

BETH O'LEARY

'AUDACIOUSLY
CLEVER'
LOUISE O'NEILL

'HEARTWARMING
AND ROMANTIC'
SOPHIE KINSELLA

THE NO-SHOW



**THREE WOMEN. THREE DATES.
ONE MISSING MAN ...**

**THE
NO-SHOW**

BETH O'LEARY



QUERCUS

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For Bug

Siobhan

He isn't here.

Siobhan breathes out slowly through her nose. She's aiming for calm, but it reads more *angry bull* than *zen*.

She cancelled breakfast with a friend for this. She curled her hair and wore lipstick and shaved her legs (not just to the knee, all the way up, in case he fancied running a hand up her thigh under the table).

And he isn't bloody here.

'I'm not angry,' she tells Fiona. They're video calling. They always video call – Siobhan is a big believer in the power of eye contact. Also, she'd quite like *someone* to see how fabulous she looks today, even if it is only her flatmate. 'I'm resigned. He's a man, ergo, he let me down. What did I expect?'

'You're wearing sex make-up,' Fiona says, squinting at the screen. 'It's not even nine in the morning yet, Shiv.'

Siobhan shrugs. She's sitting in one of those cafés that prides

itself on its quirkiness, a quality she always finds deeply irritating in anything or anyone, and there's a half-drunk double-shot oat milk latte on the table in front of her. If she'd known she was going to be stood up on Valentine's Day, she'd have got proper milk. Siobhan is only vegan when she's in a good mood.

'Sex is what we do,' she says.

'Even on a breakfast date?'

They've never actually had a breakfast date before. But when she'd told him she was on a flying visit to London, he'd said, *Fancy having breakfast with me tomorrow morning, by any chance . . . ?* Asking for a breakfast date was definitely significant – and on V-Day, no less. Generally speaking, their dates happen in her hotel room, usually after eleven p.m.; they see each other on the first Friday of the month, plus the odd bonus day if she happens to be in London.

That's fine. That's plenty. Siobhan doesn't *want* more than that – he lives in England, she lives in Ireland; they're both busy people. Their arrangement works perfectly.

'Are you sure you don't want to give it another five?' Fiona says, lifting a dainty hand to her lips as she swallows a mouthful of cornflakes. She's sitting at their kitchen table, her hair still in its overnight plait. 'He's maybe just late?'

Siobhan feels a pang of homesickness for her flat, though she's only been gone a day. She misses the familiar lemony smell of their kitchen, the peace of her walk-in-wardrobe. She misses the version of herself that had not yet made the mistake of hoping her favourite hook-up might actually want to be something more.

She sips her latte as airily as she can. 'Oh, please. He's not coming,' she says with a shrug. 'I'm resigned to it.'

'You don't think you're maybe writing him off be—'

'Fi. He said eight thirty. It's ten to. He's stood me up. It's better if I just . . .' she swallows, '. . . accept it and bounce back.'

'All right,' Fiona says with a sigh. 'Well. Drink your coffee, remember you're excellent, get ready to kick butt today.' Her American accent resurfaces when she says *kick butt*; these days she sounds as Dublin as Siobhan for the most part. When the pair first met at the Gaiety School of Acting, aged eighteen, Fiona was all New York accent and confidence, but ten years of failed auditions have washed her out. She's unlucky, always the understudy. Siobhan fully believes this is Fiona's year, as she has every year for the last decade.

'When am I not ready to kick butt? Please.'

Siobhan tosses her hair back just as a man passes behind her; he knocks her chair. The coffee wobbles in his hand, a tiny splash spilling on Siobhan's shoulder. It sinks into the pillar-box red of her dress, leaving a little stain, two droplets, like a semicolon.

It has all the makings of a meet-cute. For a split second, as she turns, Siobhan considers it – he's attractive-ish, tall, the sort of man you'd expect to have a big dog and a loud laugh. Then he says,

'Christ alive, you'll put someone's eye out with all that hair!'

And Siobhan decides, no, she is in too bad a mood for large imposing men who do not immediately apologise for spilling coffee on couture dresses. An angry, righteous heat grows in her

chest, and she's grateful for it, relieved, even – this is exactly what she needs.

She reaches out and touches his arm, just lightly. He slows, his eyebrows a little raised; she pauses deliberately before she speaks.

'Didn't you mean to say, *I'm ever so sorry?*' she asks. Her voice is sugar-sweet.

'Careful, buddy,' Fiona says from the phone, which is now propped on the wonky terracotta plant pot in the centre of the table.

He is not careful. Siobhan knew he wouldn't be.

'What exactly am I meant to be ever-so-sorry for, Rapunzel?' he asks. He follows her gaze to the coffee stain on her shoulder and huffs a warm, indulgent laugh. He pretends to squint, as if there is nothing there to see; he's trying to be cute, and if she were in a good, vegan-milk sort of mood, Siobhan might go along with it. But, unfortunately for the man with the coffee, Siobhan has just been stood up on Valentine's Day.

'This dress cost almost two thousand euro,' she says. 'Would you like to transfer the money, or pay in instalments?'

He throws his head back and laughs. A few couples glance over.

'Very funny,' he says.

'I'm not joking.'

His smile drops, and then things really get started. He raises his voice first; she pulls up the dress on NET-A-PORTER; he snaps and calls her a *mouthy little madam*, which is excellent, because it gives her an extra five minutes of ammo, and Fiona's laughing

on her phone screen, and for a good few seconds Siobhan almost forgets that she's alone in a tediously quirky café with no date.

'You're brutal, Shiv,' Fiona says fondly as Siobhan settles back into her chair.

The man has stormed off, having thrown a tenner on her table 'for the dry-cleaning'. Everyone is staring. Siobhan flicks those shining blonde argument-starting locks over her shoulder and turns her face to the window. Chin up. Tits out. Legs crossed.

With her head turned like this, only Fiona can tell she's trying not to cry.

'Did that help?' Fiona asks.

'Of course. And I'm ten quid richer, too. What shall I buy?' Siobhan sniffs and pulls up the menu from the other side of the table. She catches the time on her watch: 9 a.m. Only 9 a.m. and she's already having a record-breakingly bad day. 'An "always see the sunny side" fry-up, perhaps? A "keep smiling" kale smoothie?'

She slaps her hand down on the menu and shoves it away again; the couple on the adjacent table jump slightly and eye her with trepidation.

'Fuck me, this is categorically the worst place to be stood up on Valentine's Day,' she says. The warming anger in her chest has gone, and now there's just that tightness, the lonely clutching ache of approaching tears.

'Do *not* let this get to you,' Fiona says. 'He's a prick if he's stood you up.'

'He is a prick,' Siobhan says fiercely, voice catching.

Fiona falls silent. Siobhan has the suspicion that she is giving

her time to gather herself, which makes her even more determined not to let either of the teardrops currently teetering on her lash-line roll down her cheeks.

‘I know this was big for you, Shiv,’ Fiona says tentatively. ‘Have you even . . . Isn’t it the first proper date since Cillian?’

Siobhan scowls, conceding defeat and dabbing at her eyes. ‘What, you think I haven’t been on a date for three years?’

Fiona just waits patiently; they both know that she hasn’t. Fiona ought to know better than to *say* it, though. Eventually Fiona sighs and says,

‘Are you binning him off, then?’

‘Oh, he’s binned. He’s *done*,’ Siobhan says.

He’s going to rue the day he stood her up. Siobhan doesn’t know what ruing is, not yet, but she’s going to find out. And he’s not going to like it.

Miranda

09:03, and nobody has turned up.

Miranda gnaws the inside of her thumbnail and leans back against her car, tapping a boot on the tyre. She tightens her ponytail. She checks her bootlaces. She goes through her rucksack and makes sure everything's there: two water bottles, her climbing kit, the hand saw her parents bought her for her birthday, with her name engraved on the handle. All present and correct, no items having magically leapt from her bag at some point on the twenty-minute journey from her flat.

09:07 and, at last, there's the sound of tyres on gravel. Miranda turns as Jamie's truck pulls up, bright green, emblazoned with the J Doyle company logo. Miranda's heart is hammering at her ribs like a woodpecker, and she stands a little taller as Jamie and the rest of the crew climb out.

Jamie grins at her as they approach. 'AJ, Spikes, Trey, this is Miranda Rosso,' he says.

Two of the men give Miranda a look that she is familiar with: the hunted, nervous glance of boys who have been firmly instructed not to be inappropriate. Trey is short and stocky, with sullen, deep-set eyes. Spikes is a head taller than Trey and built like a rugby player, barrel-chested beneath his grubby, faded T-shirt. They each nod at her and immediately turn their attention to the tree on the corner of the plot where they're parked.

And then there's AJ. He gives Miranda a very different sort of look: the up-and-down glance of a man who hears 'don't be inappropriate with the new girl' and takes it as a challenge.

Miranda's been warned about AJ. He's got quite the reputation. *That AJ's had more women than he's climbed trees*, Miranda's old boss told her when she said she was leaving to join Jamie's team. *Face of an angel, heart of an absolutely heartless bastard.*

So Miranda is braced for the piercing green eyes, the bearded jaw, the muscled, tattooed arms. She's ready for the eyebrow quirk she gets when their eyes meet, the look that says, *I eat women like you for breakfast.*

She's not *totally* prepared for the small cockapoo puppy in his arms, however.

She double takes. AJ strokes the dog's head, implacable, as if it is perfectly normal to be carrying a tiny puppy when you arrive at a job site.

'Oh, yeah, and that's Rip,' Jamie says, without much enthusiasm. 'New dog. Apparently he can't be left home alone, is that right, AJ?'

'Gets separation anxiety,' AJ says, lifting Rip up a little higher against his broad, muscled chest.

Miranda is trying very hard not to smile. Her plan for dealing

with AJ had been to completely ignore him – she's found that's usually the best strategy with cocky types. But . . . *damn*, that's a cute puppy. She's never been able to resist the ones that look a bit like teddy bears, all curly-coated and snub-nosed.

'Hey, Rip,' she says, extending a hand for him to sniff. 'Hey, little guy!'

Rip's tail begins to wag against AJ's side, and Miranda tries not to melt.

'He likes you,' AJ says, voice like honey, gaze slick as it runs up and down Miranda's body again, and Miranda's brain puts the brakes on. The puppy may be cute, but she is directing way too much attention to the torso of the man holding him. This was not the strategy.

'Hi,' she says, tearing her gaze away from Rip and directing her smile towards Trey and Spikes. 'Good to meet you guys.'

'Rosso's quite the climber,' Jamie says, clapping Miranda on the back. 'You should have seen her at the aerial rescue challenge. Never seen anyone up a tree so fast. You got your own climbing kit?'

'Mmm-hmm,' Miranda says, nodding to indicate her rucksack.

'I'm sending you up the big one,' Jamie says. 'The customer wants the crown reduced by a third.' He nods at the silver birch towering over the front garden of the grand house they're parked outside. It's spindly, ducking and weaving in the wind. 'Want to show these boys how it's done?'

'Always,' Miranda says, already crouching to open her rucksack and pull out her harness.

*

There is no rush quite like a climb.

When Miranda was fifteen, she was walking home from school and heard men shouting in the distance. She followed the sounds to the tree surgeons training in the land management college up the road from her secondary. There was a row of pines, tall and lovely, with yellow and orange ropes hanging from their branches. The men above her were moving through the trees like Tarzan, leaping across forks to grab trunks between their knees, leaning back into their harnesses. One was even hanging upside-down.

It had never occurred to Miranda that you could climb trees for a living.

The instructor had seen her watching and told her about an open day the following week when she'd get the chance to try it herself, if she fancied it. Once she'd felt the harness take her weight, once she'd reached her first branch and looked down at the ground swimming beneath her, she'd been hooked.

Ten years later and she isn't just climbing trees for a living, she's doing it *really well*. And though her parents are no closer to understanding why their eldest daughter insists on working in a profession so dangerous that she was advised to get her life insurance sorted on her first day, they have reluctantly come around to it, mainly because nobody could fail to see how passionate Miranda is about what she does.

Once she's up in the birch, with her main line anchored to the highest branch that can take her weight, Miranda forgets about Trey and Spikes and AJ. She even forgets about Carter, their lunch date, the outfit carefully folded in the bottom of her

rucksack in readiness. Being forty feet up a tree is absolutely terrifying, no matter how experienced you are, and when you're doing it, there's no room for *anything* else. There's just you and the ropes and the wind and the tree, breathing around you, keeping you from falling.

AJ's pruning a hedge to the front of the property, with Rip toddling excitedly around his feet; at first Jamie stays to keep an eye on Miranda, but after half an hour or so he leaves to help AJ. The other boys are on groundwork, the heavy lifting, putting branches through the chipper. The morning goes by in a roar of chainsaws and the glitter of sawdust.

Miranda sails down the main line and lets herself land hard, heels digging into the soil beneath the tree. The rope comes down nicely for her, doesn't even catch. It's been a good morning. Her hair is coming loose from its ponytail; strands stick to her forehead as she pulls off her helmet.

'Not bad,' AJ says, as she walks past him to Jamie.

'Cheers,' she says, and smiles at Jamie. 'All good, boss?'

'Oh, I remember!' Jamie says, straightening up with an armful of hazel branches, eyes twinkling. He's in his late forties now, no longer the fastest guy up the tree, not the one who takes the risks. But he's still got an edginess to him. A really good tree surgeon is just the right amount of adrenaline junkie. Or too much of one, and very lucky. 'You've got to be gone by half one, right? For your date?'

Miranda brushes sawdust off her chainsaw trousers. She's wearing braces – safety trousers are designed with men in mind and are always too loose around the waist. A friend she met on

an aerial rescue course tipped her off that suspenders would save her from the humiliation of finding her trousers around her ankles one day.

‘Yep! Lunch date,’ she says, unclipping the chainsaw and setting it up in the bed of Jamie’s truck. ‘It is Valentine’s Day, you know.’

‘My wife reminded me of that this morning,’ Jamie says, pulling a face.

‘A lunch date?’ AJ says behind her.

She doesn’t turn around. ‘My boyfriend wanted to meet me right after I’d finished my first job with Jamie.’

‘Or he’s got another woman lined up for the evening slot,’ AJ says.

Miranda doesn’t have much of a temper. She figures anyone who’s being a dick probably has a reason for it, and there’s no use flying off the handle. But she also knows that tolerance can look like weakness, especially if you’re a woman. She swallows.

‘What are your plans for the evening then, AJ?’ she asks, glancing back at him for just long enough to catch his quick, one-sided smile at the question. ‘Got a hot date?’

‘Depends,’ he says.

‘On what?’ Miranda pulls her hair out of its ponytail and runs her fingers through the tangles. Her hair is thick and dark, frizzy around her face, ringleted at the bottom, and almost always in knots.

‘On whether Jamie’ll let me ask you out for a drink this evening.’

‘AJ!’ Jamie barks. ‘What did we talk about on the drive here?’

Miranda meets AJ's eyes for just a moment. He's teasing her, or maybe testing her. But there's genuine heat behind his gaze, and Miranda realises with a jolt that he'd do it – he'd take her out for a drink, and then he'd take her home. This gorgeous, dangerous man.

Quite flattering, all things considered. Even if she does know he screws anything that moves.

'Why not? I know you're free tonight,' AJ says, folding his tattooed arms across his chest. His biceps are enormous. Miranda is quite sure he crossed his arms so she'd notice.

She keeps her chin up. 'Not interested,' she says, and smiles. 'Thanks though.' She turns back to Jamie. 'Seven tomorrow morning, right? You'll message me the address?'

'Not interested!' Jamie crows. 'When did you last hear that from a girl, AJ?'

AJ shrugs, bending down to pick up Rip, and Miranda can feel that his eyes are still on her as she begins to walk away.

'Been a while,' he says. 'But I always wear them down.'

Miranda laughs at that. 'Not this one,' she says cheerfully over her shoulder. 'I'm taken.'

'By Mr Lunch Date,' AJ calls. 'Lucky girl.'

She is lucky. Most days she can't believe her luck, actually. Carter is the sort of guy who she'd imagine would never look twice at someone like her: he's so *mature*, has a well-paid job, wears proper tailored suits. And he's gorgeous. Grown-up gorgeous, not like scruffy AJ. Carter has round glasses and a straight, manly jaw, and this totally melt-you-on-the-spot smile.

The two of them met through Reg, one of the guys Miranda used to work with – he played football with Carter, and Miranda had been at the pub with Reg one day last year when half the team had come in for a drink after a kickaround. Carter had been scrubbed clean, back in his work suit because he'd forgotten to bring another change of clothes for after the match, and he'd stood out like a shiny penny. All bright smile and half-wet hair. As the rest of the lads took the piss out of his outfit, he did this sheepish little head-duck, glasses catching in the pub lights, and Miranda's stomach had swooped. That head-duck hinted at the boy underneath the broad-shouldered grown-up; it made him seem more approachable.

Miranda hadn't been able to stop staring at him, and eventually he'd noticed and offered her a small, questioning half grin, a gentler invitation than she'd expected. He must be used to women throwing themselves at him, she'd thought, but there was no expectation there. She'd asked Reg to introduce them in the end, buoyed up by three pints, giddy with the half smile Carter had thrown her way. *Rosso, Carter, Carter, Rosso*, Reg had said. *Carter, get her a drink, will you, this is a woman who deserves to be treated right.*

Now, five months later, Carter still seems to be taking Reg at his word – the restaurant he's taking her to for their Valentine's Day lunch is the sort of place with no prices on the menu and drizzled glazes around the edges of the plate. It's not far from Erstead, the Surrey commuter town where Miranda lives. She gets changed at the McDonald's around the corner, slicking on some lip balm and mascara, and feels pretty good about

herself for the three-minute walk to the fancy restaurant, then immediately transitions to feeling childish and underdressed as she walks to their table in her blue pinafore dress and scuffed pumps. All the other women look really sophisticated.

Miranda lifts her bum off the chair to pull down the dress surreptitiously, under cover of the tablecloth. This is a classy restaurant, so they're only doing Valentine's Day indirectly: rose petals on tables, a general increase in candles, a vague atmosphere of smugness.

Miranda arrived a little late, so it takes her a while to clock that it's well after two and there's still no sign of Carter. He's habitually late, so this is no great surprise. But at around half past, when the waiter asks her if she wants a drink, she orders a Coke – it's getting awkward just sitting there, surrounded by loved-up couples, fiddling with her napkin and tapping her feet.

She sends Carter a text: Where are you?! Xx

Then another: You're really late?

And then: Carter?? Hello?

Slowly, slowly, she slips from being a woman who is waiting for her date to a woman who has been stood up. Nothing's visibly changed – she's still here, checking her phone too often, getting through her drink too fast. But everyone can see that her status is changing as each second passes, and by the time Miranda has sat at that table for forty-five minutes, without even moving a muscle she's become somebody to be pitied.

Eventually she just can't stand the stillness any longer. With each minute that's gone by, the fidgety, need-to-move feeling in her limbs has ramped up, even after a morning on the job. She

tells herself she'll wait until ten past three, and makes it to five past before going up to pay for her drink at the bar.

There's no way around it: he's stood her up.

There's probably a totally reasonable explanation, she tells herself. Some really funny story. He'll tell it with all the different people's voices – he's really good at accents; he totally nails her dad's Italian one, and he's got the Liverpudlian guy in Miranda's building down to a tee. They'll laugh about it. It'll become one of their stories, like, *Remember that time you stood me up on Valentine's Day?*

Right now, though, it kind of sucks. Miranda chews her lip as she waits for the card receipt to print. She knows she'll forgive Carter. She's probably forgiven him already, really, in anticipation of his excellent excuse. But for a moment, it's quite nice to imagine she's the sort of woman who wouldn't. The sort of woman who'd say, *I don't take this shit. If you stand me up, that's it. You're done.*

By the time Miranda gets home it's half four, and there's still no message from Carter. She misses her old flatmate – she could really use someone to make her a sympathetic cup of tea right now. She stands in the middle of the living room, listening to the traffic outside, wondering whether Carter decided she wasn't right for him after all.

This is pointless, Miranda Rosso, she tells herself, kicking off her pumps. *Pull yourself together.*

It's not even five yet – plenty of day left. She'll Hoover, then cook dinner and get to bed early. There's no use standing around moping. Where's that ever got anybody?

Jane

The key is hors d'oeuvres. As long as she has a miniature goat's cheese tart or a tiny spring roll in her mouth, then Jane has at least three seconds of chewing time to think of a response when she's hit with the inevitable, awful questions that arise when you're at an engagement party and your date has stood you up.

'Still on your own-io, hen?' Keira asks. She's got a glass of bubbly in each hand but manages to hoick her breasts up nonetheless; her necklaces briefly disappear into the valley of cleavage at the neckline of her ball gown.

Keira helps out at the Count Langley charity shop two days a week. She is one of the people most determined to set Jane up with Ronnie Langley, son of the count himself and the man who caused this whole mess.

When Jane first started working at the shop, Ronnie had taken a shine to her. Everyone who works for the Count Langley Trust is inordinately fond of Ronnie, who has one of those tragically

arranged faces that immediately inspires pity, and who is still single at thirty-five despite being first in line to inherit a ramshackle mansion, which everyone except Jane seems to consider the height of eligibility.

It had become a charity-shop-wide mission to get Jane and Ronnie together. And so Jane had told a little lie. She'd said she had a boyfriend. Over the years the lie has grown and grown, but it has never been put to the test quite like this before.

'I'm sure he's on his way, just held up at work,' Jane says weakly, checking her watch. Only a quarter past six – another hour of 'drinks and mingling' before the sit-down dinner begins.

Keira eyes her, false eyelashes bobbing as she takes in Jane's outfit: the same one she wore to work today. Jane's cheeks warm. She'd thought she could get away with the pale green cotton dress if she removed her woolly cardigan and tights, but now that she's here, it's obviously not formal enough. Behind Keira, the crowd deepens – there are *so* many guests here, more people than Constance and Martin could know by name, surely. They're in the guildhall at Winchester; the theme of the event, unsurprisingly, is Valentine's Day. There is a truly grotesque amount of pink.

'Listen, hen,' Keira says, her wrinkles deepening as she scrunches her face up. 'We all know you've been fibbing about having a boyfriend. You're better off just owning up, now, if . . .'

'Jane, dear, may I borrow you?' calls Mortimer.

Jane turns to Mortimer with an expression of fervent gratitude. Keira looks disgruntled as he leads Jane away from the bustle towards the edge of the room.

Mortimer Daperty is seventy years old; he wears a brown

suit to work every day, has a tuna sandwich for lunch without fail, and says *Ta-ta then, Jane! See you anon!* when he leaves at six p.m. each night. When nobody else is in the shop, he and Jane coexist in warm, mothball-scented silence, steam-ironing donated clothes and passing each other used books without exchanging so much as a word.

'You look absolutely miserable,' Mortimer says kindly.

'I . . . don't do well in crowds,' Jane says, trying to steady her breathing.

'And the young man who you said was coming . . . ?'

Jane is well-practised at dodging personal questions from her charity shop colleagues. But Mortimer usually never asks them, so this one takes her by surprise, and before she knows it, she finds herself answering.

'He was doing me a favour. We're not together, but he said he'd be my date so that I didn't have to come to this alone.' She looks down at her shoes. Sensible, soft brown leather, the sort of shoes she wouldn't have been seen dead in, once. 'Keira's right: I did lie about having a boyfriend.'

Mortimer just nods. 'A very reasonable protective measure,' he says. 'And this friend of yours, he's not even telephoned?'

Jane had expected some judgement from Mortimer, but his expression is kind.

'No. He's not called,' she says, returning her gaze to her shoes.

Mortimer tuts, but it's not Joseph who Jane is disappointed in – it's herself. She should have known better than to rely on someone else. As a rule, she prefers plants and cats to humans these days: they're both species with a much better track record.

Every day since moving back to Winchester, Jane has gone to the Hoxton Bakehouse at opening and bought herself the low-fat yogurt pot with fruit and granola. It's an unjustifiable expense, really, but the routine is soothing, like slipping into the same worn boots each day.

When she'd first seen Joseph in the bakery just after Christmas, she'd stopped so suddenly she'd almost tripped over her own feet in the doorway. She recognised him. She couldn't say exactly where from, but he felt . . . important. Someone from her old job, maybe? She said, 'Oh!' out loud, and stared, before she could remind herself that staring is the quickest way to draw attention to yourself, and should at all costs be avoided.

Joseph had turned and looked, but he hadn't seemed to recognise her. He'd shot her an enormous, sunny smile. Slightly perplexed, perhaps.

'Hello,' he said.

For a moment Jane stood poised, frozen, eyes wide. Then—
'Sorry, I thought you were . . . someone else,' she mumbled, averting her gaze and scuttling to the back of the queue and out of sight. But she'd felt his gaze on her, warm and curious, as he walked out of the shop with his croissant. After that, she saw him every morning for two weeks, but still couldn't quite place him. She never made the mistake of staring at him again.

And then, just when Jane had relaxed a little:

'This is a bit odd, isn't it?' Joseph said, suddenly turning on his heel to look right at her as they waited in the queue.

Jane blinked rapidly. 'Pardon?' she managed, in the direction of the floor.

'Well, I know all sorts about you. I know you wear the yellow jumper on Mondays, and a pale blue shirt on Tuesdays, and a white floaty dress on Wednesdays, and that spring green one with a cardigan on Thursdays, and a light pink jumper on Fridays. I know you read, because you've always got a book. And I know you like cinnamon buns, because you always give them this wistful sort of look before you order the yogurt pot. We see each other every day. But we don't talk.'

Her palms sweated. Nobody else had ever noticed her outfit rotation so quickly. And she was sure she didn't eye up the cinnamon buns – or at least, not *every* morning.

At last, unable to hold off any longer, she looked up and met his gaze.

He was undeniably handsome, though if pressed on why, she would have struggled to answer. His face was very mobile and expressive; his eyebrows were a little too straight and thick and would have looked stern on a man who smiled less. His creamy white skin was flushed along his cheekbones from the warmth of the bakery, and his jaw was dusted with grainy stubble a shade darker than his hazelnut brown hair. There was nothing in his face that explained why he was quite so engagingly good-looking, but when she met his eyes, she felt that dangerous, animal thrill that you feel in the presence of someone beautiful.

'I don't think it's all that strange,' she found herself saying. 'Do you talk to the person sitting beside you on the train?'

'Yes,' he said promptly.

'Oh, that's awful,' Jane said, before she could stop herself, and he burst out laughing.

'I'm Joseph,' he said. 'Tell me, where are you getting all these books from?'

That's how they'd ended up in a two-person book club. As a rule, Jane does not make friends with people – or rather, people do not make friends with Jane. And yet somehow a few days later she'd found herself sitting down for a Sunday morning coffee with him, talking about Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *Books are my happy place*, he'd told her, and she'd felt herself light up, because that's *exactly* what they are to her, too.

She had, at least, ensured that there would be nothing romantic there. She had used the *I have a boyfriend* lie on Joseph too – a protective measure, as Mortimer put it. It was only at the start of February, by which point she and Joseph were undeniably friends, that Jane had confessed she did not, in fact, have a boyfriend.

'Ah, that is good news,' Joseph said. 'Because I was starting to think this guy was a real bellend.'

'What!' Jane had always worked quite hard to make her fictional boyfriend seem like a catch.

'He's never around!' Joseph said with a laugh. 'And he didn't get you anything for your birthday?'

It's true: Jane had not gone as far as buying herself a real present from her fictional boyfriend.

The ease with which Joseph took her confession made her relax, and in the last couple of weeks they've grown closer. She's given up on trying to work out where she recognises him from – it had drawn her to him at first, perhaps, that strange, nagging sense of familiarity, but they're past that now. He's just Joseph.

And if she is sometimes a little distracted by the sunny warmth of his smile or the way his eyes turn greener in certain lights, she has mastered the art of ignoring it.

Already he knows more about Jane than anyone else who still remains in her life. Not everything, of course, but still, he is shockingly unbothered by the parts of herself she regards as impossible to like: her tendency to blurt out her thoughts, her rules and routines, her indecisiveness. It's felt so good to have someone to talk to again. She had begun to find herself thinking, *What's the harm?*

Now, as Keira makes her way purposefully towards her with Ronnie by her side, Jane thinks, *This. This is the harm.*

'Jane,' Keira says, tugging Ronnie by the arm, 'Ronnie was just telling me *he* doesn't have a date this evening either.'

Ronnie is visibly quivering beside the formidable Keira. He is gripped with such intense self-consciousness that Jane can feel it radiating from beneath his suit like the warmth of an oven, even from several steps away.

'H-hello,' he says. 'Lovely to see you, Jane.'

'Jane's date is . . .' Keira looks at her expectantly.

Under Keira's self-satisfied gaze, Jane gives up on *He's running late* or *I'm sure he'll be here any minute*.

'He can't make it,' Jane says.

'Oh, poor Jane! Ever so unlucky in love!' Keira says.

Jane has no idea where Keira got this idea from, though, annoyingly, it's very accurate.

'Isn't your mother badgering you for grandkids yet? I've been on at my kids for years, and they're still dragging their feet,' Keira says, sipping her drink.

Jane grits her teeth for a moment before answering. ‘My mother’s dead,’ she says.

Keira recoils. Her mouth opens and closes. This is always the worst part of these conversations: the hovering silence before the other person has decided exactly which sentimental line they’re going to trot out in response.

‘Oh, hen, I never knew! You never said!’ Keira says. She lowers her voice. ‘Was *that* why you left London and came here?’

The word *London* makes Jane flinch, as if someone’s just grabbed her by the shoulder. Keira never lets this question go; she asks it at least once a month, in some form or other, with the blithe persistence of a truly talented gossip.

‘No,’ Jane says, careful to keep her voice steady. ‘No, my mother died a long time ago. I was very young. I barely remember her.’

‘How utterly *tragic*,’ Keira says.

Ronnie is shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, like a child who needs the toilet. Keira pats Jane’s bare arm, her hand sweaty and well-intentioned; it takes all Jane’s strength not to shrug it off. She never wants to be touched when she’s sad. These days she’s hardly touched at all, and so it feels even worse, like pulling on a prickly wool jumper when you’ve been wearing silk.

‘Well, you’ve got us, hen, we’ll look after you,’ Keira says. She offers Jane a watery, exaggerated wink. ‘Why doesn’t Ronnie take your date’s seat at dinner, hmm? Who knows! This could be the start of a new story for you!’

As Jane steps into the shop the next morning, she checks surreptitiously for lurking Keira-types before making her way

to the till. The engagement party was hell. She only went because Constance, who is getting married, had always been kind when they'd worked in the shop together; the event was a useful reminder that stepping outside of her comfort zone never ends well. She breathes in the musty smell of the shop and begins her usual routine on arriving at work: a spring clean, then getting the till going, then making a start on the donation bags.

The shop floor has already been swept and there are fresh flowers in the vase on the coffee table by the bookcases, carefully placed to brighten up the space. The Count Langley charity shop is inside one of the fifteenth-century buildings to the north-east of town, down by the riverside: it's all sagging dark beams and creaking wood floors, and there's mildew creeping up behind the staff toilet like an incoming tide on sand. The Count Langley Trust owns the building; the charity supports individuals who are nearing the end of their life. Their funding shrinks almost as quickly as the mildew grows.

'Jane!'

She winces. It's Keira, emerging from the back room: Jane should have known when she saw the flowers. And – she turns – Constance *and* Mortimer. This is a completely unnecessary number of people to run the shop today, and shouldn't Constance be in bed with her fiancé?

'Oh, hen,' Keira says, descending with her arms outstretched. 'I've just been miserable all night thinking about you on your own at the party. Shall we sit down and chat about it? Wasn't Ronnie charming at dinner?'

Surely, *surely* Jane won't have to go through a whole day of this. She *can't*.

'Jane?' comes a voice behind her, as the bell above the door tinkles.

She turns towards the entrance. Head ducked as he steps through the low-beamed doorway, dressed in a soft grey woollen jumper, is Joseph.

'Jane, I'm *so* sorry,' he says, making his way towards them. 'Hi, everyone, hi. I'm Joseph. Lovely to meet you all. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there last night for the party.'

And then he rests a hand on the small of Jane's back and kisses her gently on the cheek.

It's a sweet kiss, a girlfriend-boyfriend kiss. He does it so comfortably, so easily, that Jane is all the more surprised by the shot of desire that goes through her as his lips graze her cheek.

Joseph has never touched her before. Not once. They didn't shake hands when they first met; they don't ever hug hello. He doesn't guide her by the elbow when they move through a crowd. She likes that about him: he's not tactile, and that distance, that lack of flirtation, it makes her feel safe.

But it also means she had absolutely no idea how her body would react to the feeling of Joseph's lips on her skin until this very moment. Her heart is still fluttering; she's hot; her lips are parted. All from a bare second of contact.

Mortimer is ushering Joseph through to sit down in the back of the shop. Jane's heartbeat resettles slowly; she watches the others as they all pull up chairs. Keira is staring at Joseph with her mouth open – Jane can see a little scrap of something green

between two of her teeth. Constance is wide-eyed and baffled: it seems Keira filled her in on last night. Jane can't help a smile growing. It does feel lovely to surprise everyone, for once.

'I'm so sorry, Jane,' Joseph says in her ear as everyone sits down in a misshapen circle amongst the bin bags and boxes of the back room. 'I'm going to make it up to you.'

His face is crumpled with concern, all furrows and quizzical lines, but it's his lips that catch Jane's attention. She's never noticed the colour of them before – a matte, russet red. They're romantic lips. The sort of lips that know exactly what to do with themselves.

'That's OK,' she says.

'No, it really isn't. I let you down.'

He launches into the story, regaling the group. He broke his phone, then got stuck behind a cherry picker, apparently, which Jane can only assume is some sort of vehicle, then his car broke down and the driver had to help him move it to safety, and it took so long for the AA to come, and he couldn't remember Jane's number . . .

They escape to the kitchen after five minutes or so, to get him a cup of coffee. It's more of a cupboard than a kitchen, with an ancient extractor fan rattling away on the wall like a smoker with a cough, but still, it's private.

'Is any of that true?' Jane asks him. 'The car, the cherry thing, the AA?'

Joseph closes his eyes for a moment and sighs. He often looks rushed off his feet whenever he arrives anywhere – he has this air to him, this slightly harried franticness, as though he's trying

to be in too many places at once. But today it's more harassed than harried. He looks exhausted.

'No. Some of it, but no, not all of it.'

Jane nods, looking down at her coffee. She used to drink it black, but now she has it with milk, sometimes even a splash of cream.

'I let you down. Jane. Please. Look at me.'

She looks up, but her eyes snag on his lips again. She can't find room to be angry with him about last night because her brain is occupied with that kiss, that half a second where her guard dropped and she allowed Joseph to shift category in her mind.

It's not that she's *never* thought about dating Joseph. He is very attractive, after all, and as far as Jane knows he's single – he's never mentioned a girlfriend. It's more that she has persistently ignored the impulse, knowing how completely stupid it would be, that if she lets herself see Joseph that way, she'll have to cut him out of her life altogether. And he makes it easy for her to maintain that distance: he's careful around her, as if he senses that she's flighty and might take off, deer-like, if he gets too close.

'I had a very, very bad day yesterday,' he says. He looks down, scrubbing at his hair with one hand. 'I wish I could . . . go back and do it all differently.'

Part of the trick of not letting people into your heart is not to care when they lie to you; the trick is not to care what they say at all. This is harder than it should be, with Joseph. Jane has not been careful.

'OK,' she says, after a moment.

Joseph pauses, hand still on his head, and gives her the full beam of his attention. This is the difference between Joseph-who's-just-arrived and Joseph-who-is-present. Once he settles, he listens, *really* listens, with the sort of attentiveness that most people only ever fake.

'What? Really?' he says.

'Yes, really. You were doing me a big favour, saying that you'd come to my colleague's engagement party and pretend to be my boyfriend. That was quite a strange thing for me to ask of you.'

Her face heats just at the thought of it. They'd come up with the idea at their last book club; she'd opened up a little about the lie she'd told at work, how it had grown, how awkward it would be at the engagement party when they all discovered she didn't have a boyfriend at all, and he'd said, *You could always bring me. I make a great fake date. And I love an excuse to wear a tux.*

'You're . . .' He shakes his head slightly. 'You should be yelling at me.'

He looks so weary, now that he's not performing for her colleagues – the crow's feet at the corners of his hazel eyes seem deeper than when she saw him a few days ago, and his skin is dry and tired. She looks more closely: there is the ghost of a bruise on the corner of his eyebrow, as if he's been punched.

'You don't look like you need to be yelled at,' she says, wondering if it's rude to ask about the bruise.

'I do,' he says fervently. 'I deserve much, much yelling. I . . . Shit.'

She looks at him enquiringly.

'I know why you're not angry with me,' he says, slapping his forehead. 'It's because you don't expect any better.'

‘Pardon?’

‘I’ve just validated all your stuff about how people always let you down, haven’t I? You’re not mad because you’re not even surprised.’

She had been a little surprised, actually. But overnight she had chastised herself for her lapse in judgement, and here she is now, safely reminded that there’s a reason she gave up on ever trying to make friends.

‘I asked too much of you, that’s all,’ Jane says, with a small smile. ‘Don’t worry, though. I make a lot of mistakes, but I try not to make the same one twice.’