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The One That Got Away

a short story



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Gayle**

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*The One That
Got Away*
a short story

**Mike
Gayle**

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To Claire for everything

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1. Now

‘he’s what?’
‘Getting married next Saturday.’

I shake my head at my best friend Pete, who is sitting across from me at the table in the pub, still not quite able to believe what he’s telling me. ‘Are you sure we’re talking about the same person? Beth, my ex-girlfriend, the only woman in the world who claims she doesn’t believe in love? You mean her?’

He nods. ‘I’m afraid so.’

‘And you’re absolutely, one hundred per cent, swear on your nephews’ lives – especially the really cute one with the freckles and the big eyes – certain?’

Pete laughs. ‘Look, I’m not swearing on anyone’s life, least of all little Eddie’s, he’s my favourite, but yes, I am completely and utterly sure. Unless you think Amara would lie about something like that? I bumped into her an hour ago at the gym, and she couldn’t wait to tell me.’

My lip curls instinctively at the mention of Amara, Beth’s best mate. She was always a bit of a gossip and loved nothing more than stirring up a spot of drama if she could. But she wasn’t a liar. If she said it, it has to be true.

Beth, my ex, the love of my life, the woman who dumped me just a few short weeks ago, really is getting married.

‘I can’t believe it,’ I say, panic working its way into my voice. ‘I just can’t. I mean, it’s been literally ten minutes since we split up.’

Pete pulls a face. ‘Ten minutes? More like six months, mate, but I hear what you’re saying. It does seem a bit out of character.’

‘You can say that again. I mean, who even is this bloke?’

‘Dunno,’ says Pete. ‘Amara’s spin class was about to start so she took off before I had a chance to ask any more questions. But it’s not really the point, is it? The point is, Beth’s getting married and it’s not to you. So, like I’ve been saying for ages, stop holding a candle for this woman and move on, just like she obviously has.’

Despite my friend's sage advice, that night back at my flat I can't stop thinking about Beth, and her upcoming nuptials. Okay, I haven't seen her in six months, but still, I felt sure, in my heart, in my gut, that our split was only temporary, that our story wasn't over. We were just too good together to be apart forever; surely all she needed was some time, some space, to figure that out, and that's what I've been giving her. So to hear that not only is she seeing someone new, but she's made up her mind to get married to this imposter, has hit me like a wrecking ball. This was not the way we were meant to end up; we were supposed to get our hard-earned, written-in-the-stars, course-of-true-love-never-did-run-smooth-but-comes-good-eventually happy ever after. What on earth went wrong?

In an attempt to answer this question I immediately set about some very unhealthy internet stalking, but since she blocked me on every platform as soon as we split and made all of her socials private, the only thing I discover – on LinkedIn – is that she's been promoted to assistant manager at the bookshop she works at.

My efforts thwarted, I head to bed and sleep fitfully, dreaming of Beth, Beth and more Beth – which explains why, the following day, instead of spending my lunch break at work eating a Pret sandwich at my desk as usual, I sprint full pelt over to the other side of town. I know what I'm doing is kind of extreme, I know it looks a lot like the actions of a man with a very loose grip on his sanity, and I know, given how things ended between us, that she could very well tell me to get lost – and she'd be well within her rights to do so. But I have to take this chance. I've got to at least try to find out what's going on.

Pouring with sweat from my exertion but trying my very best to look casual, I linger across the road from the little independent deli and café that happens to be just around the corner from Beth's bookshop and is the very place I know she always gets her lunch from.

Sure enough, a short while later she appears and joins the queue snaking out of the door. She looks beautiful, stunning even, a vision so lovely that I literally forget to breathe for a minute. She's close enough that were I to call her name she would almost certainly turn around and look at me with those warm and wonderful deep brown eyes of hers. But I want this to seem like a happy accident – I need for this to appear like an intervention of fate rather than a contrived meeting – and so I take a deep

breath, and after counting to twenty (in elephants, in case I rush), I cross the road and join the line behind the four other people who have managed to get in ahead of me.

As I stand there, heart pounding, hands shaking, I realise I have no idea what I might actually say when Beth inevitably spots me in the queue. I'm hoping a simple 'hello' might suffice, followed possibly by a casual 'Oh, of course, you work around here, don't you?' but quite how I'm going to segue from such trivial pleasantries to the more consequential 'I've heard you're getting married at the weekend, please don't go through with it, be with me instead!' is a detail I can't even begin to imagine. As it is, however, I needn't have worried, because at the very moment when, having collected her order, Beth should've turned and seen me, one of the staff drops a tray full of empty glasses and cups. The thunderous crash is so ear-splitting that as she leaves the deli she turns back to see what's going on, thereby completely missing me. Of course, I could alert her to my presence. I could say, 'Hi Beth, I thought it was you! What am I doing here? Oh, just running some errands, you know how it is, and I suddenly realised I was hungry and came here. Anyway, I don't suppose you fancy hanging out and catching up for a while, so that you can realise what you've lost and what a huge mistake you're about to make in getting married to some rando?' But I don't say any of that, of course, because a) I haven't got the bottle and b) as I look on, her face lights up at the sight of a man walking towards her. He's tall, he's handsome, and he's obviously completely and utterly smitten with her. Sweeping her up into his arms, he kisses her passionately as if trying to recreate a Robert Doisneau photograph, all smouldering Gallic intensity, before taking her by the hand and leading her up the street away from me, the two of them with eyes for no one but each other. It's like a stab through the heart, a punch to the gut or a frying pan to the face, and I'm stopped in my tracks. It's all very well knowing in theory that Beth is about to get married to someone else, but to see them together with my own eyes, to witness the obvious affection between them first-hand – it's just too much.

Later, as I sit on a nearby bench dejectedly devouring an admittedly nice, if horrifically overpriced, gourmet sandwich, I call Pete for moral support.

'You're an idiot,' my friend says once I've explained my foiled plan. 'And you're clearly not to be trusted.'

‘It’s like I can’t stop myself,’ I say despondently, suddenly unable to stomach any more of my sandwich. ‘I’m like a man possessed. How on earth am I going to get through this coming Saturday, knowing the woman I love is marrying someone that’s not me?’

And just like that, Pete – who’s very good at coming up with ideas – devises a plan: a plan to keep me distracted from thoughts of Beth, a plan that will hopefully stop me making a fool of myself, a plan that is in fact so ridiculous there’s a very good chance it just might work.

‘I’m going to completely fill your day,’ he says. ‘I’m going to cram it with so much bloke stuff, so much ludicrous lads-on-tour-not-quite-but-almost-stag-weekend energy, that you won’t be able to give Beth so much as a second thought.’

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2. Then

Two Years Earlier

Life just gets a bit . . . I don't know . . . lonely, that's all,' said my dad so matter-of-factly that if my heart had been made of glass it would've cracked from side to side. Before this conversation on the telephone – him in his house in Leeds and me in my flat in Slough – he'd never said a single word about how he felt about Mum leaving him two years ago for the obnoxious dentist at the clinic where she worked as a receptionist. Not a single word. I'd tried, of course, telling him how hurt and angry I'd been with Mum, and doing everything I could to coax him into telling me how he felt about it all, but while he was much more in touch with his feelings than, say, my granddad, who thought all talk of 'mental health' was 'for bedwetters', Dad still wasn't all that comfortable with sharing. And though I'd tried to explain how talking had helped me make peace with Mum and her decision, any time I attempted to get him to open up he'd just laugh dismissively or pull a face like I was offering him a cup of cold sick, and then change the subject.

Yet for some reason, prompted by the most innocent and non-probing of questions – 'So, tell me, Pops, what have you been up to this week?' – he began telling me how he hadn't been doing much really, besides keeping on top of his allotment, seeing his mate Derek for their weekly drink, and repainting the garage door. Then, out of nowhere, with no indication he was about to go deep, he'd dropped his 'lonely' bombshell, leaving me feeling a) terrible for not having noticed until now and b) desperate, as his only child, to do something, anything at all, to cheer him up.

'Why don't you come down and stay with me for a bit?' I suggested. 'You're always saying it would be nice to get out of Leeds for a while.'

'Thanks, son,' he replied, 'but I don't think I'd make for very good company at the moment. Besides which, my marrows are at a crucial stage right now, and if I miss watering them for even a single day it could be the end of them.'

‘Right,’ I said, trying my best not to feel insulted that he’d chosen attending to vegetables over spending time with me, his only son. ‘Okay, then how about trying to meet some new people by, I don’t know, joining some sort of club or society?’

Dad snorted derisively. ‘What, like pigeon fancying or bowling? I’m sixty-six, not eighty-six. Those sorts of things are for proper old people, and despite what you might think, I’m not there yet.’

And of course, my dad being my dad, the rest of the conversation continued like this, with me offering up suggestions and him batting them away like they were irritating insects bothering him on a summer’s day.

‘Well, thanks for that, Dad,’ I said half an hour later, drawing the conversation to a close having completely run out of ideas. ‘I can go to sleep happily knowing that my old man has confessed to feeling lonely but doesn’t actually want to do anything about it.’

Dad laughed. ‘I was just having a moment, that’s all. I’ll be fine tomorrow. Don’t you worry about me, son. I’ll be fine.’

Despite my best efforts, however, I did worry about him, in a way that I didn’t worry about Mum. Whenever I saw her she seemed more than happy with her choices and at least had the dreadful dentist for company, but my poor dad didn’t have anyone really, apart from me and Derek – and even at our best we weren’t exactly a replacement for the love of a good woman.

The following night I met Pete for a drink, and with Dad still very much on my mind I obviously wasn’t my usual sparkling self, because halfway through the evening he clapped his hands in front of my face and said, ‘Earth calling Reuben! What’s going on? You’re miles away.’

‘Sorry, mate,’ I replied, ‘I’m just a bit distracted about my dad.’ And then I told Pete all about his ‘lonely’ revelation and my feelings of failure for not having noticed.

‘You should get him on the apps,’ he suggested. ‘Although I’d steer him well away from the free ones, mind.’ He shuddered visibly. ‘There’s a bloke at work on a really grim one, and he said it’s like the Wild West on steroids.’

While the idea of signing my dad up to a load of dating apps had briefly occurred to me, I hadn’t suggested it to him because the very thought of what he might encounter out there was enough to put me off my

dinner. Besides which, my dad wasn't exactly what you'd call tech-savvy. Only the year before, he'd accidentally managed to order two hundred and twenty-two rolls of Sellotape from Amazon instead of the two he'd wanted, and I dreaded to think how he'd cope on Bumble or Tinder.

'I don't think he's an app man. And besides, isn't it all a bit, I don't know, clinical? Where's the romance in setting up a profile? Where's the eyes meeting across a crowded room? Where's the charming meet-cute of a story he gets to tell his grandchildren about how he met their step-gran?'

Pete rolled his eyes. 'Unlike you, the rest of us live in the real world, not some pie-in-the-sky romcom! No string orchestras, no kisses in the rain, and certainly no holding of boomboxes underneath young ladies' windows! And when you live in the real world, you don't just hang about waiting for fate to intervene, you take matters into your own hands.'

'Fine,' I said reluctantly. 'But I still say no apps.'

Pete thought for a minute. 'Okay, then how about some sort of self-help book? My Auntie Mary had one a few years back – I can't remember which – and apparently it changed her life. Overnight she went from being permanently single to being knee-deep in bloke totty.' He paused and laughed. 'Granted, it was balding, middle-aged, beer-belly totty, but then again, my auntie's no oil painting and it was totty all the same.'

And so it was that, when the weekend rolled around, instead of staying in bed until midday as was my usual habit, I got up early, caught the bus to Windsor and headed to Honigan's, the town's largest independent bookshop, housed in the oldest building on Peascod Street. And it was there, on that fateful day, that I first laid eyes on Beth.

3. Now

When I wake up on the morning of Beth's wedding, my first thought is about the dream I've just had. In it, I arrived at a medieval church, inexplicably wearing a dinner suit and bow tie, and marched inside, much to the shock and horror of all the well-wishers watching Beth in the process of getting hitched. Walking up to her, I was about to declare my undying love in front of everyone, as her fiancé looked on staring daggers, knives and pretty much every pointy object in the book at me, when I woke up, bringing me to my second thought of the morning: *who on earth is ringing my door buzzer at this unearthly hour?*

I try my best to avoid looking at the half-empty bottle of Jameson on the bedside table: last night's attempt to stop me thinking about Beth's impending nuptials. Throwing on my dressing gown, I head downstairs – as the release button on the intercom hasn't worked in years – and flinging open the front door I'm surprised to find Pete looking back at me. Even more bewildering, he's wearing a black suit, thin black tie and gleaming patent-leather shoes. Looking me up and down, he shakes his head like a disappointed schoolteacher.

'You're not even dressed.'

'Dressed for what?'

He sighs heavily, as if I'm deliberately trying his patience. 'Have you not listened to a thing I've been saying to you all week? Today's your Anti-Wedding Day. Today we're doing all the things that are going to help you forget about . . . you know what.'

I rub my hands over my face in an effort to fully drag my consciousness out of last night's whiskey-induced stupor. He's right: me, Pete and our mates Omari, Steve and Big Tony spent the week talking about doing something today, bandying around the most ridiculous ideas of how to take my mind off Beth's wedding. In the Notes app on Pete's phone, under the title 'Things To Do On The Day Your Ex Gets Married', he'd written down everything from chartering a private jet to take us clubbing in Ibiza to a weekend of white-water rafting in the Canadian Rockies. But it

was just pub talk, of course, mates chatting nonsense for the sheer fun of it, not a concrete plan of action.

‘You really want us to go through with all that?’

‘Of course, why wouldn’t we?’

‘Well, for starters, I’m pretty sure we priced some of the ideas up at the pub on Wednesday, and even the cheapest was going to cost a small fortune.’

‘And?’

‘And, well, none of us have got a small fortune, have we?’

Pete laughs. ‘Well, not anymore we haven’t.’ He turns somewhat theatrically and looks in the direction of the road, where a bright-red car is parked – a car which, to my eye, looks suspiciously like a Ferrari 458 Spider.

My jaw falls open. ‘You didn’t?’

Pete grins. ‘Oh yes I did.’

‘But . . . but how?’

‘I cashed in some savings, didn’t I?’

‘Pete, you idiot, tell me you haven’t spent your mortgage deposit!’

He shrugs. ‘Of course not, just some of it. It’s a hire, and you’ve only got it for the next . . .’ He checks his watch. ‘Twenty-two hours and eight minutes. And if you crash it, I’m screwed. But I couldn’t leave my boy hanging in his time of need, could I? It’s what bros are for.’

I simultaneously want to hug and throttle my best friend, but go for the hug in the end because Pete’s selflessness has actually brought man tears to my eyes. The only other times I’ve come close to being this emotional in adulthood were when England beat Germany 2–0 during Euro 2020, and the day Beth and I split up. I’ll have to pay him back, of course – there’s no way I can let my oldest friend go without – but the fact that he’d even think to do something as crazy as this just to cheer me up on this most miserable of days means the world.

Heading back upstairs with Pete in tow, I quickly jump in the shower before throwing on an old sweatshirt, jeans and a pair of trainers, but when I appear in the living room and tell him I’m ready, he’s clearly not happy.

‘Where do you think you’re going dressed like that?’

I raise an eyebrow in confusion, then look again at Pete’s suit, and suddenly it makes sense. Of course, this was one of the many ideas we

cooked up in the pub: to spend the day dressed like the main characters in *Reservoir Dogs*, because, well, why wouldn't you?

'Right,' I say, wondering if I have a clean dress shirt as I head back to my bedroom and begin rifling through the wardrobe for my black suit. 'You'd better tell me the plan for the day,' I call out to him. 'Or I'm going to spend the whole of it playing catch-up.'

As I dress, Pete takes me through the itinerary he's written in the Notes app on his phone. 'Okay, so I know we talked about having breakfast at that posh Michelin-starred hotel you mentioned, but due to financial constraints we've had to swap that out for breakfast at The Plough. After that we're heading over to Cheltenham for the racing – you and me in the Ferrari, and the rest of the boys in Omari's motor. As well as a flutter on the gee-gees, we're having lunch there, then dinner at a nearby swanky hotel that Big Tony says does killer steaks, and from there we're off to a new nightclub in Bristol where I've sorted us a VIP table. And after that I figure it's job done: she who cannot be named will be hitched, you'll have been distracted all day, and the rest of us will have had the time of our lives. It's a win-win for everyone.'

I can't believe it. I really do have some of the best friends in the world. And even though I know I'm in danger of getting all emotional again, I'm about to thank Pete when my phone rings, and without thinking I take the call, little realising that everything, absolutely everything, is about to change.

4. Then

Standing in what a sign informed me was Honigan's 'Mind, Body and Spirit' section, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of choice on offer. There was, it seemed, a huge demand for this kind of thing, and there were an inordinate number of authors prepared to offer words of wisdom for prices ranging from £8.99 to a staggering £24.99 for the latest imported top-ten *New York Times* bestseller. This was going to be a lot harder than I'd thought.

As I scanned the vast array of books with titles like *You Are Unstoppable!: How to build the awesome life you deserve*; *Where's the Doughnut?: Master the art of self-control in just four weeks*; and my favourite, *The Moon and You: How learning to track your lunar cycle can bring you wealth and happiness*, it occurred to me that this whole process would be a lot easier if I knew what I was looking for. What I really needed was a book entitled *My Dad Is Sad!: How to support a male parent after your mum dumps him in order to run off with the dentist who gave you your first braces*, but sadly there was nothing even remotely close to that.

At random I picked up *Learn Your Love Language: A 28-day guide to finding what sets your heart aflame!*, but after reading the back of it – which was littered with quotes from TikTok users and peppered with an overzealous use of exclamation marks – I concluded that Dad might not be its target audience. Returning it to the shelf, I picked up another, only to discover that it was entitled *The Big O: How to supercharge your feelings of sexual ecstasy*, and it was at this precise moment, with the book still clutched in my hands, that Beth first came into my life.

'Hi. I couldn't help noticing that you look a bit lost.'

I turned to see a woman with the most beautiful dark-brown eyes I had ever seen. She had dark shoulder-length wavy hair, a scattering of adorable light-brown freckles across the bridge of her delicately pierced nose, and was wearing jeans, Doc Marten boots and a cream cardigan over a navy-blue t-shirt, pinned to which was a Honigan's staff badge emblazoned with the name *Beth*.

‘Do you need any help at all,’ she continued, ‘or are you happy browsing?’

Shoving the book back on the shelf and hoping beyond hope that she hadn’t seen the cover, I smiled at her. ‘Actually, yeah, I could do with a hand. I’m looking for a self-help book – not for me, you understand, I’m absolutely fine. Well, maybe *fine*’s not the word, I suppose *okay* would be a better one . . . Yes, I’m okay. What was the question again?’

I had no idea where this bout of nervous energy had come from. Usually, I was quite good at talking to women I found attractive, but this time I was all stammering and awkwardness. Thankfully, rather than running off and calling security, Beth just nodded politely and looked as if she might be trying to stifle a grin.

‘You were looking for a self-help book.’

‘Yes,’ I said, trying to regain my composure. ‘It’s for my dad. He retired a couple of years ago, and then, almost immediately, my mum left him for someone else. Funny story, he was our family dentist, and the reason my teeth are so straight.’ Without any encouragement whatsoever I drew back my lips in a grimace to show her exactly how straight they were. In response she gave me a funny look, but even then I couldn’t seem to stop myself. The presence of this woman was wreaking havoc on my ability to act even remotely like a normal human being. And so, not only did I go on to tell her how long I’d had to wear the braces, I also revealed that my dad now had to travel across Leeds to go to a different practice that depressingly was nowhere near as good.

‘He didn’t just lose a wife,’ I concluded somewhat insanely, ‘he lost the best dentist this side of West Yorkshire too.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ She proceeded to turn away and cough, though it sounded a lot like she was trying to cover up a laugh.

‘Anyway,’ I said, trying to claw back my dignity, ‘long story short, earlier this week I was chatting to my dad on the phone and he confessed that he’s actually been feeling quite lonely for some time.’

Suddenly, all traces of amusement disappeared and her face was filled with genuine concern. ‘Oh, that’s awful. I’m really sorry to hear that.’ She turned to the wall of books in front of us, quickly scanned the spines, and then like a precision-guided missile plucked out a book with a silver-and-gold cover.

‘This one, *Your Time Will Come: Dating tips and tricks for finding love in later life*, is a store bestseller. A regular customer swears it turned her dating life around, and’ – she checked the cover displaying its sales to date – ‘about ten million other people agree with her. It’s been out over a decade but they refresh it from time to time to keep up with all the latest trends in dating.’

I beamed at her. ‘You’ve sold it to me. I’ll take it.’

‘Glad to be of help. Is there anything else you need?’

Just your phone number, thanks, I imagined myself saying suavely.

‘No,’ I replied, wishing I indeed had the guts to be more debonair, ‘that’s fine, thanks.’

‘Well, in that case, just follow me and I’ll put that through the till for you.’

And that was that – she rang up the book, along with some stamps and wrapping paper, and I left the store with my purchases, all too aware that I had left my heart behind with Beth.

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5. Now

Hey Reuben, it's me.'

Even if I'd followed Pete's advice and deleted her number six months ago, even if her name and photo didn't flash up on my phone when the call came in, I'd know from the first second, from the very first syllable she uttered, who it was. It's Beth. My Beth. And she's calling me, her ex-boyfriend, on her wedding day.

And her opening gambit in our first exchange in over half a year isn't 'Hi, how are you?' or 'Long time no see' or even 'I bet I'm the last person you expected to hear from today', but instead these words: 'I know it's going to sound really strange, and I know I've got absolutely no right to ask, but I need your help. I really need you to come and get me.'

I don't know how to react. This makes no sense at all. I have to be dreaming. I have to still be lying in bed sleeping off last night's excess. This can't really be happening, can it? I pinch the skin on my arm hard, really digging in my nails, and it hurts. It hurts a lot. So it seems I am awake after all.

'You want me to . . . what?'

'Come and get me.'

'From . . . from . . . where?'

Under the circumstances, her reply is everything it shouldn't be: clear, calm and cool-headed.

'From my wedding,' she says. 'I need you to come and get me from my wedding.'

A tsunami of questions crashes over me: *What's happened? Is she okay? Is she in some sort of danger? And why on earth does she need rescuing from her own wedding?* But I don't voice a single one of them, because I know that would be to completely misunderstand the unspoken, yet deeper, more fundamental, question Beth is actually asking: *Can I count on you?*

This is Beth's equivalent of the sort of ridiculous question me and my friends will debate in the pub: 'It's midnight, you get a call from me saying I've killed a man. Do you call the police or put a shovel in the boot of your

car and help me bury the body?’ It’s a question less about aiding and abetting a crime (although with my friends that can’t definitely be ruled out) than it is about whether or not you’d have your friend’s back, whether they can count on you in a crisis, and this question of Beth’s – delivered on her wedding day, no less – is pretty much the same. She wants to know if I have her back. She needs to know if she can count on me.

‘I’m leaving now,’ I hear myself saying as, figuratively speaking, I look around for a shovel to throw into the boot of the car. ‘Just tell me where to meet you and I’ll be there.’

‘I knew I could count on you,’ she says, and the relief in her voice makes me feel like I’m king of the hill, like I’m top of the heap. ‘I knew you’d be there for me.’

Ending the call, I’m so full of adrenaline that I’m practically twitching. This is it, our romcom moment, the beginning of our happy ending, the point at which the guy gets the girl. Turning to Pete, I quickly brief him on the situation. Unsurprisingly, he’s completely horrified.

‘You want to use the very expensive, highly engineered sports car I hired to take your mind off the fact that your ex is getting married today, and drive it over to the Cotswolds so you can rescue this very same ex from her own wedding?’

‘I know it sounds mad when you put it like that,’ I say. ‘In fact, I’m not entirely sure I haven’t actually lost my mind, to be honest with you. I don’t know what’s gone on, but Beth needs me, mate, she really does, and I just can’t let her down.’

‘But this is madness. Whatever it is she thinks she needs right now, why on earth does it have to involve you? Mate, this is so typical of you. You’re listening to your heart, not your head. You’re not thinking straight, but I am. This whole thing just smells off. I’m telling you, don’t have anything to do with it. I’m telling you, whichever way she’s telling you to go, let’s go the opposite.’

‘Please,’ I say, not wanting to get into this with him right now. ‘Just give me the keys.’

‘What about our plans?’ he says, running a protective hand over the bulge in his jacket pocket where the keys are. ‘What about the boys? We can’t cancel everything now, it’s all arranged.’

‘Then don’t.’ I wonder if I’m going to have to take the keys from him by force. ‘I’m absolutely fine with you all having a great time without me. Maybe if this whole thing with Beth doesn’t take too long, I’ll call you, find out where you are and catch up with you.’

Pete shakes his head, knowing me too well to be taken in by my words. ‘The boys won’t like this. They won’t like this at all.’

‘Okay, maybe they won’t, but they’ll understand. They’ll know this is something I just have to do.’

My crazy logic must make some sort of sense to Pete, because he lets out an anguished grunt and then, screwing up his face, reaches into his pocket, takes out the keys and tosses them to me.

‘I’d better not end up regretting this,’ he says. ‘Now hurry up, before I change my mind.’

As the Ferrari’s 562-hp engine roars to life, fear shoots up and down my spine. I haven’t driven in ages, let alone a beast like this. But in spite of the terror raging inside me, there’s also an element of excitement at being behind the wheel of such a powerful car. As I adjust the mirrors and catch sight of Pete’s terrified face, however, fear wins the battle. What if I take a corner too quickly and lose control of the car? What if I scratch it trying to squeeze past that badly parked van at the end of the road? What if someone carjacks me at the traffic lights?

And yet, despite all the dread and trepidation clawing away at my chest, holding my heart and lungs in their cold, vice-like grip, I know that getting out of the car and, for instance, returning to the flat and going back to bed is not an option. For better or for worse, I’m now a man with a mission – one which, if I haven’t misread the situation (and there is every chance that I have), is going to involve me rescuing my former girlfriend from a wedding in which she no longer wishes to participate.

‘You are going to be alright, aren’t you?’ asks Pete when I wind down the window to say a final goodbye.

I can’t help but be moved by my friend’s concern. ‘I’m going to be better than alright, mate. I’m finally going to get Beth back.’

6. Then

It was early evening, and having just arrived at The Royal Oak to meet Pete and a few mates, I was about to order a drink when my phone rang. It was Dad.

‘Alright, son,’ he said cheerily. ‘You’re never going to believe this but that book you sent me, it works!’

It was a month since I’d bought *Your Time Will Come* for Dad, and as he hadn’t mentioned it I’d just assumed he’d put it in a drawer along with all the terrible Father’s Day presents I’d bought for him as a kid, and forgotten about it. But it turned out that I’d been wrong. Not only had he read it from cover to cover, he’d also made copious notes and set about putting its advice into practice – and as a result had landed his first date.

‘Her name’s Anne,’ he said, sounding almost giddy with excitement. ‘We got chatting at the allotment when I used a technique from the book called “putting your best foot forward”. Basically, you just use every opportunity that comes your way to talk to people, but make the conversation about them, not you, and have no expectations about anything other than having a good chat with a stranger. Anyway, I used it, we got chatting. Then I saw her again, and we talked for a bit longer that time, and then just now I saw her and I don’t know what came over me but, bold as you like, I just asked her out for coffee. And guess what? She said yes, and so we’re meeting up tomorrow afternoon at this new place down from the library! How great is that?’

‘Fantastic news,’ I replied, glad that he sounded so happy but feeling weird at the idea of him being with someone that wasn’t Mum.

‘She’s sixty-six,’ he continued, ‘just like me. Divorced with two boys, Scott and Ray, but they both live abroad: one in Canada and the other in New Zealand. And for most of her working life she was a history teacher, although now she volunteers for a kids’ charity of some sort.’

‘Wow, I’m really pleased for you, Dad. Hope it goes well.’

‘Thanks, son. Couldn’t have done it without you. That book was genius, absolute genius.’

As I ended the call I couldn't help wondering if perhaps I should get a copy of *Your Time Will Come* for myself, as it had been the best part of six months since I'd been on a date. But before I could take this thought any further, I sensed I wasn't alone and turned to see a woman standing at the bar next to me. She had dark shoulder-length wavy hair, and a scattering of adorable light-brown freckles across the bridge of her delicately pierced nose, but this time around her Doc Marten boots had been swapped for a pair of light-grey Adidas Sambas teamed with an oversized navy sweatshirt and long denim skirt. I knew who she was straight away. This had to be the universe at work. It had to be. What were the chances of this stunningly gorgeous woman walking into this bar on this night, the very night my dad had called to tell me that he'd scored thanks to the very book she herself had recommended? This was fate, no doubt about it, and I knew I'd be a fool to let this opportunity go. So, taking a deep breath in the hope of calming my heart – which was pounding furiously as if it was trying to escape my chest – I plucked up the courage to speak to her.

'You work at Honigan's, don't you? Beth, isn't it? I'm Reuben – you sold me a copy of *Your Time Will Come* for my dad about a month ago?'

'Oh yes, I remember you now. How did your dad get on with the book? Good, I hope?'

'You'll never believe it,' I said, hardly able to comprehend the serendipity of it myself, 'he's just this minute called and told me that, thanks to the very book you sold me, he's only gone and bagged a date with some hottie called Anne that he met at his allotment.'

She smiled. 'Lucky for some.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Don't tell me you're single.'

'Why sound so surprised?'

It was a good question, one which, had I been bolder, I would've naturally answered with 'Because look at you . . . you're amazing.' But I wasn't, and so instead I said, 'I dunno, you just look like someone who'd have a boyfriend.'

I died inside. I was being about as eloquent as a toddler high on Haribo. Thankfully, however, she laughed.

'And what does someone with a boyfriend look like exactly?'

'I don't know,' I said, unable to hide the embarrassment in my voice. 'It was a ridiculous thing to say.' A change of subject was needed. 'Can I

buy you drink to say thank you for saving my dad from singledom and to apologise for the nonsense coming out of my mouth right now?’

She laughed again. ‘As it happens, both the friends I’m supposed to be meeting here messaged to say they’re running late, so why not? I’ll have a glass of house red.’

That one glass turned into two, and I was in the middle of ordering a third when her friends arrived. But, rather than heralding the end of our time together, much to my delight Beth suggested that she and her friends join me and mine.

It was such a great evening, seeing our two very different groups of friends hitting it off, talking and laughing as if they’d known each other for ages. All too soon, however, the landlord was signalling closing time, and reluctantly we gathered our things together and congregated in the road outside in order to go our separate ways.

‘So that was fun,’ I said to Beth a while later, once the last of our friends had disappeared into the back of an Uber. It was yet another lame line but my mind had gone suddenly blank, and I reasoned it was better than silence.

‘We should definitely do it again,’ she replied, and there was something in the way she said it, never once breaking eye contact, that gave me the confidence to do what I did next, which was to lean in for a kiss. And, thankfully, she responded in kind, and as we stood, eyes closed and lips locked together, I felt sure – as sure as I’d ever felt about anything – that this was the beginning of something very special indeed.

7. Now

It's mid-morning when I see signs for Abbey Manor, and as I pull off the main road and follow the long and winding path through fenced-off fields of open pasture occupied by small herds of ruminating sheep, I find my stomach muscles tightening with anxiety the closer to the destination I get.

I haven't allowed myself to imagine the details of what might happen once I arrive, instead occupying my mind by listening to music from my favourite playlist, the one that once upon a time Beth and I put together. It has tracks we used to dance to, tunes we sang along to at the tops of our voices until we were hoarse, and songs to which we made love. And now, as the opening bars to Frank Ocean's 'Thinkin Bout You' play, I finally allow myself to think about seeing Beth face-to-face and how this might all play out.

But no sooner have I given permission for my thoughts to roam freely than I begin to realise that something is wrong. In her text she said she'd be waiting at the top of the drive before it curls around to the hotel entrance, well away from the prying eyes of friends and family. But as I scan the area in all directions, there's no sign of her.

Pulling the car over to the side of the drive, I tell myself to be patient, that she must be on her way. After all, I can only imagine that escaping from your own wedding is no easy task. But after five minutes of waiting and no response to any of my messages, I begin to get a bad feeling. My first thought is that perhaps she's changed her mind, and has dragged me all the way out here for nothing, but she sounded so desperate on the phone, so clearly in need of help, that this just doesn't ring true. My second thought, and one that is admittedly more sinister, is that her suave and handsome husband-to-be has caught her in the act of escaping and locked her in a room without her phone until it's time for the ceremony. And yes, while this scenario seems more suited to a Hollywood film than reality, it strikes both me and my ego as the more plausible of the two.

Fired up like a bargain-basement James Bond – not least because I'm driving a high-end sports car and wearing a black suit and tie – I bolt from

the car, only just resisting the urge to dive on to the grass and do a parkour-style roll as I make my way towards the hotel entrance. I've no idea what my plan is other than to locate the target (Beth) and extract her from this perilous situation with the minimum amount of collateral damage.

Thankfully, I don't see anyone I recognise, and as a generic-looking man in a suit at a wedding, none of the staff give me a second look as I stride into the entrance hall, which is a hive of activity as preparations for the afternoon ceremony take place. There are people moving chairs, caterers wheeling in boxes of produce, and florists making last-minute tweaks to elaborate displays.

I'm about to make a dash for the reception desk to ask for directions to the bride's quarters when my phone rings, and when I check the screen, I see that it's Beth.

'Turn to your left and look up,' she whispers, and when I do as instructed I spot her straight away, standing on the mezzanine floor above. Rather than the damsel in distress in a white wedding dress I expected to see, Beth is wearing a pink velour tracksuit and trainers, her hair in huge rollers. And yet, in typical Beth fashion, she still manages to look breathtakingly beautiful.

'I see you,' I croak, my mouth suddenly dry. 'Why aren't you outside?'

'I was,' she replies, 'then I realised I'd left my phone in the room. I would've been back out there by now but my mother-in-law-to-be is sitting in the lobby. She's the one in the pale-blue trouser suit. You distract her and I'll make a run for it.'

I spin around, and sure enough there's an elegant-looking woman in a pale-blue suit sitting on a chair to the left of the stairs. I don't think, I just act.

'Hi,' I say a touch breathlessly. 'I have to say you look absolutely fabulous – is it a designer suit? It is, isn't it? And tell me, you had to have been a model, or in fashion or something. Everything about you just screams catwalk!'

Puzzled but clearly flattered, the woman gets to her feet and gives me a twirl, allowing Beth to escape down the stairs and out of the front door.

After snapping a couple of pictures of the woman on my phone for my legions of fans on 'the 'gram' who will 'just die' when they see how

glamorous she is, I make my exit in a whirlwind of charm too powerful to leave any room for questions.

‘Where did you park?’ asks a panicked Beth, practically leaping on me the moment I step outside. ‘We need to get out of here, pronto!’

‘That’s me over there,’ I say, pointing at the Ferrari with no small amount of pride.

‘That’s yours?’ says Beth, stunned.

‘For now,’ I reply. ‘Anyway, let’s go.’

We race towards the car, and as I start the engine the Frank Ocean song – our Frank Ocean song – begins to play. It’s the perfect soundtrack as we roar back along the drive, startling the sheep.

And as we reach the exit it occurs to me that I have no idea where I’m going to take Beth other than away from here, and so I indicate right before pulling out on to the main road. Not a single one of the questions racing through my head is new. I’m still wondering what’s happened to make her want to run away. I’m still asking what she wants from me. And, of course, I’m still contemplating the biggest question of all: how has a woman who once claimed not to believe in love ended up on the verge of getting married?

8. Then

It was three o'clock on a rare sunny Saturday afternoon in Leeds, and as Beth helped Dad's girlfriend, Anne, dole out plastic cups of orange squash to the kids who had been on car-washing duty at the charity fundraiser, Dad took the opportunity to grill me for my opinion of his new squeeze.

'So, what do you think, son? She's a smasher, isn't she?'

'You're not wrong there, Pop,' I replied, and I meant it. While so far I'd only spent a couple of hours in Anne's company, it had been clear from the get-go how much she liked my dad, and how good she was for him. She was warm, funny and smart – the perfect foil for my dad, who had a tendency towards the pessimistic. And even though they'd only been seeing each other three months or so, the positive difference she had made to his life was already clearly apparent. He seemed brighter somehow, more relaxed, younger even, and the happiest I'd seen him in a long time.

'I'm glad you like her, son, because I'm not going to lie, I'm really, really keen on her. And if you don't mind my saying, you seem pretty smitten with your Beth too. She's a cracker, by the way – you're definitely punching above your weight with that one!'

'Cheers, Dad!' I said with mock outrage. 'I know it's true, but I don't need reminding about it!'

Dad laughed. 'I'm only teasing, son – I'm sure she's as mad about you as you are about her, and by the looks of things everything's going well?'

'Yeah, brilliantly,' I said. In fact, only that morning as we'd sat on the train, Beth dozing, head on my shoulder, me looking out of the window at the countryside whizzing by, I'd been thinking about all the good times we'd had so far. That time at the pub with her friends when she'd made me laugh so hard with her impression of Paul Hollywood of *Bake Off* fame that beer came out of my nose. And the time she'd won a free spa weekend after buying a strip of raffle tickets from a woman at work, thereby introducing me to the previously unknown delights of pedicures and hot stone massages. And when we'd gone camping on a whim to the Welsh countryside and, even though it had rained incessantly, been freezing cold,

and one morning we'd been woken up by a cow putting its head through the flap of the tent, somehow being with Beth had made it the most fantastic weekend ever. In short, all these memories and so many more had made the past three months the best of my life.

Looking back, I'd never been particularly good at relationships. Whenever I got together with someone it always started off brilliantly, but sooner or later they seemed to reveal something about themselves that proved to be a complete and utter dealbreaker. For instance, with my last girlfriend, Grace, it was when she'd told me she hated dogs. Not just your big, scary, XL-bully-type dogs – I mean all dogs, no matter how small or fluffy or how soulful their eyes. What kind of monster admits that they 'hate' dogs to another human being without expecting consequences to follow? With Jing, my girlfriend before the dog hater, the issue came down to her fascination with conspiracy theories. While I was initially prepared to look the other way when she said mad stuff about shadowy government networks because she was smoking hot, I drew the line at lizard people and alien abductions. With Amber, the girlfriend before Jing, the dealbreaker was her total obsession with and dedication to becoming an influencer. At first, I didn't mind taking the occasional photo for her grid, or shooting a quick video for her TikTok, but when she started criticising my lighting choices and blaming the lack of engagement with her videos on my editing, I was done. Don't even get me started on Sienna and her militant veganism or Orla and her penchant for correcting my grammar, and the less said about 'Stop the Boats' Becky the better.

Unlike all those others, however, Beth was perfect. She was funny and smart, thoughtful and kind, she liked my parents and my friends, and crucially she loved dogs of all sizes. We could talk about anything and everything, from politics to reality TV, and from books to video games. In short, she was everything I'd always wanted from a girlfriend, and that night, as we cuddled up together in my dad's spare room, I told her as much.

'You do know you're perfect, don't you?' I said, kissing her on the nose. 'There's nothing, not a single thing about you, I would change.'

Beth laughed. 'Steady on, nobody's perfect. Least of all me.'

'But you are,' I insisted. 'I mean, just look at you.'

She raised an eyebrow in warning. 'So I'm just the sum total of my physical attributes?'

'You know I'm not saying that.'

'So what are you saying?'

'That you're the full package, brains and beauty, and no red flags whatsoever.'

'And you're quite sure about that, are you?'

I looked at her, puzzled. 'Yes,' I replied uncertainly, wondering what she was getting at.

She sighed. 'Okay.'

'Okay what?'

'Just okay.'

Sitting up, I stared at her, almost certain she was pulling my leg, but fearful at the same time that she might be about to declare her undying commitment to Satanism, her passion for making jumpers out of cat hair, or indeed reveal that she was actually engaged to someone on death row.

'Come on,' I pressed. 'Tell me, what terrible flaw could you possibly be hiding? What on earth could you tell me that would make you anything less than the total perfection I know you to be?'

She went quiet, so quiet that I could hear my dad snoring across the hallway, so quiet indeed that I suddenly knew in my bones that this wasn't a joke, that she was deadly serious. Sitting up, she smoothed down the bed covers over her legs.

'Come on then, Beth, whatever it is, just come out with it.'

She cleared her throat. 'You think I'm perfect? Well, I'm not, and here's just one of the many reasons why: I don't believe in love.'

I spluttered a laugh of relief. She was joking after all. 'You really had me going for a minute.'

Beth wasn't laughing though. Her face was deadly serious.

'I mean it, Reuben,' she said. 'I really don't believe in love.'

9. Now

As we zip along the road past fields filled with the glowing yellow of rapeseed, enchanted-looking chocolate-box country houses and quaint pubs with names like The Shire Tavern, I don't ask any questions, because it still doesn't feel like the right time. I do, however, allow myself to steal a glance at Beth. Her gaze is fixed on the road ahead, her expression traumatised, her carefully applied make-up streaked with tears, and her thoughts, I suspect, very much back at the wedding venue and the impending chaos once word gets out that the bride, the very epicentre of the day, is nowhere to be found.

Still, it feels amazing, absolutely fantastic, to be so close to her physically, here in the confines of the car – so close that, if I allowed myself, I could reach out and touch her – and close emotionally too. Of all the people in the world that she could've called for help, she chose me, and in doing so she has made me her co-conspirator, her partner in crime, the Clyde to her Bonnie. And now, just like fugitives from justice, we need somewhere to hole up for a while, to gather our thoughts while the heat dies down.

We approach a major roundabout, potential destinations pointing off in every direction, and I notice a sign for a nearby nature reserve. Back when we were together, Beth used to enjoy nothing more on a sunny afternoon than a nice country walk, and so, reasoning that this is as good a place as any, I indicate to change lanes and head towards it. A short while later we're pulling off the main road along a dirt track and into the car park of the quaintly named Rose Pool Nature Reserve.

Barring an elderly couple in matching hiking gear putting a lead on a fawn-coloured greyhound, and a young family unloading bikes from the back of a lime-green people carrier, we are alone.

Switching off the engine, we sit in silence for several minutes until eventually I turn to Beth.

'Are you alright?' I immediately regret my question. 'What am I on about? Of course you're not. I mean . . . I don't know.'

She looks at me briefly. 'I know what you mean, and no, I'm not okay. But I'm definitely a lot better than I would've been if you hadn't come to get me. So, thank you.'

Her words have the effect of calming me down, and I exhale heavily. 'Do you . . . you know . . . want to talk?'

'Yes, but not right now.' She looks out of the window. 'Where are we? What is this place?'

'I don't know. I've never been here before. Some sort of country park, I think.'

'How do you feel about taking a walk?'

We get out of the car and I notice that the two boys from the young family are blatantly staring at the Ferrari in wonderment, refusing to look away even when they notice me noticing them.

'Your car is amazing!' says the taller of the two. 'Can we have a go in it?'

The boys' mum apologises but then, seeing how incongruously we're dressed, looks a little alarmed. 'Oliver,' she says, 'what have I told you about bothering people?' And, grabbing each boy by the hand, she pulls them away.

'He's not wrong though, is he?' says Beth. 'What happened? Did you win the lottery?'

Flushing with embarrassment, I laugh nervously. There's no way I can tell her the truth – that my best friend hired it for me as part of our elaborate Anti-Wedding Day celebrations in order to stop me thinking about her. No way at all.

'It's a very, very long, complicated and possibly quite boring story,' I say breezily, hoping to sidestep the subject. 'Perhaps one for much later in the day.'

'Hmm,' she muses absently, her mind clearly elsewhere, and thankfully she doesn't ask any more about it.

Locking the car, I take a moment to get my bearings, but there are no signs telling us which way to go, only two well-trodden paths, one heading off to the left and one to the right. The elderly couple with the dog and the family with the children all head to the right, so I decide to do the opposite, reasoning that at least we'll have the trail to ourselves.

As we walk along the tree-lined path, past thistles, briars and clumps of bracken rustling with animal life, we fall back into silence, but this time it feels less fraught, more comfortable, and eventually we are rewarded for our efforts with a view across a huge body of water that is far more lake than the name 'Rose Pool' implied.

'This is so beautiful,' says Beth, and we pause to watch a duck coming to land gracefully on the water in front of us. 'It's exactly what I need right now.' And then, just like that, she bursts into tears.

For a moment I just stand there, not knowing what to do. As much as I want to comfort her, as much as I want to make things right, at the same time I'm all too aware that, strictly speaking, it's not my place. I am, after all, her ex-boyfriend. The last time I touched her, the last time I put my arms around her, I was hers, and she was mine, and there's been a torrent of water under the bridge since then.

Even so, I can't just stand by and watch her suffer like this, and so gently, very gently, I put my arms around her, pulling her to me, telling her everything is going to be alright. She doesn't try to move away, or make any objection; instead she pulls closer into me, pressing her body against mine until, without any warning – in fact, without any anything – she closes her eyes, now wet with tears, and tilts her face up towards mine.

I so want to seize the moment and kiss her; I so want this to be the scene where the sun sets and the credits roll. After all, I've done nothing but dream of this for the last six months. But no matter how hard I try to push it aside, no matter how hard I try to pretend that it doesn't exist, a question, *the* question, keeps fighting for my attention. Any normal person would just let it go, any normal person would think to themselves, *I'll deal with it later*, but when it comes to Beth, sadly I'm anything but normal. And so, in the end, though I know it will almost certainly ruin this magical moment between us and bring us crashing back down to earth, I feel like I have no choice. I just have to ask it.

'I don't . . . I don't understand,' I begin, just a little too loudly. 'I don't get it. How could you of all people have ended up on the verge of getting married when you don't even believe in love?'

10. Then

And she wasn't joking?' 'Nope, she wasn't joking.'

'And you're sure she wasn't messing with you? I mean it's not like you haven't got form with this sort of thing. Remember when Big Tony told you he was going vegan? It took you six months to work out that it wasn't actually chicken-shaped tofu in his "special" biryani.'

'This is different. Beth isn't joking, she isn't winding me up just for the lols; she one hundred per cent doesn't believe in love.'

Pete exhaled heavily and then drained his glass. 'This, my dear Watson, is what I like to refer to as a two-pint problem, so let me get us another round in and we'll see if we can sort this out.'

It had been three days since Beth's revelation in my dad's spare bedroom in Leeds. Seventy-two whole hours of me going over and over our conversation in my mind, and it still didn't make any sense. Even so, as Pete headed to the bar, that didn't stop me from returning to that moment and going over it yet again in forensic detail.

'I don't quite understand what it is you're saying,' I'd said as I sat up in bed next to her. 'You're saying you don't believe in . . . what . . . romance?'

She shook her head. 'I mean exactly what I said: I don't believe in love.'

'As a concept?'

'As an anything.'

'But that makes no sense,' I protested. 'Love is just a fact. There's no believing required. It's just there, like air.'

'For you maybe. But not for me. Remember when we met? You told me about how your mum had left your dad? Well, my dad left my mum when she was pregnant with me, and to be honest she's never really recovered. That had a massive impact on me, and I suppose it's part of the reason I don't believe in love, or to be more accurate, I suppose, "romantic" love. I believe people can like each other and want to spend time with each other . . . but all that stuff about being together forever? I don't know, it

feels a bit like a work of fiction, a lie we tell ourselves to make life more palatable. A way of explaining the kind of temporary chemical craziness that comes over people when they get together. It's just molecules breaking apart and forming new bonds, it's hormones playing tricks on us to fool us into keeping the species alive, and sooner or later it wears off.'

Much as I appreciated her honesty, much as I felt for her and her mum in their circumstances, and understood why she might be wary of relationships as a result, we were so happy, and worked so well together, that I struggled to see what any of this had to do with us and how we felt about each other.

'So, you're saying what exactly? That you can't imagine a situation where we'll be together forever?'

'I'm saying that we'll be together as long as we're meant to be together, that's all. It might be six months, it might be six years, but is there a chance that we'll split up? Of course there is, people split up every day. It's just how it is and no amount of "believing" in everlasting love is going to make any difference.'

I tried to think of a counterargument, but in the end became so fearful of it turning into an actual argument that I thought it best to let the subject drop. The last thing I wanted was a row at one o'clock in the morning about something as nebulous as whether love existed. All that really mattered, I told myself, was that she wanted to be with me and I with her, and everything else was just window dressing. But as she fell asleep that night in my arms, I remained stubbornly awake, churning over her words and what they might mean for us and our future together.

'It's not just me,' I said when Pete returned to the table with our drinks. 'What she said is mad, isn't it?'

'I was thinking about it at the bar,' he mused. 'And, I don't know, maybe she's got a point. I mean, people do split up all the time. Fifty per cent of marriages do end in divorce, so maybe it follows that there is no such thing as love, or at least the everlasting kind.'

‘Really? You don’t think that’s just a little bit cynical? I mean, look at me. My mum left my dad and I still believe in love.’

‘Well, that’s you and your experience, and she’s talking about her and her experience. Her dad left her mum before she was born, didn’t he? It’s not exactly difficult to imagine how that might colour someone’s view of relationships. You can see how, at least to her, forever might seem like a bit of a fantasy.’

‘No, you’re right. I can see that but . . .’ But what exactly? I was finding it hard to put my finger on the flaw in the argument other than that it just felt wrong – wrong and sad. Finally, I came up with something. ‘But . . . what does that mean for us? If I fall for her, muggins here will be in it for the long haul while she’s . . . what? Counting down the days until we split up? I mean, how would that even work? Would we ever reach the point where we believed in our future enough to buy a sofa together? Or forget sofas, how about a lamp? A cheap fifteen-pound lamp from Argos, do we have enough future in us to do that? Or how about a pint of milk? Is that too much of a risky investment with a woman who thinks we could split up at a moment’s notice?’

Pete laughed. ‘Depends how often you drink the milk, mate. Are you just having a dash in your tea or having loads of it on your cereal as well? Anyway, Sarcasmo, no one knows what the future will bring, so there’s no point in worrying about it. All you can do is focus on today, on right now. But if the way Beth feels about this is a dealbreaker for you – and if it is, you’re an idiot – then knock it on the head before it drives you crazy. But if it isn’t, then just let it be her little weird thing that the two of you don’t talk about, just like how me and you never talk about the fact that I still owe you that seven hundred quid from last year’s holiday.’

Pete was right, of course. I was going to have to make a decision one way or the other, and for the next few days I did little other than wrestle with the question. In the end, after much soul-searching, I decided that although I really liked Beth I wasn’t prepared to let myself fall any further for someone who saw us as a temporary arrangement and wouldn’t even entertain the notion of forever.

Later that week, Beth and I met up for dinner, a dinner I could barely touch because I was so wound up about the fact that I was going to split up with her. But then, just as I was about to tell her that it was over, she looked

at me across the table, smiled one of her amazing smiles and said something that really stopped me in my tracks.

‘I just wanted to say that I’m so glad we had that talk at your dad’s. I’d been wondering how to bring it up and worried about how you might react. And I’m so relieved that you were so good about it. I really feel like it’s taken the pressure off everything. Anyway, now you know all my secrets I feel ready to say something I’ve been wanting to say for a while: how would you feel about moving in with me?’

By rights I should’ve said, ‘Well, actually, I don’t understand, I’m not accepting it, and I’ve been freaking out about it in private.’ By rights I should’ve said, ‘Actually, I’ve come to the conclusion that we need to split up.’ But instead, as I sat across from her, it dawned on me that what I had right here was an opportunity – a chance to change her mind and prove to her once and for all that love really could last forever.

‘I’d love to move in with you,’ I heard myself saying. ‘I can’t think of anything I want more.’

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11. Now

The pained expression on her face says it all. She's hurt and she's angry, livid that as always I just couldn't keep my big mouth shut. Pushing me away, she walks closer to the water's edge, and stands with her back to me.

'Come on, Beth,' I say. 'Did you really think you were going to be able to get away without talking about this? The whole reason we split was because you said love isn't real, and then I find out that six months later you're promising to spend the rest of your life with someone else! You can't blame me for having questions. It just makes no sense.'

She turns to face me, arms folded, eyes aflame. 'First of all, you know as well as I do that's not the reason we split up, and secondly, what makes you think I owe you an explanation about anything? You don't own me, you don't get to interrogate me. I'm my own person and I don't owe you anything, Reuben Miller, not a damn thing, and don't you forget it!'

She's right, of course, on both counts. Strictly speaking, her not believing in everlasting love didn't end our relationship; my actions alone took care of that. Guilt floods through me, but I push that feeling away for now. And she doesn't owe me anything. It was my decision to take her call this morning, to come to her rescue and bring her here. But I can't see where any of this is going, and I can't begin to understand what either of us is doing here unless we at least try to talk things through – unless we at least try to make it all make sense.

'I'm sorry,' I say, 'but not about the question. I'm not sorry about that at all, although I suppose I could've framed it better.' I take a step closer to her, and place a hand gently on her arm. 'I just want to understand, Beth. I just want to hear what happened, what changed.'

For a moment I'm afraid that she might storm off and never speak to me again, but then she lifts her head, and when I look into her eyes the fire of anger has all but gone.

'Okay, I'll try,' she says eventually, and she turns and walks over to a bench behind us and sits down.

‘I was really sad when you and I split up,’ she begins as I sit down next to her. ‘Really sad, and really angry too. And more determined than ever that I was right, that love was a lie, that it was impossible for two people to be together forever. The last thing I wanted, the last thing I felt I needed, was another relationship. But then I went island-hopping with Amara, and no sooner had we landed on Sifnos than we got talking to Leo and his best friend and the two of us just sort of clicked. He’d just come out of a long-term relationship too, and I suppose we both thought it would be a holiday fling, nothing more than that, but a week after I came home he messaged and asked to see me again.’

‘And you’d been upfront with him about not believing in love?’

She laughs. ‘It was practically one of the first things we talked about.’

‘And he wasn’t fazed? He wasn’t put off?’

‘Like you were?’ Though I feel the sting of her words, I don’t say anything, and she continues. ‘The only thing he said when we got together was that he wasn’t going to stop me from being me, but at the same time wasn’t going to let me stop him from being who he was.’

‘But that was just talk, wasn’t it?’

She shakes her head. ‘No, he really meant it. It was like a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders. I didn’t have to worry about being me, he didn’t have to worry about being him, and I suppose for the first time ever I allowed myself to relax. Things between us just seemed so easy. We were both happy to go with the flow, live in the moment. I’m guessing that’s why, when he proposed two months ago, I didn’t say no, or maybe, or even “Let me think about it for a while.” I just said yes, because it felt so right.’

Her words feel like a punch to the stomach – hard enough to send me staggering, and for me to want to curl into a ball and beg for mercy. This man, this interloper, got exactly what I’d wanted by allowing Beth to do what I clearly hadn’t been able to: be herself. Sure, I’d done a decent enough job of pretending, telling myself that, given time, she would change, but, if I’m being honest, I wanted the change to happen within a timescale I dictated, not one of her own creation.

I feel like such an idiot. She could’ve felt right with me if only I’d been willing to leave her to her own devices.

‘I’m sorry, I’ve hurt you, haven’t I?’ she says when I don’t speak for a moment.

‘I suppose you’ve just made me see what a fool I’ve been,’ I reply. ‘If I hadn’t pushed so hard . . . wanted you to be someone you weren’t ready to be . . . then maybe . . .’

‘You’d be the one I was running away from today.’ She reaches out a hand and touches my face tenderly. ‘I’m a mess, Reuben, an absolute mess. There’s no making sense of me, there’s no point trying to get inside my head, because I’m in here and I don’t get it either. Until this week I really did think I could go through with it. I really did think that I did believe in love after all. But then, I don’t know . . . This is going to sound really strange, but do you remember the deli around the corner from the bookshop, the really expensive one you said was all style over substance? Well, you’re going to laugh, but earlier this week I could’ve sworn that I saw you there, and even though I know it can’t have been you it got me thinking that if I was hallucinating ex-boyfriends then perhaps my subconscious was trying to tell me something.’

I look down at my shoes for a moment, embarrassed. It’s far too early to come clean about this, isn’t it?

‘Actually, that wasn’t your subconscious. It really was me.’

Her eyes widen in surprise. ‘You went there to see me? But why?’

‘Because . . . because . . . I’d just heard you were getting married.’

‘And what? You wanted to offer your congratulations?’

I sigh. ‘I went because I wanted to see if I could change your mind about the wedding. I went because I wanted to tell you that . . . I still love you.’

Without an immediate response from Beth, my words seem to hang in the air between us, and with each moment that passes I become increasingly tempted to grab them and shove them back down my throat, but then Beth gently takes hold of my hand and looks deeply into my eyes. And just like that all the worry and anxiety bottled up inside me disappears, and what’s left is a profound feeling of peace. There’s quiet in my mind – all the questions snapping at my heels for answers have departed, and outside of myself there’s no sound apart from the wind rustling through the reeds in the riverbed. It’s the first sense of calm I’ve felt in months, and all because – rather than living in the past, rather than living in the future – right here and right now I feel as if I have everything I need.

Well, nearly everything.

I pull her gently towards me and, wrapping my arms around her waist,
I press my lips against hers, and thankfully she responds in kind.

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12. Then

The first flashpoint in our relationship came after about six blissful months of living together. I'd come home from work to find Beth standing at the cooker staring at a recipe on her phone while stirring a pot. In all the time we'd been together I'd never once seen her cook anything from scratch, other than a fried-egg sandwich, and yet the kitchen was now covered in all manner of packaging and peelings, and by the looks of it every single pot, pan and utensil we owned.

'What's all this in aid of?' I asked, eyebrows raised in bemusement. 'It's not my birthday, is it?'

Laughing, Beth looked over at me, a splodge of something that may or may not have been coconut milk on her nose. 'You seemed a bit down on the phone earlier after your horrible morning at work,' she replied, 'so I thought I'd cheer you up with your favourite meal. But to be honest it looks like a disaster and tastes like one too! I think I might have put too much black cardamom – whatever that is – in it, because it tastes like someone's chucked in a pack of Fisherman's Friends.'

She scooped out a spoonful of her concoction from the pan and held it up. It did indeed have a pungent menthol flavour, but even so it was easily the most lovely, kind and thoughtful thing any girlfriend had ever done for me.

Circling my arms around her, I pulled her to me and hugged her tightly, and before I could stop myself I whispered, 'I love you.'

Despite for obvious reasons never having said this to her before, now that it was out there I was actually quite happy these words had escaped. They had felt so natural, so easy, so what-you're-supposed-to-say-to-someone-you-care-about, that I couldn't regret them. So what if she'd once told me that she didn't believe in love? That was then, when we'd only known each other a short while, and this was now, after having been together for nine months, two-thirds of which we'd been living under the same roof. Things had to have changed since that most bizarre of conversations at my dad's, surely? She couldn't possibly still be hanging on to such a strange notion as not believing in love?

I looked at her expectantly. Surely now was the time that she'd tell me she loved me too? Instead, as if she hadn't heard me, as if I hadn't spoken, she simply carried on talking about how horrible the meal was going to be and how we should order something in from the Thai place up the road. I was so stunned by her lack of response that, without comment, I did exactly as she'd asked, and it was only once the food had arrived that I finally plucked up the courage to challenge her.

'Are you seriously going to spend the whole evening pretending I didn't just tell you that I love you?' I asked as she dished out the contents of the foil containers in front of her.

'Well, the only other alternative is to remind you that I don't believe in love, and I know if I do that we'll just end up having an argument.'

'So you still feel that way, even though we live together?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'I still feel that way, even though we live together.'

'And you're not ever going to change?'

'No, I don't think so.'

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that she was being so stubborn. Of course she loved me. Everything about the way she acted told me that she did. So why was she being so obstinate? Why was she refusing to admit it?

'What do you actually think would happen if you said the words?' I snapped. 'Do you think you'd spontaneously combust? Do you think I'd yell "Gotcha!" then whip out a ball and chain and attach it to your ankle? Come on, Beth, which is it? Which one of these crazy scenarios do you think is going to happen if you actually dare utter those three little words?'

Beth sighed heavily, her dark-brown eyes brimming with disappointment. 'You're welcome to carry on until you've got it out of your system,' she said. 'But I'm not doing this.'

With that she removed the apron she'd forgotten to take off and threw it on to the kitchen counter. Then, grabbing a pair of chopsticks from the drawer next to her, she picked up the entire bowl of pad thai and stormed off into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

For a moment I stood there, mouth open, unable to fathom how such a lovely moment had turned quite so sour, and how a declaration of love had led to our very first argument.

I thought about going after her, trying to talk it out until we'd reached some sort of peace, but I was feeling far too hurt to even think about being reasonable. Instead, even though I was starving, I didn't eat any of our takeaway, but decamped to the living room and watched TV until I heard her brush her teeth and go to bed. Once the coast was clear, I grabbed the spare duvet from the cupboard in the hallway, made up a bed for myself on the sofa, and as I lay there staring at the ceiling in the darkness my only thought was this: *what sort of future are we going to have if she can't even admit to loving me at all, let alone in the way that I love her?*

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13. Now

Across my thirty-three years I've heard countless people talk about having an out-of-body experience. For instance, my friend Omari recently claimed to have had one when he was in LA for work and found himself sharing a hotel lift with none other than Megan Fox. And a guy at work once told me he'd had one playing Sunday-league football, when he picked up a deflection on the tip of his boot while positioned on the edge of the penalty box, and somehow managed to send it into the top right-hand corner of the goal. But while I understood what people were trying to convey whenever they employed the phrase – that because of some out-of-the-ordinary experience or other they'd felt removed from themselves – I never once imagined that this 'out-of-body experience' literally happened.

And yet, when Beth kisses me, when I feel the tenderness of her lips against my own, I would swear on my life, on everything I hold dear, that in that moment I literally split in two: there's a physical body, which remains in situ, kissing my former girlfriend, and an ethereal body, floating above the action and observing from afar. And this ethereal body doesn't just observe, it speaks too, telling me things like 'This is it, Beth's finally come to her senses!' and then contradicting itself: 'What are you doing, man? She's going to think you're trying to take advantage of her!'

It's only once the kiss is over, once the moment that brought us so close has dissipated into the ether, that body and mind are finally reunited in time for me to hear the most depressing words I've ever heard.

'I shouldn't have done that,' says Beth, standing up. 'I don't know what came over me. I let myself get carried away in the moment. I'm so sorry.' She walks back over to the water's edge and I follow her.

'Don't be,' I say, trying to sound chipper as my heart cracks and shatters like hot glass plunged into ice-cold water. It doesn't feel great to hear that she regrets our kiss. But a kiss with regrets is certainly better than none at all.

I shove my hands deep into my pockets. 'We were both just caught up in the moment, that's all.'

She shakes her head remorsefully. 'This is supposed to be my wedding day! What am I doing, Reuben? I've abandoned poor Leo, embarrassing him in such a horribly public way. I've run away from all my friends and family. I've just made such a mess of everything. And now, as well as all that, I've dragged you right into the middle of my chaos!'

'You're not dragging me into anything. I'm here because you asked. I'm here because I want to help.'

Bending down, she picks up a stone and hurls it as far out over the water as she's able to manage. It lands with a loud splash, sending ripples out in all directions. A metaphor, if one were really needed, of just how much trouble her decision to duck out of her wedding is going to cause.

'This time last week I'd never have imagined that me of all people would end up being a runaway bride. I mean, who even does that? Who makes plans to get married, sorts out a venue, the food, the flowers, and let's not forget all the invitations to family and friends, only to get cold feet on the actual morning of the wedding? And then, to make matters worse, calls their ex-boyfriend to come and rescue them, and somehow ends up kissing him? I'll tell you who does something like that – a psychopath, that's who. A full-on . . .'

She makes a stabbing action in the air with her hand while making a noise that sounds more like a seagull being strangled than the screeching violins from Hitchcock's psychological thriller, but I understand the point regardless.

'Do you think I'm a psycho?' she asks, looking at me.

'Of course not. You're just confused, that's all.'

'But I wasn't last week. Last week I was one hundred per cent sure that I wanted to marry Leo.'

'Okay,' I say, feeling strangely hurt hearing her say this out loud. 'So talk me through what happened. Why did you wait until today to do a runner?'

Beth thinks for several moments, during which a loud squabble breaks out between a pair of lairy Canada geese. 'Because, despite the disquiet I felt at seeing you that day at the deli, I managed to convince myself that maybe it was just nerves. I talked it through with Mum, with close friends, and every single one of them told me not to worry about it, reassured me

that it was perfectly natural, that I'd be okay on the day. Then today came, and I just knew from the moment I opened my eyes that I couldn't do it.'

She pauses, and I feel her words settling over my skin like the pale-grey airborne ashes from a bonfire. This can't have been easy for her. It can't have been easy for her at all.

'So when did you decide to call me?'

She thinks for a moment. 'Pretty much there and then, but it took me a couple of hours to pluck up the courage, by which time the woman who was doing my hair and make-up had arrived, which is why I look like a clown in curlers.'

Across the way, some huge bird plunges from the air into the water like an expertly thrown javelin, barely making a ripple. I turn back to Beth, a question on my lips which she immediately pre-empts.

'You're wondering why I called you, and not someone else, aren't you?'

I nod, wondering if everyone can read me this easily or if it's just her.

'I called because out of everyone in my contacts you were the one I knew would come and get me. I called because, even though we hadn't spoken for six months, I just knew in my heart that you still care.'

'And I do,' I say. 'Like I said before, I never stopped. Ruining what we had was the biggest mistake of my life. And I know it's your wedding day, I know you're confused, and I know that what I'm about to say isn't going to make this any easier, but I'm standing here telling you that I want to give us another go. I want you to choose me, not him.'

14. Then

The next flashpoint for me and Beth came six months after the first one – at, of all things, my dad and Anne’s wedding. To say their relationship had been a whirlwind would be an understatement. Anne had moved in with Dad after three months of dating, and then only a couple of months later they’d announced their engagement, and then, a little over a year after their first date, here they were getting married with me as his best man.

If it had been anyone other than Anne, I’d have been suspicious, but having met up with her and Dad several times since our first introduction, and seen first-hand just how happy she made him, I was left in no doubt at all that it was true love. And though it was undeniably weird being at my own dad’s wedding, regardless I was over the moon that he’d finally found happiness after so long without it. Which explained, I think, why I found the ceremony so moving.

‘I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I – Alan James Miller – may not be joined in matrimony to Anne Hester Morley,’ said Dad in his snazzy light-brown checked Paul Smith suit, when prompted by the celebrant.

‘I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I – Anne Hester Morley – may not be joined in matrimony to Alan James Miller,’ declared Anne in her ice-blue Vera Wang dress, when prompted in the same vein.

‘Then, by the power vested in me,’ declared the celebrant, ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife.’

At this, the entire congregation, myself included, exploded in spontaneous applause. Whatever fears I’d had, whatever reservations I might have once entertained, evaporated in this moment of pure joy. It was evident from the beaming smiles on my dad and Anne’s faces how much they loved each other, and how, for them at least, love wasn’t an unspeakable four-letter word. I turned to Beth, about to say as much even though I knew it probably wouldn’t go down brilliantly, when I saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

‘Are you okay?’

‘It’s just so beautiful, such a lovely moment.’

Any normal person would’ve let it slide – after all, this was my dad’s wedding, which was about as far from a perfect location for a domestic as possible. But the fact that I didn’t, that I couldn’t, was probably a good indicator that the issue I thought I’d come to terms with, the one I’d declared didn’t really matter, clearly still mattered to me a great deal.

Thankfully, my dad was too busy kissing his new bride to notice that I, his best man, was leaving his wedding early, followed moments later by Beth.

‘Reuben, what’s wrong?’ she called out after me, once we’d left the room and were out of earshot of the congregation.

‘You want to know what’s wrong?’ I snapped as I turned around to face her. ‘I’ll tell you what’s wrong: you. All this time, all these months, I’ve been tying myself up in knots trying not to tell you how much I love you, because you say you don’t believe in it. And then I see you crying at my own dad’s wedding! I don’t understand, why weren’t you shouting out, “It’ll never last!” Why weren’t you hating every single moment of this?’

Beth’s eyes widened in hurt and defiance. ‘Because I’m not a monster,’ she replied. ‘Just because I don’t believe in love doesn’t give me the right to condemn everyone who does.’

‘How eloquent,’ I spat, refusing to hide the venom in my voice. ‘I bet you’re really proud of that, but where does that leave me? How do I fit into the way you see the world? I love you, Beth, I think I’ve loved you from the moment I first saw you, and I want to be with you for the rest of my life. And it hurts that you say you won’t even entertain the idea. I mean, you can’t even say you love me back. It hurts – it hurts so much.’

People were looking at us now – guests who had been at the wedding and waiting staff at the venue too. And I’m sure if I’d been in Beth’s shoes, my gut instinct would’ve been to save face, give as good as I got and protect my wounded ego, but I wasn’t in her shoes, I was in mine, and so what she did next took me totally by surprise. Slowly, very slowly, she walked over to me and wrapped her arms around me so tightly that all the pain, all the anger and resentment, seemed to ebb away, leaving behind nothing but shame at my outburst.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, eyes closed and my forehead resting against hers.

‘I know you are,’ she said softly. ‘And I know this is a really emotional day for you but we can’t keep doing this.’

‘You’re right,’ I said. ‘You’re absolutely right, but please, please give me one more chance.’

In response she kissed me and I silently resolved to do better from that moment on. And every time she did something lovely and kind, like surprising me with tickets to see my favourite band or going with me to see the kind of film she hated, full of gun battles and explosions, without complaining, I kept my ‘I love you’ inside. Every time we made love and my body flooded with a bucketload of dopamine, you guessed it, I kept that ‘I love you’ in the vault. And yes, even when we were sitting on the sofa half watching some must-see Netflix drama and half looking at our phones, and I’d look up, see her face, then think to myself, *I really am the luckiest man alive*, the organic, spontaneous ‘I love you just because I love you’ that threatened to emerge had to be grabbed by the scruff of the neck and stuffed right back down from where it came. And when it came to any talk about the future, I was always careful to let her bring it up first and set the pace – about holidays, Christmas, and even our co-purchase of a new sofa to replace the worn-out and frankly odd-smelling old one in the living room. But this steely resolve, this grim determination, didn’t last, of course. It couldn’t, and my attempts to deal with it the next time around would lead to total and utter disaster.

15. Now

Wow,' she says. 'I . . . I . . . I don't know what to say.'

'Say yes,' I reply. 'Say you want to be with me.'

She looks at me for a moment, her expression inscrutable. 'But it's not that simple though, is it? It's not just about the two of us. I mean, today was meant to be my wedding day. Today was meant to be the day I declared to the world that I finally believed in love. Now look at it.'

Ignoring that last bit, I opt to focus on the first: Leo. She wants me to consider the feelings of this needlessly handsome man that I don't know, have never met, and have only ever seen once from afar. A better man than me might be able to do that, but the way I see it I'm fighting for the love of my life here, and so there's no room for Queensberry rules. If it comes to it, I will kick, bite and if needs be punch beneath the belt, as long as it gets me the result I so desperately want.

'Yeah, it's your wedding day,' I continue, 'and of course you'll feel bad about Leo, but surely it's better for him to learn how you feel now than to hear it months or even years down the line when things start to fall apart? Maybe you're already doing the kindest thing you can do by not marrying him. I mean, he might even thank you for it . . . one day.'

She laughs bitterly. 'Maybe, or maybe he'll just hate me for the rest of his life. And who could blame him?' Her voice cracks, and it's a moment or two before she can speak again. 'Any minute now he's going to find out what I've done. Any minute now he's going to discover the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with has left him without even having the guts to talk to him first.'

I picture Leo, dressed in his wedding suit, frantically searching the hotel for his bride-to-be, and the look of horror on his face when it finally dawns on him that she's gone. My stomach lurches at the thought of it, but I choose to ignore that. Of course he'll be hurt, his pride dented, his heart broken, but it won't kill him. He'll almost certainly live to love another day.

'Look, no one's saying this is going to be easy on him, but you can't just go through with it to save his feelings. Your feelings count too, which is why right now you're here with me and not him.'

It's all I can do not to give myself a round of applause for this sterling rebuttal, and for a moment I'm so pleased with myself that I wonder if I haven't missed my calling as a barrister. But then I hazard a glance at Beth, and see that she's nowhere near as convinced by my genius as I am.

'I don't know, Reuben.' She bites her lip and shakes her head sadly. 'I really, really do care about Leo. And the last thing I want to do is hurt him. He hasn't done anything to deserve this. All he's ever done is be kind, patient and loving, and I just feel like a total bitch putting him through all this. And so publicly too.' She puts her head in her hands. 'Imagine him having to explain what I've done to his friends . . . his family . . . It's just too awful.'

'But imagine the alternative,' I persist. 'Imagine you, right now, back at the hotel knowing full well how you feel, but preparing to promise to spend forever with this man that you have doubts about. Wouldn't that be a hundred times worse?'

'Maybe,' she says weakly, after a moment of considered silence. 'But at the same time I just feel so confused. I want to do the right thing by Leo and by me too, but I just don't know what that is.'

My response is immediate and forthright. 'Are you absolutely sure about that? I mean, you're here with me, aren't you? Doesn't this feel right?'

She thinks for a moment. 'It feels safe, it feels familiar, but right? I don't know. I mean, when we split after . . . you know . . . I was so hurt, so angry, I never wanted to see you again, let alone be with you. But this morning when I needed someone, the first person I thought of . . . the only person I thought of was you.'

We're standing in silence, eyes fixed on each other, contained in this moment so full of promise, so overflowing with hope, just a single kiss away from re-establishing what we once were, taking us towards where we want to be, when suddenly the shrill piercing of a ringtone fills the air.

Instinctively my hand goes to my pocket, ready to curse Pete for having such abysmal timing, but then as Beth reaches into her own pocket I realise it's not my phone ringing.

'It's Amara,' says Beth, her panicked gaze fixed on her phone. 'She must've realised I've gone missing. She must be calling to get me to come back.'

‘Don’t answer it,’ I say firmly. I just know that no good can come from this. ‘Let it ring, let it go to voicemail.’

‘But what if she’s worrying about me? What if she thinks something terrible’s happened?’

‘Then text her, tell her you’re fine, and that you’ll speak to her when you can. But whatever you do, don’t—’

She takes the call, much to my dismay, and I have no choice but to listen to her half of a conversation that is filled with enough shocked exclamations for me to conclude that something is very wrong. Finally, she ends the call, and turns back to me, her face the perfect illustration of disbelief.

‘It’s Leo,’ she says so quietly that she’s almost whispering. ‘You’re never going to believe this, but Amara’s just told me he’s got cold feet and done a runner.’

16. Then

That's it! I'm done,' I said as I scrabbled around on the table in the hallway for my keys. 'I'm done with always feeling like the bad guy, I'm done with never getting to say how I feel.'

It was a Friday night, some three months after Dad and Anne's wedding, and Beth and I were having the single worst row of our relationship so far. We'd been getting ready to go to Pete's thirty-first birthday party at a bar in town, having a few pre-drinks and playing music really loud, when Beth had emerged from the bedroom in a new dress that made her look simply stunning. It was silver, and glittery, and hugged every wonderful curve, and as she stood framed in the doorway I couldn't believe how lucky I was that she was mine. I kissed her passionately, and she kissed me back, and as I buried my face in her hair, kissing her shoulder, her neck and that spot just behind her ear, instinctively I found myself whispering those three terrible words, only for them once again to be met by silence.

Perhaps if I'd not gone for a quick drink after work, perhaps if we'd not had those shots as we'd danced in the kitchen to Daft Punk's 'Get Lucky' on repeat, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps, I might have managed not to say those words, or at the very least cared less about not hearing them said in return. As it was, however, once the genie was out of the bottle there was no putting it back, and no desire to pretend, at least on my part, that it wasn't out there.

'Are you really never going to say it?' I exploded. 'Are you really so hard-hearted that you can't even bring yourself to say it just once, for my sake?'

'Not this again,' she said. 'And we were having such a good time too. You know exactly why I won't say it, why I can't say it, and you know as well as I do that even if I was prepared to say it, once would never be enough.'

Though she was right, it wasn't what I wanted to hear, and so I'd delivered my 'That's it, I'm done' line before heading out alone.

The party was in full swing by the time I arrived, and though I recognised most people, there was a good smattering of strangers. This

didn't surprise me in the least as some of the small print of Pete's e-vite had read: 'Feel free to bring any stray friends along! The more the merrier!' After saying a quick hello to the birthday boy, I had a couple of drinks, then four shots that barely touched the sides, before eventually falling into conversation with some old friends, Tom and Maxie, who I hadn't seen in ages.

'So good to see you, Reubs,' said Maxie, giving me a hug. 'It's been way too long.' She introduced me to the woman standing next to her. 'Laura, this is my good friend Reuben.' Then she turned to me and smiled. 'Reuben, this is my really lovely workmate Laura.'

'Pleased to meet you,' I said, shaking her hand, and that would've been the beginning of the two of us having a conversation were it not for the fact that Tom excitedly started up an anecdote about an embarrassing mishap he'd had at the gym. Then an equally excited Maxie followed up with a story about a wedding she and Tom had recently been to on the Amalfi Coast. By the time she'd finished, the moment for chatting with Maxie's friend had gone, and even if it hadn't, the arrival of a huge influx of latecomers – most of whom I knew – would've put paid to any blossoming conversation. In fact, I lost all track of the woman until much later that night when, having danced a little too extravagantly to some hits from my youth, I went to the outside patio area to cool down and found myself standing next to her while she was having a cigarette.

'Oh, it's you again,' I said, noticing for the first time quite how pretty she was. 'Laura, isn't it?'

She smiled. 'And you're Reuben, aren't you?'

'The very same.' I also noticed that she didn't have a glass in her hand. 'Are you okay for a drink?'

'I'm fine, I'm going to be getting off soon.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, and then completely unbidden found myself saying, 'Is there nothing I could say to make you stay a bit longer?'

The moment I said it I knew I was flirting, but I told myself that it was harmless, that it would go nowhere, and anyway, it felt good when all I felt was bad. Besides, even if Beth didn't believe in love, the most important thing was that I did, and so nothing was going to happen with this woman. So, okay, I was angry with Beth. I was hurting. And okay, right now I

couldn't see how we were going to make things work. But deep down I knew we would, because we always did.

But then Laura and I started to chat about work, ambitions and life in general, and the more we spoke the more relaxed I became. And the more relaxed I became, the more easily we talked. Then finally I made the mistake of asking her if she believed in love. Her answer in the affirmative didn't mean we were somehow destined to be together, it didn't mean we were a match written in the stars – to be honest it didn't even mean that we particularly liked one another. All it meant was that for once someone was telling me exactly what I wanted to hear, and in that drunken moment that seemed like it was enough. We leaned in towards one another, eyes closed, lips slightly parted, and kissed. There was a real sense of inevitability about the moment, one that was in truth only surpassed by the one that followed it when, horrified by my actions, I came to my senses, broke away from our embrace, and as I did so glanced over Laura's shoulder and saw a female figure in a sparkly silver dress see me, then turn and leave.

It was a terrible thing I'd done. Absolutely unforgivable. And though I tried everything I could think of to tell her how sorry I was, Beth wasn't having any of it. I'd crossed a line, and as far as she was concerned there was no going back. Despite this, I never gave up hope of us one day getting back together, but then out of the blue, just six months later, while I was still very much holding a candle for her, I heard from my best friend that Beth was getting married.

17. Now

Beth's news is so ludicrous, so utterly preposterous, that I need to make sure I've heard her right.

'He's . . . he's done a runner?'

She nods, a stunned expression on her face. 'I know, I can't believe it either. Of the two of us, he was always so sure, so certain that this was what he wanted. Why would he do this?'

A thought occurs to me. 'Maybe he saw us leaving. Maybe he thought "if she's going, I'm off too". Maybe it was the easiest way for him to save face.'

'Except, you didn't arrive until just after eleven,' she counters, 'but Amara said that Rob, his best man, said Leo's been gone since at least ten thirty.'

I don't know what to say, how to react. Part of me is glad because, just like that, the biggest obstacle standing in the way of me and Beth getting back together has just been removed. But the other part of me, the bit that's a touch more sensitive, is only too aware that the situation is a lot more nuanced – and now is not the time to crack open the champagne and unravel the bunting, no matter how much I might want to.

'I'm not having this,' says Beth, unlocking her phone and dialling a number.

'What are you doing?' I exclaim.

'What do you think? Calling Leo to find out exactly what he's playing at.'

'You're doing what?' I literally can't believe what I'm hearing. 'The only reason you're even here with me right now is because *you* didn't want to marry *him*! Why on earth are you calling him? Isn't this what you wanted? For the wedding to be off?'

She at least has the decency to look shamefaced, and drops the hand holding her phone down to her side. 'It's just so confusing though.'

'Not to me, it isn't,' I say. 'And after everything you've said today, it shouldn't be to you either . . . unless, that is, you don't mean any of it. Unless, that is, you want him back.'

‘Of course I don’t want him back,’ she says, but there’s a beat before she manages to conjure up her response, a moment of hesitation that tells me far more than the actual words.

‘You do want him back, don’t you?’ The sudden realisation hits me hard. ‘Why else would you want to call him? Why else would you be this upset?’

She bites her lip, tears springing to the corners of her eyes. ‘You’re not being fair,’ she says, her voice unsteady. ‘Nothing about this is easy, nothing about this is straightforward. It’s complicated – you can’t just turn your feelings on and off like a tap.’

‘Apparently you can!’ I bark before I can stop myself, feeling so hurt, so wounded, that all I want to do is get as far away from her as possible. I really thought this was it, I really thought this was our happy ever after. I feel like such a fool. I feel like the world’s biggest idiot. If only I’d never answered her call this morning, if only I’d had the courage to ignore it and get on with my life – right now I’d be happy, or at the very least pleasantly distracted, and my dignity would be fully intact.

‘Where are you going?’ she calls after me as I begin stalking back down the path towards the car park.

‘Away from you and all this drama.’

She runs after me and grabs me by the arm.

‘You’re not being fair,’ she says through her tears. ‘You’re not being reasonable. This is a lot for me. All I’m doing is trying to process it. All I’m doing is trying to make it make sense.’

‘Well, good luck with that,’ I say. ‘I’m guessing we’re all dealing with our own stuff today. Do you really want to know why I’m driving that stupid Ferrari, why I’ve really got that ridiculous penis substitute of a car? It’s because of you, because my friends knew that I couldn’t deal with you getting married to someone else. They rented the car, planned a whole day of stuff for us to do together, stuff that was supposed to take my mind off you. And what did I do the minute you called? I dropped them, and came racing to your rescue, because that’s the sort of pathetic excuse for a man I am. So fine, call Leo, go chase after him, because do you know what? I’m done with you, I’m done with your drama, I’m out of here!’

Wrenching myself free of her grasp, I storm away, back down the path, back towards the car, ignoring Beth’s cries for me to stop, ignoring her

pleas for me to go back to her. The walk that seemed to take an age when we first arrived here now takes no time at all, as I'm propelled by fury, and before I know it I'm emerging from the trees on to the tarmac of the car park, now empty save for the Ferrari.

Reaching for my keys, I open the car, slide into the driver's seat and switch on the engine. My phone immediately connects to the car stereo and starts playing 'Trouble', a Ray LaMontagne song, another track from the playlist Beth and I made together that was one of our favourites. And maybe it's the song, a moody ballad about being saved by the love of a good woman, or maybe it's the image of Beth crying alone back there by the water's edge, but something makes me turn off the engine and get out of the car, ready to retrace my steps, but before I can do so she appears at the entrance to the path and begins walking towards me.

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18. Now

She rushes towards me, her face still wet with tears. ‘Reuben, please don’t go like this. I’m sorry, you were right. I’ve been selfish and I’ve treated you terribly.’

‘But you don’t want to be with me, do you?’ I say, surprised by how calm I feel.

She looks down at the ground, avoiding my gaze.

‘No,’ she says quietly. ‘No, I don’t want to be with you. I’ll always care for you, Reuben, and I’ll always be grateful for what you’ve done for me today, but it’s only now I’ve lost Leo that I fully realise what a terrible mistake I’ve made. I should never have let my nerves get the better of me, I should never have run out on him. He’s all I want, all I need. And if he’ll still have me, I want to be with him forever.’

Her use of the word ‘forever’ really stings. And I want to be angry with her, if for no other reason than that it’s the easiest thing to do in this moment. Blame her for everything that’s gone wrong, focus all my attention on her faults instead of my own. But something – call it a refusal to live in denial, call it a sudden coming to my senses, perhaps even call it the ultimate wake-up call if you really want to – whatever it is, it’s telling me that the way forward, the way for me to make sense of the madness of today, lies in acknowledging the part I’ve played in my own downfall.

‘You know where I think it all went wrong for us?’ I ask, leaning against the car.

Beth responds with a shake of her head.

‘It was that first time we stayed at Dad’s, that time when I said you were “perfect”. I can see it now, although I couldn’t at the time, but I should never have thought it, let alone said it. You weren’t perfect, nobody is, and though you told me you weren’t, I just wouldn’t listen. It’s like I wasn’t seeing you for you, as a real person with flaws and quirks and all the other things that real people have.’ I pause, trying to order my thoughts, trying to find the words to say what I need to say. ‘I suppose that’s what I’d always thought being in love meant. I mean, if you’re perfect for me, and I’m perfect for you, it stands to reason that we should be happy together.’

‘But that’s an awful lot of pressure to put on someone – to put on yourself too,’ she responds.

I can’t help but smile. ‘You’re not wrong there. And that sort of brings me to my second point: the fact that I tried to change you. And before you say it, I know it’s a massive contradiction. Where’s the logic in trying to change someone you think is perfect? But ultimately, isn’t that what we all are? A seething mass of chaotic contradictions masquerading as rational human beings? You’re perfect, but I wish you talked more about your feelings. You’re perfect, but I wish you were a little less grumpy first thing in the morning. Or, in our situation, you’re perfect, but I just wish you believed in love the way I believe in it.’

Beth smiles. ‘You’re right, as a species we don’t make much sense, do we?’

‘I should never have pressured you into being who you aren’t,’ I continue. ‘But equally I should never have pretended not to care about the things that mean so much to me. I wasn’t seeing you, and worse still, I wasn’t allowing you to see me. Bizarrely, it wasn’t until you said that you didn’t believe in love lasting forever that I became sort of obsessed with it. Until then I would’ve happily bumbled along, merrily taking each day as it came. But the moment you took forever off the table, the second you said that it wasn’t possible . . . I don’t know . . . it was almost all I could think about.’

‘I get it,’ says Beth. ‘It’s like that thing when psychologists tell you not to think about, say . . . I don’t know, an elephant, and then for the next minute, no matter how hard you try, that’s literally all you can think about. Elephants walking two by two, elephants standing on a ball, elephants wearing tutus and holding parasols. It’s just how the mind works.’

‘Exactly,’ I say, thinking about all the heartache, the pain and the drama we could’ve saved ourselves if we’d had this conversation earlier. ‘It’s all about the elephants. Maybe that’s what your wobble this morning was about: it was an elephant. Telling yourself not to panic about the thought of spending forever with Leo meant that it was all you could do.’

She gives me a searching look. ‘And our kiss . . . Was that an elephant too?’

I swallow hard as the memory of it comes flooding back to me, making me want to take her in my arms and do it all over again. ‘Yes,’ I say,

forcing a smile to my lips. 'Probably. Just the mind playing tricks, telling us not to kiss – meaning that was all we could think about.'

'So, you saying you wanted us to get back together . . . You didn't really mean it?'

I stop and think about the past six months without her, about my reaction to the news she was getting married, about dropping everything today to be by her side.

'It doesn't matter whether I meant it or not,' I say, trying my best to be strong. 'Not if you're still in love with Leo, not if you really still want to get married to him today. And you do, don't you?'

There are tears in her eyes when she speaks. 'More than anything.'

'In that case,' I say, digging deeper than I've ever done before, deeper than I've ever had to, 'we'd better get going. We've got ourselves a groom to track down.'

19. Now

If 'rescue ex-girlfriend from her own wedding' was an unlikely entry on my bingo card for today, then 'help ex-girlfriend find her fiancé' was so far off the chart of possibilities that it might as well have been in a different dimension, in a whole other universe. And yet here I am, bombing down country lanes in a rented Ferrari, with my ex-girlfriend in the passenger seat, doing just that.

'This is so hopeless,' exclaims Beth desperately. 'Like looking for a needle in a haystack. He could literally be anywhere. Shall I try calling him again?'

'If he didn't pick up the first ten times,' I say, 'I can't imagine he will now, but by all means give it a go.'

She presses redial, and once again the phone rings out before going to voicemail, and this time, just like all the others, she leaves a message. 'Leo, it's me again, I want you to know that it's not too late, whatever's going on with you we can work this out. I promise you we can fix this. So please call me back, even if it's just to let me know you're okay.'

Less than half an hour ago each and every one of her words would've felt like a stake through my heart, but I don't know what it is – whether I love her so much that I just want her to be happy, or if so much has happened that I'm simply dead inside – but somehow I don't feel that pain anymore. I'm just a man with a mission; a different one than before. I want to find Leo, I need to find Leo, so at least someone will be in with the chance of getting their happy ending today, even if it isn't me.

'Think,' I tell Beth. 'You know Leo better than anyone. We know that he hasn't got his car, and so chances are he's either walked somewhere or ordered a taxi, so where would he go? Back to Slough, back to your flat?'

'I don't know, probably not. He'd know I could walk in there at any minute, so I doubt it.'

'Where else then? Would he go and see a friend?'

'They're all at the wedding or on their way to it.'

I think for a moment. 'Okay then, how about an ex? I mean, if you called one in your time of need, maybe he did too?'

‘The only one he’d even think about getting in contact with moved to Canada two years ago. But she’s married, and didn’t invite him to the wedding, so I’m guessing that’s a non-starter.’ She begins to cry. ‘We’re never going to find him.’

‘Come on, Beth!’ I command. ‘There’s no point falling apart, you’ve got to hold it together. Think! Think! You’re Leo, where are you going to go?’

She sniffs, dries her eyes with the sleeve of her tracksuit, and tries to compose herself. ‘You’re right, this isn’t the time for tears. Okay, I’m Leo, I’m normally logical and methodical but I’m worried about my wedding day and I’m not sure whether or not to go through with it . . . I need time to think . . . someplace where I can get my thoughts straight . . . work out what it is I really want, and so I’d go . . . I’d go . . . I’d go—’

‘—to the pub!’ we say in unison.

‘Of course, that’s it,’ I say. ‘And even better, I bet I know exactly the one he’s picked.’

As soon as it’s safe, I stop the car and head back in the direction of Abbey Manor. On the way we pass quaint country pub after quaint country pub until finally we reach the one I’m looking for, The Shire Tavern, the first one I drove past after rescuing Beth this morning. He has to be there; it’s within walking distance of the hotel, and from the outside at least looks reassuringly olde worlde, the sort of place to which men with problems have been going to think things over for centuries.

Pulling into the busy car park, we both leap out, wired with energy. ‘You check the main bars and any tucked-away function rooms they might have,’ I tell her, ‘and I’ll check the outside and the beer garden.’

Beth gives a curt nod, and I’m about to remind her that in her tracksuit and curlers she might elicit some stares, but she’s so focused on the task at hand that she disappears before I have a chance – leaving me once again, in my black suit and tie, looking like a second-rate James Bond in pursuit of his arch-nemesis, or perhaps a lost mourner in search of the funeral cortège.

I survey the handful of tables set out to the side of the building, looking for a runaway groom, sitting alone, contemplating a solitary pint as if the weight of the world is resting on his shoulders. Instead all I see are groups of laughing friends making the most of the sunshine, pub-lunching families and loved-up couples with eyes only for each other. I dodge past

them all, trying and failing to look inconspicuous, but as I come to the rear of the pub I'm rewarded with the sight of an additional, much larger beer garden, overlooking a field empty but for a forlorn-looking horse that's chewing on some bracken.

Though the majority of the tables out here are as busy as the others, one in the far corner catches my eye, occupied as it is by a solitary handsome man. But it's the morning suit he's wearing and the way he's gazing into the half-drunk pint of beer in front of him as if it's a crystal ball that really gives the game away.

I've done it. I've found the runaway groom.

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20. Now

The man in the morning suit lifts his gaze away from his drink and considers me the moment I stand before him and say his name. By the look of his bloodshot eyes, it's clear that this isn't his first drink of the day, or even his second.

'Do I know you?'

'No,' I reply, sitting down opposite him at the table. 'I'm Reuben. I'm sort of a friend of Beth's. She's really worried about you.'

He studies me for a moment. 'Reuben . . . Reuben . . . Reuben, as in her ex Reuben?'

'Yeah,' I reply, all too aware that I don't know what he knows, and the last thing I want to do right now is inadvertently give the game away.

'You weren't on the guest list. What are you doing here? What, did Beth ask you to look for me?'

How exactly to answer this? 'I'm a friend, that's all. And she's worried about you, and so, as her friend, I am too.'

He regards me carefully, his face confused. 'Didn't you get off with some woman when you and her were together? Beth can't stand you.'

'I did, yes,' I admit. 'But what better person to talk an idiot fiancé out of making a decision he's going to regret than the idiot who got dumped for doing just that?'

Leo laughs bitterly. 'I suppose I can see your logic, but a fat lot of good that's going to do me now. It's too late, I've ruined everything.'

'Look,' I say, leaning across the table and staring him dead in the eye, 'it's not too late. You've not ruined anything yet. Beth's in the pub looking for you as we speak.'

'She's here?' His face contorts in horror as he gets unsteadily to his feet. 'I've got to go. I can't face her. I just can't.'

'Because, what? You ran away from the wedding?'

He gives me a hard stare. 'Because . . . because . . . I'm not sure I believe in love anymore.'

'You what?' I almost want to kick the table in frustration. What is it about people getting all philosophical, instead of just getting on with the

basics of being happy?

‘I’m not sure I believe in love,’ he repeats.

‘What are you on about?’ I say. Standing up, I put a hand on each of his shoulders and sit him back down on the bench. ‘Of course you do.’

‘I did, yeah, and I’ve never felt about anyone like I do about Beth, but I’ve spent so long listening to her arguments, so long trying my best to understand her worldview, that, I don’t know, I woke up this morning in a panic thinking, “What if she’s right after all? What if there is no such thing as happy ever after? What if all I’ve done is fool her into making the biggest mistake of her life?”’

‘And what if getting married today is the best decision either of you ever make?’ I counter. ‘What if it’s a decision so good that, years from now, even decades later, you’ll look back on it in wonder? You see, that’s the problem with “what ifs”, they work both ways, so if you think about it, they sort of cancel each other out. And all that’s left, all that matters, are the choices we make, choices that don’t come with a single assurance that they’re not going to end in disaster. Is there a chance that things might not work? Absolutely. But is there a chance they might? Most definitely. It’s like something my dad once told me, something he read in a self-help book: life doesn’t come with any guarantees, all you get – all any of us get – is what we get. So, in the end, all you can do is put your best foot forward, and keep doing that ’til the day you die.’

He stares at me for a moment, his face so unreadable that it’s impossible to know if anything I’ve said has got through to him, but then he stands up, leans across the table and throws his arms around me in a huge bear hug. I’m not going to lie, I don’t enjoy it, but the man is clearly having some sort of an epiphany, and it seems churlish to object to him invading my personal boundaries.

‘Reuben? Leo?’

We break away from our embrace to see that we’re no longer alone. Beth in all her tracksuited, hair-rollered glory is staring in wonderment at the both of us as if we’ve lost our minds.

‘He’s all yours,’ I say, getting to my feet. ‘Give me a shout when you’re ready. I’ll be by the car.’

Without once looking back, I head to the car park, hopeful that I’ve said enough to get things back on track for them, but all too aware that

there's a lot for them to talk over, and none of it will be easy.

Reaching the car, I take out my phone and call Pete, who according to the Anti-Wedding Day itinerary should be arriving in Cheltenham with the boys around now for the afternoon races.

'Mate,' he says, 'how's it all going? I've been wanting to call all morning but figured you might be a bit busy. You haven't done anything stupid, have you?'

'I've done everything stupid,' I assure him, and taking a deep breath I give him a detailed breakdown of the morning's events.

'I . . . What . . . You . . . How . . . Mate,' he splutters, rendered momentarily speechless by my tale. 'That's . . . that's insane! Completely bonkers! Only you could get yourself into a scrape like that. So what are you going to do now?'

I'm about to reply, to offer a witty retort, when I spot Beth and Leo, hand in hand, emerging from the entrance to the pub, huge smiles plastered across their faces. Though I have no idea what's been said, it's clear they've made their peace with each other, and much to my surprise I'm genuinely happy for them. They've certainly been through it today, and gone through a trial that would undoubtedly have crushed any ordinary couple, but they've made it through, and by the looks of things emerged stronger than ever.

They walk over to me, still grinning, still clutching each other's hands, and after almost knocking me over with a joint hug and proclaiming that I saved the day, they ask me a question, the answer to which I know is going to drive Pete completely crazy.

'Mate, you're never going to believe this,' I say to my friend, who's still hanging on at the other end of the line, 'but it looks like I'm going to a wedding.'

Epilogue

So that's that. The unexpurgated version of what I did on the day my ex got married. My fantastic mates came up with an elaborate plan to take my mind off the fact that the woman I was in love with was getting married to someone else. Then, of course, she called me, which led to a dramatic rescue followed by an audacious escape to a lakeside setting. Then there was a moment where we almost kissed which I spoiled by demanding an explanation of how she came to change her mind about love, which was followed by another moment which this time I managed not to ruin, ending in an actual kiss, which in turn led to me making a bid for us to get back together. Then there was the bombshell news about Leo doing a runner, which sort of brought Beth to her senses, and eventually made me realise that she didn't really love me. And that maybe, truthfully, I'd been in love more with the idea of her than the reality all along.

Then finally, dramatically, there was my tracking down of the runaway groom and the pep talk I gave him, which I'd like to think turned everything around. Because yes, Beth and Leo did indeed get married, and yes, I was one of the guests, but no, my head didn't explode, my heart didn't break, and neither did I feel compelled to object at the crucial moment during the exchange of vows. Instead, along with everyone else in the room, I clapped, whooped and generally rejoiced in the official union of two people who were clearly very much in love.

So if, like me, you learn that the love of your life is getting married and you end up wondering what to do on the day, would I recommend doing what I did? Well, no, not at all. At least not to the faint-hearted. So, then, what would I advise?

Take a holiday abroad – nothing can prevent you from crashing your ex's wedding quite like being ten thousand miles away, lying on a beach drinking your third mojito of the morning.

Surround yourself with good friends – the kind who will hide your car keys, lock away your phone and, if needed, physically restrain you, if that's what it takes to stop you ruining someone's magical day and making an idiot of yourself in the process.

Read a book – a really good one about love, loss and getting back out there. I hear *Your Time Will Come: Dating tips and tricks for finding love in later life* is a good one, but if you have trouble finding it, try *Heartburn* by Nora Ephron, *On Love* by Alain de Botton or *My Legendary Girlfriend*, by some bloke called Mike Gayle. Reading them will be a good reminder that you're not alone in this – that others have travelled along the same path and lived to tell the tale.

Do something you've always wanted to do but have always been too sensible to go through with – hire that Ferrari, enjoy that luxury spa day, jump out of that aeroplane (preferably with a parachute). Because if you can't treat yourself on a day like this, when can you?

Fall in love – which I know sounds like a bit of a stretch, because when I asked my girlfriend, Alyssa, if I should include this one, she just pulled a face and rolled her eyes. Ironical given that we actually met on the dance floor at Beth and Leo's wedding, while throwing shapes to 'Believe' by Cher. Alyssa was the platonic plus-one of a work colleague of Leo's, and we hit it off straight away, chatting like old mates, making each other laugh and, yes, dancing to the cheesiest of wedding-disco classics until the small hours. We've been together a year now. My dad and Anne both adore her, Pete thinks she'll be the making of me, and as for Beth and Leo, they think she's amazing. And me? I really think she might be the one. She's gorgeous, clever and kind, and makes me laugh like no one else. And as for the big question, the one that plagued Beth, Leo and me too: yes, she does believe in love, which is handy, because thankfully so do I.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Mike Gayle was born and raised in Birmingham. After graduating from Salford University with a degree in sociology, he moved to London to pursue a career in journalism and worked as a features editor and agony uncle. He has written for a variety of publications including *The Sunday Times*, the *Guardian* and *Cosmopolitan*.

Mike became a full-time novelist in 1997 following the publication of his *Sunday Times* top-ten bestseller *My Legendary Girlfriend*, which was hailed by the *Independent* as ‘full of belly laughs and painfully acute observations’, and by *The Times* as ‘a funny, frank account of a hopeless romantic’. Since then he has written nineteen novels, including *The Man I Think I Know*, selected as a World Book Night title, and *Half A World Away*, selected for the Richard and Judy Book Club. His books have been translated into more than thirty languages. In 2021, Mike was the recipient of the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Romantic Novelists’ Association.

He lives in Birmingham with his wife and two daughters.

You can find him online at mikegayle.co.uk and on Instagram [@mikegaylethenovelist](https://www.instagram.com/mikegaylethenovelist).

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