be tempted to spend too much. My grant and student loan had a long way to stretch but these two were my daytime luxury. Technically, Trina should be doing the coffee-buying, though. Like that was going to happen. She would simply tell me there was nothing wrong with the cup she had pretty much spat into. Like she wouldn’t pour away a cup I had breathed too close to.

As I looked for any amount of money, my gaze scanned the room and snagged on the green gaze of the man who hadn’t stopped staring at me. His expression didn’t change when our gazes slotted together, stuck on each other like two vital pieces of a puzzle.

I didn’t understand him.

When we were in class, when we worked together, he talked to me like he talked to everyone else. I didn’t detect anything that might suggest he thought differently of me to anyone else. He was jokey and clever – always answering questions with the assurance of someone who did the extra reading and then some. Always ready with a joke or humorous observation that might have escaped most people. But when we were in other settings, when I wasn’t directly interacting with him, he would stare at me. Only at me.

‘Don’t you start!’ Trina said, nudging me and releasing me from the stare-hold that had taken over for a few moments.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked her.

DOROTHY KOOMSON

‘Don’t start staring back at him. I literally just told you – I am no one’s sidekick. You’re not allowed to get with him or anyone else until I have someone.’

‘I am not getting with him.’

‘Yeah, pull the other one, it’s got carnival bells on.’

I allowed myself another sneak look at him, and he wasn’t staring at me. He was sitting back in his seat, a book in one hand, a hot drink in the other. It was almost as though, now he’d got my attention, as brief as it might have been, he could get on with his life. Now that he knew I knew he was there, he could go about his day.

And what about me? How was I meant to go back to normal knowing that any second now he could start staring at me again?

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8 AUGUST, 2022

4TH FLOOR, HONEYMAY PRODUCTIONS OFFICE, BRIGHTON
AFTERNOON

I'm juggling my bag, my laptop bag and a brown paper bag of my sleep medication, as well as my jacket, my hat and hand sanitiser, when I try to press the white rectangle of my pass with my name and a picture of my face against HoneyMay Productions' security panel.

It takes a couple of goes and I probably should just dump a couple of things on the floor to make it easier, but I don't. I'm the kind of stubborn that means I'll keep going, keep swinging my pass in the direction of the security panel until . . . until . . . until I can get the pass to dangle close enough and long enough to beep and flick from red to green.

As it beeps to let me in, I put my shoulder against the frosted glass door and push it open. I usually work from home, holed up in my office with my messy desk, draughty windows and very expensive ergonomic office chair that makes my coccyx hurt if I sit in it for more than twenty minutes. But for the past six months, I've been coming regularly to write at the offices of HoneyMay Productions, the production company who bought my books for TV adaptation seven years ago.

In the early days, when I was learning all about writing for TV, I also used to come here to meet with more experienced writers and script editors. I've been coming back recently because I can't be at home. I'm in the process of dismantling my life as I know it, and I have to focus. At home there is Wallace. And even when he's not there, he's there. In the pictures, in his scent on the bedding, in the way the furniture is arranged, the way the lights are placed. We moved into our house seven years ago, and every day has been spent making it ours. With all the stuff in front of me, the things I have to do, I have to focus on work and I can't do that if I'm getting sentimental and googly-eyed over belongings.

The office area they've found for me to work in is just off the main open-plan workspace. It's a smallish meeting room with a bank of four desks pushed together in the middle. Where I usually sit and plug in my laptop has the picture window to the right and the door to the left.

Most people ignore me as I bustle past with my belongings in my arms and my security pass dangling from my wrist. They didn't do a *Cheers*-style 'NORM!' greeting when I used to arrive, but some of them at least raised their heads and smiled at me. Now they all pretend they don't see me; they blanch and look away if they accidentally make eye contact and they absolutely do not want to say hello.

Everyone hates me at the moment. I'm learning to be OK with that.

I dump the tangle of my belongings on the desk beside the one I sit at and notice there's a laptop, a mobile charger and a reusable coffee cup on the desktop. Someone came in to work in here while I was out, obviously. I wonder if they'll stay or will come scuttling in, collect their belongings and leave.

'Oh,' Gail Brewster, one of the production assistants, says as she enters the room. 'Didn't realise you were back.' She stands just inside

the doorway, looking on edge and unsure about whether to come in or just run for it.

'Yup,' I reply and dip my head as I start to sort out my belongings and set up my computer for work. I mean, yes, I've been telling myself that I'm fine with everyone hating me but, er, maybe I'm not as at ease with it as I thought.

'I'll just get out of your hair,' she says. She starts to gather up the items she's left on my desk.

'Cool,' I mumble.

'Are you OK?' Gail asks as I take a seat at 'my' desk.

'I'm fine,' I say.

'Are you sure? You seem . . .'

'I'm fine. Honestly, I'm fine.'

'If you're sure. How are the rewrites coming along?' Even though Gail smiles as she asks this, her concern has evaporated as quickly as droplets of water dripped into a hot pan. It seems like something a supportive colleague would ask another colleague, but we are behind and they need this script. They needed it yesterday but I haven't finished it. I'm finding it difficult to do that.

I'm finding it difficult to end this.

I mean, I have to. But it's not as easy as it should be.

Seven years ago, not long before I married Wallace, my agent, Antonia, sold my first novel, *The Baking Detective*, to HoneyMay Productions. It'd been a real dream-come-true moment. It took me a while to realise that things are rarely that simple. That despite all the heralding in the entertainment press and social media, 'optioned' meant pretty much nothing. Anyone could option anything if you had a few thou to hand. But this was different. This was one of the things that went beyond optioning and skated smoothly and deliciously into being

slated for development, to being greenlit for production. To being actually made.

And to actually appearing on a streaming network. Every step of the way, I'd kind of stood on the outside myself a little, wondering when it would all go wrong. Not only had it got on to the screens, people liked it enough to keep tuning in. So much so, it was not only commissioned for a second series, it stopped being shown in one clump and was actually scheduled to run weekly. *The Baking Detective* was a hit because, apparently, everyone loved a woman who could bake *and* solve crimes at the same time. Some of the crimes committed were hideously gruesome – but because Mira Woode solved the mystery while finding time to bake at least one thing (the more the better), people seemed to ignore the truly horrible nature of the murders. In fact, the more ghastly the murder, the more elaborate the cake to balance the sensibilities, the more people seemed to love it.

Which led to where we are now.

Me in the middle of a divorce and dismantling my life as though I were taking scaffolding down from the outside of a finished building. And part of that dismantling meant leaving the show.

No one is happy.

No one wants this to end.

Once I'd handed the first *Baking Detective* novel over for adaptation, I had no power. They could do whatever they wanted, except the two things I'd had written into the contract:

1. The main character had to be played by a dark-skinned Black woman.
2. Once I decided it was over, it was over, and HoneyMay Productions couldn't make any more.

What this meant in real terms was that when I decided the series was over, the character, the stories and pretty much the entire franchise stayed with me and they couldn't make any more. No one wanted to agree to that, of course. They offered me an eye-watering amount of money to get rid of that clause. When that didn't work, they went to the other end of the spectrum and threatened to walk away. But I wouldn't budge.

'Fine!' I could almost hear the HoneyMay team involved in this deal say. *'But we're lowering our offer and she'd better not think about trying to negotiate for more when she changes her mind further down the line.'*

I minded, of course, not getting as much money as I could potentially have got. But I cared more about having a woman who looked like me on the screen and being able to walk away cleanly.

So Gail's nice question was probably delivered through gritted teeth. She tosses her wavy blonde-brown hair, revealing the line of studs and mini-hoops that run from the top of her ear to her earlobe. All silver. All marking out her style. She is my age and a jeans, T-shirt-and-hoodie woman, but these earrings show that she has her own style, too. Since she started about six months ago, she's always been quite nice to me, but she, like everyone, is probably being nice to my face because we have to keep working together for now.

'The rewrites are going well,' I reply to Gail. *'I've nearly finished the latest draft for the penultimate episodes and then I'll get on with the final episode stuff.'*

'Great, thank you.' She lets the mask slip for a moment and those three words come out forced, as though they've been squeezed out like toothpaste from an almost empty tube. Everyone gets like that when the final episodes are mentioned.

Ordinarily, I would care, it would eat me up that someone doesn't like me or is cross with me or is possibly upset with me, but right now, I don't mind.

I don't deserve friends, I don't even deserve people to be nice to me. I deserve . . . everything that's coming, I suppose. Every little thing.

'I'll leave you to it, then,' Gail says before she heads to the door with her stuff in her hands. 'Holler if you need anything.'

'I will.'

She shuts the white door behind her and I physically relax now I'm alone. Instead of allowing my fingers to move over the keyboard to get this work done, I drop them onto my lap. That doesn't feel enough somehow, I need to unravel some more. I lower my head to the table and rest my cheek on the desk, while my eyes stare outside. From this position, high up in a Brighton building, you get the most amazing views, the most incredible vistas.

What I wouldn't give to be one of the clouds that hangs over the city, part of the air that circulates, anything rather than being Cleo Forsum right now. Anything.

Horsforth, 1996

'Cleo, I have a problem,' Heath stated.

Heath, the man who stared at me, and I were in a small space off the main area on the first floor of the library working on our project for the Philosophy of Science module of our Psychology degree. It was almost like an alcove, but with a door that could slide across to make it a cosy little room with a table and two chairs. We had the door open, but it still felt like we were cocooned here, cosseted and hugged by the

smell of books and the reverential atmosphere of learning. Libraries had always been my happy place, somewhere to visit and disappear; to escape and just ‘be’.

We’d been here a while and had been making steady progress, but suddenly he had made this statement – more of a quiet declaration, really – and I was sure it was not the sort of problem I wanted to deal with. I moistened my lips and said, ‘If your problem is something along the lines of “How are we going to condense all of this essential information into a five-minute presentation?” then I share your pain. If it’s anything else, then I don’t think it’s anything to do with me.’

Since Trina had initiated that ‘Romantic Comedying’ conversation, every interaction with Heath had become an issue. If I was friendly to him, I worried I was moving into the ‘doe-eyed, soon-to-be-kissy-kissy’ stage of the RC timeline. If I was blunt or short, I felt, rather acutely in every cell, that I was just extending the ‘enemies-to-lovers’ part of the story. If I tried to be nonchalant, it felt exactly that – I was trying too hard. Basically, Trina had rather expertly got into my head, messed around and ruined any chances of me and this guy being anything even resembling friends.

I mean, I heard the way those words just came out of my mouth and they weren’t exactly pleasant. I liked to think of myself as a pleasant person, that I could get on with most people no matter how odious, but I was constantly on edge around him. If he could just stop staring at me, too, that would be helpful.

‘I suppose it is kind of to do with the presentation and the philosophy of science,’ Heath replied. ‘And kind of not.’

I stared at the books and notebooks in front of us, the notes we’d both made, the highlighted sections and the sticky-note bookmarked

sections. I wasn't sure if I should speak or if I should wait for him to elaborate.

'It's the kind of not that makes it related to the philosophy of science because it is and it isn't related to the philosophy of science, which invokes the quantum philosophy of things existing and not existing at the same time, which is hard to prove exists. A bit like trying to prove the mind exists as a separate construct to the physical brain.'

I squeezed shut my eyes. Frustration. Despair. Complete frustration. Trina had got right down into my head, hadn't she? Right deep down, past all the rational layers, past the places that control our actions, into the irrational areas, the places where little thoughts take hold and start to grow. Start to grow in stupid, stupid ways.

Usually, being in a library space, with the books and the atmosphere they created, acted like a shield to protect me from the excesses of being around other people. They absorbed the nonsense and made me not mind as much if they went off on random tangents that were nothing to do with me. But not this fella, it seemed. He was immune to the sponge-like powers of books.

'What are you talking about?' I asked, my eyes still closed, straining to not scream at him.

'I think . . . no, no . . . I *know* I have fallen in love with you.'

My eyes popped open in surprise, then slowly swivelled in his direction to look at him, before coming back to centre to stare at the notes and learning detritus in front of us. The theories of science applied to and about the study of the mind – finding out if the way we studied the physical world could be harnessed and deployed to study what goes on in the metaphysical space attached to the brain. That's what we were doing here, that's what I'd sat down to do.

‘I’m going to be honest with you here, Heath. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say to that so I’m going to pretend you didn’t say anything.’

‘And therein lies my problem. Problems. Because my problems are twofold. One, I am as certain as I can be that you are not even remotely interested in me. Two, I’m not sure I want to feel this way. I’ve always been led to believe that love is pleasurable, something that people pursue. This . . . this is not pleasurable. This . . . is not something I wish to experience. Quite the contrary. This . . . *these* emotions are very much unwanted.’

‘Do you always speak like a robot?’ I asked, conversationally. If Trina heard him speak, she’d know why – despite her mind-messing – nothing could happen with this guy.

‘No. I have it on good authority that I speak more like a Vulcan.’

That made me laugh despite myself. ‘OK, kudos for the *Star Trek* reference, but I have to ask – with the way you talk and all – did you get hassled in school?’

He conjured up a ghost of a smile, amused by the question, it seemed. ‘No, no, I didn’t actually.’ He shook his head briefly. ‘I had the living shit kicked out of me pretty much every day, but I was not really “hassled”.’

I turned in my seat to stare at him in surprise and horror.

He stared back at me with an open face. ‘I take it from your reaction you were not expecting that answer,’ he said quietly, looking suddenly dubious about the way he had told me that he had been assaulted almost daily.

I shook my head. I was not expecting that answer at all.

‘Oh. Maybe I should have sugar-coated it? I just assumed . . . you’re a very straightforward person so I assumed you would prefer me to be direct about such matters.’

A wave of sadness almost submerged me as it crashed over and through me. There was such quiet acceptance in his voice, like it was something normal. He was weird and he knew it. And he'd suffered for it. I was weird, I knew it, but I had escaped that sort of suffering. 'I'm sorry you went through that,' I whispered, even though those words seemed insubstantial when weighed up against what they were trying to make up for.

'Thank you, I appreciate you saying that,' he replied.

We sat in an awkward silence, where I stared at the work in front of us, not really reading the open pages, not picking up our pens to make notes, not adding anything to the prompt cards, just staring at our work, wondering how we moved on from here.

Apparently, we moved on by him saying: 'About my problem?'

Yes. About his problem. What was I going to do about his problem that was clearly becoming partly my problem now that he'd gone beyond staring and had opened up? 'You know, Heath, when I was in fifth form, there was this guy who was really goofy, a bit weird. Not anything too weird, just a bit odd, like anyone really. But he still got hassled a lot and sometimes beaten up. And honestly, it was so sad, because he seemed nice enough. I suppose he stood out because he didn't seem to hide his weirdness, or even try to hide it, or even think he might need to hide it.'

'How does that relate to my problem?' Heath asked.

'I'm coming to that. Don't be so impatient. This guy from fifth form wanted to be my friend—'

'Just your friend?'

'Will you stop interrupting?! I'll never get to the end of this if you keep interrupting. Yes, just my friend. Well, at first. Cos I'm a bit gullible? No, that's not the right word. I'm a bit clueless, I suppose. All my

friends were going – are you really going to hang out with him? – and I went, “why not, seems harmless enough”. When I say “hang out” I literally mean we used to talk at the bus stop. He was the only one who lived on the same bus route as me so we’d talk as we walked to the bus stop, talk while we waited for the bus and then not even sit next to each other on the bus. Then out of the blue, he asked me if I would go to the cinema with him one weekend. And there I was, stuck.’

‘Because you didn’t like him?’

I glowered at Heath until he mumbled, ‘Sorry.’

‘And there I was, stuck, because I did not like him. And also, even if I *did* like him, how am I explaining going out with a boy to my African parents? Yes, I could have gone down the whole sneaking-around thing, but for me, that’s all far too much hassle. So I did the next best thing.’

Heath stared at me.

I stared at him.

He stared at me.

I stared at him.

‘Oh for pity’s sake,’ I snapped, when the staring was stretching into a minute, ‘you decide to pick now to stop interrupting?’

‘What was the next best thing?’ he dutifully asked.

‘I found him another girlfriend. Well, I found him an actual girlfriend because I wasn’t in any way his girlfriend.’

‘So you’re saying you’re going to find me a girlfriend instead of you?’

‘Well, I am not your girlfriend, but I think if you met someone who was attracted to you . . .’

‘I wouldn’t want you?’

‘If you want to put it like that.’

‘But you seem like a nice, accepting person, and you still think I’m weird, therefore I am as certain as I can be that most people think I’m weird. How, pray tell, are you going to find me a companion who would even consider becoming my girlfriend?’

‘Ah, you’re not weird.’ I obviously couldn’t look at him when I said that. ‘Not *that* weird, anyway.’

‘How exactly are you going to make me not weird enough to find someone who might be interested in me?’

‘Makeover, of course!’ I said gleefully.

He physically drew back, horrified by the idea. ‘I’m not sure that’s the course of action either of us should be considering right now.’

‘Nothing drastic, just a haircut, some grooming, some clothing rehoming.’

‘What is wrong with my clothing?’

‘Everything. That jacket . . .’ I shook my head, not bothering to mask my disgust. ‘That jacket . . . Heath, it’s 1996, no one outside of Nashville wears a suede jacket – with tassels. I hate to break it to you in such a blunt way, but come on, mate, even the citizens of Vulcan must know it’s time to retire the jacket.’

Heath stared at me and I thought for a moment he was going to say something else, to protest, but instead he sighed. ‘You think it’s best that I completely transform myself to make myself acceptable to the opposite sex? Haven’t people advocated since time began for one to be oneself?’

‘Yes. And I am completely on board with that message, it is why I myself wear a skull buckle belt with purple jeans so ripped my mother would have a nervous breakdown if she saw them, but I don’t think this is the real you. I think the real you has yet to find expression, so me sprucing you up is going to do wonders for your confidence.’ I clapped

my hands together in delight. 'I can't wait to upgrade you – this is like *Pretty Woman* . . . without the prostitution element, of course.'

'Do you honestly believe you can make me irresistible to women?'

'Erm . . . I didn't actually say that. And let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're just going to make you a bit more eligible, looks-wise. Which will help people get to know the real you.'

Unusually, he didn't say anything. Maybe I upset him with the idea that he had to change. Maybe he liked his jacket that looked all sad and bedraggled, maybe it was bequeathed to him by a favourite uncle or aunt and he'd been saving up to get some cowboy boots and a hat to match. Maybe I had mortally wounded poor Heath Sawyer and this was where everything went wrong and instead of just staring at me, he started to actively hate me. 'Erm,' I began, leaping in to do some serious damage limitation, 'you know, you don't have to do any of this, right? You can carry on as you are because you're perfectly fine as you are. You don't have to do anything.'

'I know I don't, but I want to. I want to do everything I can to be worthy.'

'Worthy? No, no. This honestly isn't about changing who you are so you live up to some impossible standard. It's literally just sprucing you up, making the best of what the Lord gave you.'

'I want to be worthy of you.'

'Again, you are worthy. But you and me is not up for grabs.'

'It's not up for consideration at all?'

'I knew you weren't listening when I was talking earlier. If you want a girlfriend, you're going to have to learn to listen.'

'I was listening. I am simply confirming that you helping me make these changes won't facilitate the establishment of a relationship or liaison with you.'

DOROTHY KOOMSON

‘You are correct, it will not facilitate any such contact between us. The mission is to find you someone suitable. Someone more right for you.’

‘More right for me . . . more right for me,’ he said, as though musing over the points. ‘I suppose, in the absence of anything else, that will have to do.’

3

8 AUGUST, 2022

4TH FLOOR, HONEYMAY PRODUCTIONS OFFICE, BRIGHTON
EARLY EVENING

Gail sticks her head around the door when the world outside is darkening and people are thinking of heading home. I've made good progress but I've still got so much left to do. So much. It's one of those 'so much to do' situations where I want to throw my computer out the window, climb into bed and cry while drowning Maltesers in sugary coffee.

'We're all heading off now. Are you coming?' she says, back in nice mode.

Behind her in the open-plan space outside the room where I work, Clarissa, the runner, and Amy, the junior script editor, are both lurking with their coats and bags on. I suspect they're not paid enough to properly hate me, they just have to work in a negative environment created by my decision to end a successful show.

'I might just stay—'

'OK, when I asked if you were coming, I meant, come on, let's all get out of here. It's not good to stay here when everyone else has gone. It is über creepy in here.'

'Yeah, come on, get your coat, you've pulled,' Amy adds in a broad South London accent.

‘How can I resist?’ I reply and set my work to back-up on my computer while I clean up my workspace. I’m messy – in so many iterations of that word – so I make sure to put my inhaler into my rucksack along with the hand sanitiser. I push my black hat onto my head and slip on my black jacket. When the laptop says it has safely backed up everything I’ve done this afternoon, I zip it up into its black carrying bag before I start shoving everything else – notebooks, pens, Post-its, mints, notecards, sleep medication, security pass, highlighters, keys and my earrings – into my main bag. At one point, I take so long that first Gail then Amy come to assist me. They help me gather up my belongings like I’m incapable of doing anything for myself.

As we let ourselves out of the building, they make small talk about going to the pub over the next weekend, and in their own ways they all try to include me in that chat – suggesting places they might go to and asking if I like them, asking if I could be tempted to get a train to London one evening since Gail and Amy live up there and commute down to Brighton. Clarissa makes a case for going to a restaurant so we can eat while we drink and says us Brighton-based folk will be able to find something nice but easy on the pocket, too. All of us know I won’t be joining them, that I’m not one of them on any level, but I’m grateful that they’re trying. It takes the sharp edges off the bleakness of ending my marriage and leaving my job and knowing I’m going to have to move away soon as well.

We part ways after climbing the long, steep stone steps behind Brighton station and walking through past the new taxi rank (that isn’t so new but will always be new in my mind), along the walkway parallel to the platforms and onto the concourse. Gail and Amy go to get trains to their different parts of London and Clarissa heads down towards the seafront. I stand at the grand entrance to Brighton station

feeling enchanted by the beauty of another day drawing to a close, another day becoming so rich and dark and studded with the jewel-like lights of shops, cars and street lights. I also stand there, people bumping into me as they hurry on with their lives, knowing that I don't actually *deserve* to have anyone be nice to me, but appreciating it all the same.

Leeds City Centre, 1996

Heath and I met outside the bus station in Leeds city centre on an October Saturday afternoon.

Thankfully, he'd had to go into town a little earlier, otherwise we might have had to get the bus down together, which would have been thirty minutes of awkwardness I could do without.

'Where do you want to go?' he asked. He waved his arm around, trying to take in the expanse of Leeds. 'There's a whole city full of clothes that will transform me into a suitable, dare I say, eligible, life form.'

Eligible life form. I gave him a very hard stare from the sides of my eyes and frowned, thinking, *Where does he get this stuff from? Who is this person?* He didn't notice – he was apparently oblivious to my response to the things he said. 'Let's go to the markets,' I told him. 'We can get some decent stuff for a good price.'

'That sounds just the ticket.' I chose to let that one go unside-eyed.

I hadn't lived in Leeds for long, but I'd got to know the streets by walking and walking. When Trina, the only person I would call a proper friend at this stage, was off taking part in her extra-curricular activities, I would get the bus into town and walk. I would go up and down roads and side roads, taking in shops and emporiums, second-hand treasure troves and out-of-the-way restaurants. I would see where the cafés were,

the takeaways, the electronic shops. I would note the areas that were a bit too shady for me to go any closer to. I'd also found the quickest bus route out of the city centre to Chapeltown where I could buy my Black magazines and newspapers and hair products. I immersed myself in the city by walking its streets and unearthing the secrets you usually found by living somewhere for a long time.

Heath followed me as I led us on a short walk to the markets. We wandered past the rotund Corn Exchange, across the double road, and joined the groups of people moving like shoals of fish towards the big glass entrance above which was emblazoned: LEEDS CITY MARKETS.

As soon as we stepped through the doors, I felt the atmosphere change, almost like the moment you step outside an airport in a different country – the air changes, the pressure changes, your body experiences this new place in so many visceral ways. I felt like I had stepped into a microcosm, a planet that was contained in this historic building. The glass roof was striped with intricate ironwork, the walls above the stalls were moulded with white masonry and beautiful black iron corning, creating the effect of a palace dropped right in the centre of a busy city.

Heath and I navigated our way through the slightly-too-close-together stalls, all overflowing with their wares. The people talking, mingling happily, the bright colours of piled-high fruit, veg, sweets, fabrics, the smells of the food, fish, meat, perfumes – all created a comforting, buzzy backdrop.

'I'm thinking the Zack-from-*Saved-by-the-Bell* look for you,' I told Heath above the sound of the market. 'You've got the blond hair and innocent looks already, we just need to add jeans, a white T-shirt and a lumberjack shirt. A couple of other shirts. Nice jacket – either black leather or one of the jackets with white arms and a letter on the front.'

‘I have no idea who Zack from saved by the whatever you said is.’

I stopped walking and pulled him to a halt, too. ‘You what? You haven’t heard of *Saved by the Bell*?’

‘I am extremely sad to say I have not.’

Having stopped so suddenly, I became an obstruction in the lane we were walking in and the person behind me, clearly having no time to ask me to move, simply shoved me aside, forcing me up against Heath’s body. His hands instinctively reached out to steady me and we stood for a second or two, him holding me, me mortified. Extremely embarrassed, I stepped away and started walking again at speed, trying to put that moment as far behind me as I could. ‘I can’t believe you haven’t heard of *Saved by the Bell*.’ I started talking again – loudly, to try to drown out the embarrassment that was still raging in my head – without checking he was walking with me. ‘Wow, have you been living under rock or something? How can you not know *Saved by the Bell*. Heathen.’

‘No, it’s Heath,’ he said.

‘What?’ I said and turned to him.

‘You called me Heathen. My name is Heath. I have no “e” or “n” on the end.’

‘I meant—’

He grinned at me, the action a little breathtaking because I’d never seen him smile like that before. His eyes danced, his dimples deepened and he seemed to be staring right into my soul.

‘Can’t believe I fell for that,’ I said and carried on walking.

‘I can’t believe you fell for it, either,’ he laughed, keeping pace. ‘I am sorry I disappoint you so about this programme.’

We arrived at the first circular clothes stall, run by a man with bushy brown eyebrows whose neck seemed to blend into his head and

shoulders without any clear demarcation. Men's clothes – band T-shirts, white T-shirts, normal button shirts, denim jackets, leather jackets and all types of jeans – hung from hangers the full 360 of the stall.

'I take it this is where the transformation is to take place?' Heath said.

'The start of it,' I replied. 'Now, do you like any of those T-shirts?'

'Not a Motorhead or heavy metal fan,' he stated.

'As I suspected, you're going to be a good Zack.'

'From *The Bell Saved Me*?'

'*Saved by the Bell*, but near enough, I suppose.' We chose white T-shirts, a couple of lumberjack shirts in blue and green – red would have been too much this soon. A couple of pairs of jeans – black and blue – and the all-important jacket. I wanted to go for a grey jacket with cream arms and a large letter Y, but I could see Heath was trying – and failing – to control his revulsion at the idea, so I went for a black leather blazer instead. He looked cool when he slipped it on over his usual clothes. Cooler than I actually thought possible. I'd nodded my approval at him. He held out his arms and spun in a slow circle so I could get a full look at him. 'You like?' he said when we were facing each other.

'I like. The jacket,' I added quickly. 'I like the jacket.'

Heath gave me a wry smile as he broke eye contact and took the jacket off. We'd been having too much fun, I realised. Too much fun and we'd both inadvertently forgotten what this was all about – finding him a girlfriend who wasn't me.

Stop this, I told myself sternly. Don't start thinking that Trina might have a point about you and him. Because honestly, it's not as if you're capable of feeling anything for anyone, is it? It's not as if you have any idea what love or anything close to love is all about, is it?

We'd been to almost every clothes stall in the market, collecting bags of clothes for him – obviously I stayed well away when he found a stall for his socks and underwear – and now we were laden with a whole new wardrobe.

'The trick to keeping these clothes in good condition is to wash them carefully,' I said to Heath as we headed for the exit, nearly a dozen bulging bags between us. I'd started being a bit cooler, a bit more removed, because I did not want either of us to forget what we were doing and why we were doing this. 'They last longer if you wash them at the right temperature, reshape them while wet, hang them out to dry.'

'I did not realise I would be receiving life lessons as well as purchasing a new wardrobe collection,' he said.

His accent and phraseology was off the scale today. The weird thing was, it wasn't his natural way of speaking. I had heard him speak in class, in the canteen, in the common room, sometimes even when he was talking to me – and he wasn't verbose and almost painfully 'proper'. I was going to have to bring it up with him sometime.

'Life lessons are always included,' I said as we reached the pavement outside.

'What about washing lessons? Are they included? Would you come over to my halls and show me what to do?'

'Do it *for* you, you mean? I think not,' I replied.

'Worth a try,' he chuckled.

When we arrived at the bus stop, I handed over his bags. 'I'm meeting Trina and a few other friends to go to the pictures, so I guess I'll see you around?'

'You are definitely not going to accompany me to the barbers to get a cut?' he asked hopefully.

'I do not need to experience that. Just get it cut short all over and

leave the front long, so you get the full Zack effect. I can't remember his surname. Urgh, I was only watching it last year and all that revision has knocked out these vital pieces of information. This is a travesty, you know? That exam prep has replaced important stuff. I mean, what if I end up on *Mastermind* and "what is Zack from *Saved by the Bell*'s surname" is the deciding question? Can you imagine the pain?"

'I understand your concern about a very-likely-to-occur situation. That is why I suggest you quit college, reacquaint yourself with *Save My Bell* and all would be well in the world.'

'Oh you'd like that, wouldn't you?' I shot back at him. I gave him a beady-eyed look. 'You've clearly got issues with me being top in our Psychology department, so you'd prefer it if I left to concentrate on the important things, wouldn't you?'

He laughed, his eyes crinkling and his face creasing. 'Yes, you caught me out. I am, indeed, trying to get to first place in class.'

'Good on you, admitting that,' I laughed. 'Anyway, look, down on the Headrow there are a couple of barbers, think there's a hairdresser, too. Someone will sort you out.'

'Thank you,' he said with meaning, sounding genuinely touched. 'I really appreciate it.'

'I'll see you around,' I told him and began to walk away. I stopped, turned back. 'And by the way, it's called *Saved by the Bell*, not *Save My Bell*.'

'I'll remember that,' he called after me. And I knew, even without looking around this time, that he stood and watched me walk away until I was out of sight.

4

8 AUGUST, 2022

CLEO & WALLACE'S HOUSE, HOVE-BRIGHTON BORDER
EARLY EVENING

Keys returned to pocket. That's the first thing I do when I shut the front door behind me. Laptop on wooden box seat, hat in hat box, mask in small wicker wash basket, coat on hook, shoes in shoe cubbies. I'm not sure when my life became about boxes, but that's what coming home is like.

'Hello?' I call as I go through the routine. 'Hello?'

At the turn at the end of our long, tiled hallway, a head appears. I have to pause to assess that face: close-shaved head, dark brown skin, big black eyes, long eyelashes, full, kissable mouth . . . And at first glance, I still can't be sure. I mean, could be my husband, could be his twin. From here, without my glasses, I can't see the chicken pox scar close to the hairline on the left-hand side of his forehead, which is usually the clue as to whether I'm speaking to Wallace or his twin brother.

'Hello,' he says without emotion. Wallace.

I know it's taken him a huge amount of effort to strip any kind of feeling from showing in his voice. He is – and has been since I've known him – an emotional person. But since his wife decided to

divorce him, he's tried to be less expressive until, I assume, he understands what is going on.

'Hello,' I reply. 'How are you?'

His face twitches for a second like he wants to scream at me: *How the hell do you think I am?* 'I've just finished making dinner, if you want some?' he replies, avoiding my question.

I do not want dinner. Everything I eat nowadays, when I do actually eat, tastes like nothing. My tastebuds have been blunted and there is a solid and immovable rock that sits at the back of my throat. I have to swallow hard several times to get saliva or water past it and every bite of food feels like I am pushing a bowling ball down a plughole. I love my food, as well. I love to eat and I love to drink, and I especially love Wallace's food. He pours so much love into every dish – he uses the best ingredients, he takes his time and the results are always out of this world. Before Wallace, when people talked about the languages of love, I would wonder if they had nothing better to do with themselves. But then I met a man who could cook, who would seem to tell me how he felt by making elaborate meals and I, too, became someone with nothing better to do with myself.

'Since when do you call it dinner?' I tease. 'I thought it was breakfast, dinner and tea?'

'Well, you've obviously got in my brain. I meant tea, of course.'

'Nah, I'm not having that! You've finally realised that it's breakfast, lunch and dinner.'

'Really? So those women at school who served you your daytime meal, what did you call them?'

'Well, di—'

'Sorry, what was that?' Wallace says with raised eyebrows and a big grin spread right across his face.

I clear my throat, uncomfortably.

Waiting for me to reply, Wallace moves into the part of the corridor where I can still see him but he stays a good distance away.

‘You know what, I haven’t washed my hands yet.’

‘Come now, don’t be difficult, Cleo, what did you call the women at school who served your daytime meal?’

I roll my eyes and try not to smile, no, grin at him. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘Shall I prompt your memory?’ he says, coming a little closer. ‘Seeing as you’ve forgotten.’

‘If you must,’ I reply. I can’t look at him. Sometimes he’s like the sun, too luminous, and ultimately dangerous if I stare too long – mainly because I will want to fall into him and never leave. I will fall into him and forget what all of this is about.

‘Dinner ladies,’ he says with a small, triumphant smile.

‘All right,’ I concede. ‘They were called dinner ladies.’

‘So what does that mean about the meal they were serving?’

‘That it’s called lunch and they were confused about what time they should be doing their jobs?’

He grins again and I feel my knees go funny as my stomach flips. I’m pretty sure a woman of my age and experience shouldn’t have those sorts of things happen to her. She should be stoic and unflinching in the face of the smiles of the man she’s divorcing.

‘Is that sore loserism, Miss Cleo?’

‘No,’ I say brusquely, trying to get control of this. Remind us both that we’re not those people any more. ‘No, that is a woman who needs to wash her hands, change her clothes.’

The smile stays in place as I march down the corridor on shaky legs, skirt around him and go to the toilet under the stairs. I shut and

lock the door behind me, take my time to wet my hands, lather them with soap and then rinse them clean before drying them on the towel hanging through the metal ring. I remember when we put that towel holder up, how it'd been such a big deal, us having this big house all to ourselves, us doing DIY. Me letting him use my drill to make holes in the wall to hang the chrome circle.

It all seems so . . . trivial now. Pointless. I've done that. I've made our life together pointless. I can't look in the mirror while I wash my hands. I can't look in any reflective surface for too long because I will see who I am.

And I do not want to see the truth reflected back at me.

Wallace is outside the bathroom, leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest. There are so many things I want to say to him, so many words that I know would explain everything and take away the distress that defines our relationship. But I can't say any of them. I can't remove or alleviate any of this agony. Not now. Not yet.

I open my mouth to say something, knowing the right words will find their place in my throat, on my tongue and then out of my mouth. Maybe a return to our messing around earlier, maybe to ask what's for dinner, maybe to find out how his day has gone because he didn't answer me earlier. Nothing. Nothing comes out, even though my mouth is there agape, ready and willing to say something my brain has not provided. I close my mouth, feeling more than a little foolish. Wallace seems to understand that there is something I want to say but can't and he decides to close the gap between us. And then he is standing right in front of me, too close for me to do anything but stare at him, feel his body heat, inhale his scent and long for him. Suddenly he scoops me up and kisses me with all the drama that is usually missing from our everyday lives.

We're normal, see? We're people who give each other the odd peck, who cuddle and hug, drop the odd kiss onto each other's heads or the soft space on the back of the other's neck, but not the big snogs. Not the grandiose pashes. Sometimes not even as a prelude to sex. Normal is as normal kisses. Until . . . his grip on me becomes firm, holding me tight in case I slip away. In case I realise this is the last thing we should be doing. That in actual fact, we're doing divorce all wrong. We haven't argued yet, not about the divorce, we haven't started tearing strips off each other, we haven't even started on the snide looks, passive-aggressive sighs and irritated tuts.

I don't hesitate in kissing him back. I don't even think to. He presses his body against mine and I do the same. I feel his fingers on the bottom of my top and the tugging sensation of him pulling it from the waistband of my jeans. I kiss him more urgently. His fingers go to my jeans, freeing the button from its buttonhole. I reach for his trousers, opening his button and unzipping him, running my hand up and down the thick shaft of his erection. And then his fingers are inside my knickers and I sigh as they brush over my pubic hair. I moan softly, feel my body convulse a little as two of his fingers slip inside me. The kissing is more intense and I want nothing more than to undress him right now, have him undress me and for us to—

A key is inserted in the front door and it swings open almost immediately. 'Yo, who's in?' Franklyn calls from the doormat where he's going through the process that I went through earlier. Only he's quicker, *much quicker*. 'Smells good in here, so I'm guessing Wals is back,' he continues at the same volume as he progresses down the corridor. Franklyn is not quiet at the best of times. 'No disrespect, though, Cleo, cos your food is top notch. Could eat your yam and chofi till kingdom come, not forgetting fufu and soup, but when it comes to—'

Franklyn stops talking when he turns the corner and finds us standing close together outside the kitchen door looking extremely guilty. I'd only managed to do up my trousers, not properly pull down my top, Wallace only managed to pull up the zip from where I'd opened his trousers and hadn't got the button done up again.

Franklyn looks from his twin to me, then back again at his twin, but his final gaze – glare – lands on me. Because he knows that the divorce is all on me. He wants to know what the hell I'm doing to his brother; he wants to know what the hell his brother is doing even giving me the time of day. (I know that's what he thinks because I've heard him tell Wallace exactly this – more than once – in his not-very-quiet tones.)

'You two are messy,' he says with disgust coating every word, every syllable. 'Proper, proper messy.' He kisses his teeth so hard I'm surprised his mouth doesn't cave in on itself. He shakes his head to underline his feelings, then opens the door beside the kitchen to the back of the house. 'I'm washing my hands down the back,' he throws over his shoulder as the door shuts behind him, but it sounds very much like, 'I can't stand to look at either of you right now.'

I drop my face into my hands; part of me wants to cry with the humiliation and the look that Franklyn just fired at me, but most of me wants to laugh. I want to double over and laugh, because being caught having sex, or almost having sex, with your ex by his brother will never not be funny to me. But it's not funny. I shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't be giving him hope. Less importantly, I shouldn't be giving myself that same hope.

'I'm going for a shower,' I say without raising my face from my hands.

'Can I join you?' Wallace jokes. I don't need to look at my husband to know he has the cheeky smile on his face that made me fall for him,

and possibly one eyebrow raised at the thought of what we could do in or out of the shower.

‘And further traumatise your brother and make him hate me even more than he already does?’

I feel the grin disappear, and an emotional and physical distance land with a thud between us. ‘I’m sorry, Wallace, I shouldn’t have done that. We need to keep our distance. Not do that again.’

He shrugs. ‘If that’s what you want,’ he states and I turn to the stairs. He opens the door to the understairs toilet, I presume to wash his hands, but pauses. ‘Franklyn doesn’t hate you,’ he says as I climb the stairs. ‘He could never hate you . . . Just like I could never hate you.’

You both would. If you knew the truth, you would both hate me with a fury that would never, ever end.

Horsforth, 1997

‘I’m thinking of trying it on with your Romantic Comedy mate,’ Trina said to me. We were back in our usual place in the common room, slightly shielded. I had stopped torturing Maltesers in coffee and had moved on to Minstrels. They took longer to disintegrate and left a thick, syrupy sludge on top of the sugar at the bottom of the cup that took an age to edge onto my tongue.

I wasn’t looking at Trina, but I guessed she was looking over at Heath, who was sitting where he used to sit when he stared at me, but he was not alone now. He was very rarely alone these days and he very, very rarely stared at me.

‘Go for it,’ I told her without looking over at him. ‘Although you’re going to have to get in line. I mean, the guy is never without female company nowadays. Homeboy is on everyone’s list at the moment.’

‘And you don’t mind?’

That did make me refocus my attention on her. Every part of her was saying she suspected I minded. In fact, she looked like she thought I minded very, very much.

‘Why would I mind? This was the plan and the best possible outcome.’

‘The plan, huh?’

‘Yes, the plan. I told you that I was going to spruce him up. Turn him from Nashville reject to Zack from *Saved by the Bell*. And there we have it. He gets lots of female company and I get to sit here without him staring at me. Win. Win. Win.’

‘And you’re not even a little bit jealous? Not even a little bit?’ Trina pressed as she wound one of the red locks from her newly installed curly extensions around her fingers. She’d taken to wearing lots of gold rings on her fingers and painting her nails to match the colour highlight of her hair. Trina was so beautiful and stylish I often felt like I didn’t make enough of an effort. Well, to be fair, I didn’t make much of an effort, but Trina’s immaculate looks meant I *noticed* that I didn’t make much of an effort and I wondered if I should. My signature baggy jeans (sometimes so ripped I had to wear leggings underneath), comic-book-character T-shirt and longline black cardigan with plain black extensions pulled back into a ponytail were so laid-back next to my best friend’s looks. I usually comforted myself with the fact that we were all different and some of us needed to fade into the background to allow others to shine. ‘Not even an ickle bit jealous?’

I did look at Heath then, my attention sweeping over him like it would a stranger I’d been asked to assess. He was certainly good-looking now you could see his face and his clothes didn’t make you baulk.

‘No jealousy,’ I confirmed to Trina. ‘Not even the slightest bit of it.’

‘Don’t believe you,’ she said, affecting a Trinidadian accent for a moment to emphasise how much I was deluding myself. Having known her for six months now, I knew she only deployed this accent when she wanted me to know she was serious.

‘Fine, don’t believe me. I have no interest in Heath. Our project was done a million years ago, and he’s stopped staring at me . . . mostly. It’s all good.’

‘He is kinda cute, though,’ Trina said. She was obviously trying a different tactic.

‘Trina, my love, my best friend, the path is open. I can introduce you, if you like? I will not mind at all.’

‘Nah, I’m good. I’ve got other *tings* distracting me.’

‘Oh yeah? Who?’

‘That, I cannot tell you right now. But all I can say is that my RC is in full swing.’

Outraged, horrified and completely shocked, I revolved in my seat until I was facing her properly. ‘You cow!’ I hissed. ‘You absolute cow! You’ve made me the sassy best friend. The Sassy *Black* Best Friend. It’s not right. And it’s not fair.’

She shrugged her shoulders at me, before tipping her head in Heath’s direction. ‘You could climb out of Sassy Black Best Friend hell really easily. I’m sure if you gave homeboy even the tiniest indication that you’re interested, he would be here like that!’ She made a circle with one hand and then was about to do something crude with the other hand, so I snatched my gaze away from her.

‘No need for any of that,’ I said.

She laughed out loud at my horror. ‘How come you don’t like him?’ she asked when she’d calmed down.

I risked looking in her direction and thankfully she'd stopped what she'd been going to do with her hands. 'Dunno, just don't.'

'Do you like guys?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Do you only like guys?'

'Yes.'

'Do you like white guys?'

'I think so,' I replied.

'You think so?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'So you've only been out with Black men?'

'No.'

'You've been out with Black men and white men?'

'No.'

'You've only been out with Asian men? Pacific South Islander men? Middle Eastern men?'

'No. No. And no.'

'Come on, girl, give me a clue here . . .' Her voice petered away as it finally dawned on her. 'Have you been out with *any* men?'

I paused before I admitted: 'No. I have not.'

'Oh, *ohhhhhh*. So you're still a—?'

'Yes, yes I am.'

'I thought we were close – why am I only hearing about this now?'

'Not something I ever talk about. Like ever.'

'Fair enough, but hey, how come when that idiot the other day said you looked like you'd been around a bit you didn't say anything? I mean, I was going to tump him down but you stopped me. Why didn't you say anything?'

‘What was I supposed to say? Oh, actually, random-man-who-means-nothing, I’m a virgin. In fact, I’ve never even kissed anyone. Oh, and, random-man-who-means-nothing, I’m starting to think there’s something wrong with me because I don’t feel anything for anyone? Is that what I should have said?’

‘Well, when you put it like that . . . so you really don’t like that guy at all?’

‘Who, Heath? No. I don’t.’

‘Is there anyone you like?’

I shook my head. ‘I mean, guys off the telly and movies and stuff. But the ones in real life? No. I can’t seem to jump over that line. I can’t feel stuff. I don’t know if that makes sense to you?’ It didn’t make sense to me. Not really. When I was helping Heath with changing his image, I had enjoyed myself. We’d had fun together, and if I was in one of the movies or books I devoured, our eyes should have met, I should have felt a tingle deep inside, stars exploding, feelings amassing. And none of that had happened. None of it. *Maybe I’m broken*, I thought for the umpteenth time. *Maybe I am broken. Maybe there is something wrong with me.*

‘We need to get you laid,’ Trina stated. She said this with the authority of someone who knew what was what.

‘Maybe.’

‘No maybe about it, babe. We need to find you a man and burst that cherry and then you’ll see that there’s nothing wrong with you.’

‘Hmm, maybe. But I don’t think I can jump into bed with just anyone, though.’

‘You won’t have to,’ she reassured me. ‘We’ll find you someone. Someone nice.’

I watched my best friend; she was holding her head in a rigid

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position where she could only look at me, which told me quite clearly she wanted to look over at Heath.

‘Not him,’ I told her. ‘Someone else. Anyone else. Not him.’

She seemed to deflate at that, resigning herself to possibly having to work a little harder at finding me a man who I might want to kiss. ‘OK. Not him,’ she grumbled.

Definitely not him.

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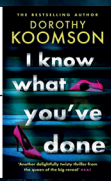
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