

## PROLOGUE

### *Arthur*

Young people! With their hurrying and their worrying and their wanting all the answers, *now*. They wear me out, the poor, harried things.

Don't come back, I always tell them. *Don't come back.*

Youth is still where you left it and that's where it should stay. Anything that was worth taking on life's journey, you'll already have taken with you.

Twenty years I've been saying this, but do they listen? Do they hell. Here comes another of them now. Panting and puffing as he reaches the top of the cliff. Late thirties, I'd guess. Attractive enough, against the blue sky. Looks a bit like a politician. Do I mean that? Maybe a movie star.

I don't remember his face from the old days. Not that that means anything. These days I barely even recall my own face when I glimpse it in the mirror. I can see this chap's gaze raking the surroundings, taking in me, sitting in my chair under my favourite olive tree.

'Are you Arthur?' he says abruptly.

'Guilty.'

I scan him adroitly. Looks well-off. Wearing one of those

expensive-logo polo shirts. Probably good for a few double Scotches.

'You must want a drink,' I say pleasantly. Always useful to steer the conversation in the direction of the bar early on.

'I don't want a drink,' he says. 'I want to know what happened.'

I can't help stifling a yawn. So predictable. He wants to know what happened. Another merchant banker having a midlife crisis, returning to the scene of his youth. The scene of the crime. Leave it where it *was*, I want to answer. Turn round. Return to your adult, problematic life, because you won't solve it here.

But he wouldn't believe me. They never do.

'Dear boy,' I say gently. 'You grew up. That's what happened.'

'No,' he says impatiently, and rubs his sweaty brow. 'You don't understand. I'm here for a reason. Listen to me.' He comes forward a few paces, an impressive height and figure against the sun, intentness of purpose on his handsome face. 'I'm here for a reason,' he repeats. 'I wasn't going to get involved – but I can't help it. I have to do this. I want to know *what exactly happened . . .*'

# 1

## *Lottie*

*Twenty days earlier*

I've bought him an engagement ring. Was that a mistake?

I mean, it's not a *girly* ring. It's a plain band with a tiny diamond in it, which the guy in the shop talked me into. If Richard doesn't like the diamond, he can always turn it round.

Or not wear it at all. Keep it on his nightstand or in a box or whatever.

Or I could take it back and never mention it. Actually, I'm losing confidence in this ring by the minute, but I just felt bad that he wouldn't have anything. Men don't get the greatest deal out of a proposal. They have to set up the occasion, they have to get down on one knee, they have to ask the question *and* they have to buy a ring. And what do we have to do? Say 'yes'.

Or 'no', obviously.

I wonder what proportion of marriage proposals end in a 'yes' and what proportion end in a 'no'? I open my mouth automatically to share this thought with Richard – then hastily close it again. *Idiot*.

'Sorry?' Richard glances up.

'Nothing!' I beam. 'Just . . . great menu!'

I wonder if he's bought a ring already. I don't mind either way. On the one hand, it's fabulously romantic if he has. On the other hand, it's fabulously romantic to choose one together.

It's a win-win.

I sip my water and smile lovingly at Richard. We're sitting at a corner table overlooking the river. It's a new restaurant on the Strand, just up from the Savoy. All black and white marble and vintage chandeliers and button-back chairs in pale grey. It's elegant but not showy. The perfect place for a lunchtime proposal. I'm wearing an understated, bride-to-be white shirt, a print skirt, and have splashed out on stay-up stockings, just in case we decide to cement the engagement later on. I've never worn stay-up stockings before. But then I've never been proposed to before.

Ooh, maybe he's booked a room at the Savoy.

No. Richard's not flash like that. He'd never make a ridiculous, out-of-proportion gesture. Nice lunch, yes; overpriced hotel room, no. Which I respect.

He's looking nervous. He's fiddling with his cuffs and checking his phone and swirling the water round in his glass. As he sees me watching him, he smiles too.

'So.'

'So.'

It's as though we're speaking in code, skirting around the real issue. I fiddle with my napkin and adjust my chair. This waiting is unbearable. Why doesn't he get it over with?

No, I don't mean 'get it over with'. Of course I don't. It's not a vaccination. It's . . . Well, what is it? It's a beginning. A first step. The pair of us embarking on a great adventure together. Because we want to take on life as a team. Because we can't think of anyone else we'd rather share that journey with. Because I love him and he loves me.

I'm getting misty-eyed already. This is hopeless. I've been like this for days, ever since I realized what he was driving at.

He's quite heavy-handed, Richard. I mean, in a good, lovable way. He's direct and to the point and doesn't play

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games. (Thank *God*.) Nor does he land massive surprises on you out of the blue. On my last birthday, he hinted for ages that his present was going to be a surprise trip, which was ideal because I knew to get down my overnight bag and pack a few things.

Although, in the end, he *did* catch me out, because it wasn't a weekend away, as I'd predicted. It was a train ticket to Stroud, which he had biked to my desk with no warning, on my midweek birthday. It turned out he'd secretly arranged with my boss for me to have two days off, and when I finally arrived at Stroud, a car whisked me to the most adorable Cotswold cottage, where he was waiting with a fire burning and a sheepskin rug laid out in front of the flames. (Mmm. Let's just say that sex in front of a roaring fire is *the best thing ever*. Except when that stupid spark flew out and burned my thigh. But never mind. Tiny detail.)

So this time, when he started dropping hints, again they weren't exactly subtle indications. They were more like massive signposts, plonked in the road: *I will be proposing to you soon*. First he set up this date and called it a 'special lunch'. Then he referred to a 'big question' he had to ask me and half winked (to which I feigned ignorance, of course). Then he started teasing me by asking if I like his surname, Finch. (As it happens, I do like it. I don't mean I won't miss being Lottie Graveney, but I'll be very happy to be Mrs Lottie Finch.)

I almost wish he'd been more roundabout and this was going to be more of a surprise. But there again, at least I knew to get a manicure.

'So, Lottie, have you decided yet?' Richard looks up at me with that warm smile of his, and my stomach swoops. Just for an instant I thought he was being super-clever and that *was* his proposal.

'Um . . .' I look down to hide my confusion.

Of course the answer will be 'yes'. A big, joyful 'yes'. I can still hardly believe we've arrived at this place. Marriage. I mean, marriage! In the three years Richard and I have been

together, I've deliberately avoided the question of marriage, commitment and all associated subjects (children, houses, sofas, herbs in pots). We sort of live together at his place, but I still have my own flat. We're a couple, but at Christmas we go home to our own families. We're in *that* place.

After about a year I knew we were good together. I knew I loved him. I'd seen him at his best (the surprise birthday trip, tied with the time I drove over his foot by mistake and he didn't shout at me) and his worst (obstinately refusing to ask for directions, all the way to Norfolk, with broken sat nav. It took six hours). And I still wanted to be with him. I *got* him. He's not the show-offy kind, Richard. He's measured and deliberate. Sometimes you think he's not even listening – but then he'll come to life so suddenly, you realize he was alert the whole time. Like a lion, half asleep under the tree, but ready for the kill. Whereas I'm a bit more of a gazelle, leaping around. We complement each other. It's Nature.

(Not in a food-chain sense, obviously. In a *metaphorical* sense.)

So I knew, after a year, he was The One. But I also knew what would happen if I put a foot wrong. In my experience, the word 'marriage' is like an enzyme. It causes all kinds of reactions in a relationship, mostly of the breaking-down kind.

Look at what happened with Jamie, my first long-term boyfriend. We'd been happily together for four years and I just happened to mention that my parents got married at the same age we were (twenty-six and twenty-three). That was it. One mention. Whereupon he freaked out and said we had to take 'a break'. A break from what? Until that moment we'd been fine. So clearly what he needed a break from was *the risk of hearing the word 'marriage' again*. Clearly this was such a major worry that he couldn't even face seeing me, for fear that my mouth might start to form the word again.

Before the 'break' was over, he was with that red-haired girl. I didn't mind, because by then I'd met Seamus. Seamus, with his sexy Irish lilting voice. And I don't even *know* what went

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wrong with him. We were besotted for about a year – crazy, all-night-sex, nothing-else-in-life-matters besotted – until all of a sudden we were arguing every night instead. We went from exhilarating to exhausting in about twenty-four hours. It was toxic. Too many state-of-the-nation summits about ‘Where are we heading?’ and ‘What do we want from this relationship?’ and it wore us both out. We limped on for another year, and when I look back, it’s as though that second year is a big black miserable blot in my life.

Then there was Julian. That lasted two years too, but it never really *took*. It was like a skeleton of a relationship. I suppose both of us were working far too hard. I’d recently moved to Blay Pharmaceuticals and was travelling all over the country. He was trying to get partnership at his accountancy firm. I’m not sure we ever even broke up properly – we just drifted apart. We meet up occasionally, as friends, and it’s the same for both of us – we’re not quite sure where it all went wrong. He even asked me out on a date, a year or so ago, but I had to tell him I was with someone now, and really happy. And that was Richard. The guy I really do love. The guy sitting opposite me with a ring in his pocket (maybe).

Richard is definitely better-looking than any of my other boyfriends. (Maybe I’m biased, but I think he’s gorgeous.) He works hard as a media analyst, but he’s not obsessed. He’s not as rich as Julian, but who cares? He’s energetic and funny and has an uproarious laugh which makes my spirits lift, whatever mood I’m in. He calls me ‘Daisy’ ever since we went on a picnic where I made him a daisy chain. He can lose his temper with people – but that’s OK. No one’s perfect. When I look back over our relationship, I don’t see a black blot, like with Seamus, or a blank space, like with Julian; I see a cheesy music video. A montage, with blue skies and smiles. Happy times. Closeness. Laughter.

And now we’re getting to the climax of the montage. The bit where he kneels down, takes a deep breath . . .

I’m feeling so nervous for him. I want this to go beautifully.

I want to be able to tell our children that I fell in love with their father all over again, the day he proposed.

*Our children. Our home. Our life.*

As I let my mind roll around the images, I feel a release inside me. I'm ready for this. I'm thirty-three years old and I'm ready. All my grown-up life, I've steered away from the subject of marriage. My friends are the same. It's as though there's been a crime-scene cordon around the whole area: NO ENTRY. You just don't go there, because if you do, you've jinxed it and your boyfriend chucks you.

But now there's nothing to jinx. I can *feel* the love flowing between us, over the table. I want to grab Richard's hands. I want to envelop him in my arms. He is such a wonderful, wonderful man. I'm so lucky. In forty years when we're both wrinkled and grey, perhaps we'll walk up the Strand hand in hand and remember today and thank God we found each other. I mean, what were the chances, in this teeming world of strangers? Love is so random. *So* random. It's a miracle, really . . .

Oh God, I'm blinking . . .

'Lottie?' Richard has noticed my damp eyes. 'Hey, Daisy-doo. Are you OK? What's up?'

Even though I've been more honest with Richard than I have with any other boyfriend, it's probably not a good idea to reveal my *entire* thought process to him. Fliss, my big sister, says I think in Hollywood Technicolor and I have to remember that other people can't hear the swooping violins.

'Sorry!' I dab at my eyes. 'Nothing. I just wish you didn't have to go.'

Richard is flying off tomorrow to a secondment in San Francisco. It's three months – could be worse – but I'll miss him terribly. In fact, it's only the thought that I'll have a wedding to plan which is distracting me.

'Sweetheart, don't cry. I can't bear it.' He reaches out to take my hands. 'We'll Skype every day.'

'I know.' I squeeze his hands back. 'I'll be ready.'

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'Although you *might* want to remember that if I'm in my office, everyone can hear what you're saying. Including my boss.'

Only a tiny flicker of his eyes gives away the fact that he's teasing me. The last time he was away and we Skyped, I started giving him advice on how to manage his nightmare boss, forgetting that Richard was in an open-plan office and the nightmare boss was liable to walk past at any minute. (Luckily, he didn't.)

'Thanks for that tip.' I shrug, equally deadpan.

'Also, they can see you. So you might not want to be *totally* naked.'

'Not *totally*,' I agree. 'Maybe just a transparent bra and pants. Keep it simple.'

Richard grins and grasps my hands more tightly. 'I love you.' His voice is low and warm and melting. I will never, ever get sick of him saying that.

'Me too.'

'In fact, Lottie . . .' He clears his throat. 'I have something to ask you.'

My insides feel as if they're going to explode. My face is a rictus of anticipation while my thoughts are spinning wildly. *Oh God, he's doing it . . . My whole life changes here . . . Concentrate, Lottie, savour the moment . . . Shit! What's wrong with my leg?*

I stare down at it in horror.

Whoever made these 'stay-up stockings' is a liar and will go to hell, because one of them *hasn't* bloody well stayed up. It's collapsed around my knee and there's a really gross plastic 'adhesive' strip flapping around my calf. This is hideous.

I can't be proposed to like this. I can't spend the rest of my life looking back and thinking, *It was such a romantic moment, shame about the stocking.*

'Sorry, Richard.' I cut him off. 'Just wait a sec.'

Surreptitiously I reach down and yank the stocking up – but the flimsy fabric tears in my hand. Great. Now I have flapping plastic *and* shreds of nylon decorating my leg. I cannot believe

my marriage proposal is being wrecked by hosiery. I should have gone for bare legs.

'Everything OK?' Richard looks a little baffled as I emerge from under the table.

'I have to go to the Ladies,' I mutter. 'I'm sorry. Sorry. Can we put things on pause? Just for a nanosecond?'

'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine.' I'm red with embarrassment. 'I've had a . . . a garment mishap. I don't want you to see. Will you look away?'

Obediently, Richard averts his head. I push my chair back and walk swiftly across the room, ignoring the looks of other lunchtime diners. There's no point trying to mask it. It's a flappy stocking.

I bang through the door of the Ladies, wrench off my shoe and the stupid stocking, then stare at myself in the mirror, my heart pounding. I can't believe I've just put my proposal on pause.

I feel as though time is on hold. As though we're in a sci-fi movie and Richard is in suspended animation and I've got all the time in the world to think about whether I want to marry him.

Which, obviously, I don't need, because the answer is: I do.

A blonde girl with a beaded headband turns to peer at me, lipliner in hand. I guess I do look a bit odd, standing motionless and holding a shoe and stocking.

'There's a bin over there.' She nods. 'Do you feel OK?'

'Fine. Thanks.' I suddenly have the urge to share the momentousness of this occasion. 'My boyfriend's in the middle of proposing to me!'

'No way.' All the women at the mirrors turn to stare at me.

'What do you mean, "in the middle of"?' demands a thin redhead in pink, her eyebrows narrowed. 'What's he said, "Will you . . ."?'

'He started, but I had a stocking catastrophe.' I wave the hold-up. 'So he's on pause.'

'On *pause*?' says someone incredulously.

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'Well, I'd get back out there quick,' says the redhead. 'You don't want to give him a chance to change his mind.'

'How exciting!' says the blonde girl. 'Can we watch? Can I film you?'

'We could put it on YouTube!' says her friend. 'Has he hired a flashmob or anything?'

'I don't *think* so . . .'

'How does this work?' An old woman with metal-grey hair cuts across our discussion imperiously. She's waving her hands angrily underneath the automatic handwash dispenser. 'Why do they invent these machines? What's wrong with a bar of soap?'

'Look, like this, Aunt Dee,' says the redhead soothingly. 'Your hands are too high.'

I pull off my other shoe and stocking, and, since I'm here, reach for the hand lotion to slather on my bare legs. I don't want to look back and think, *It was such a romantic moment, shame about the scaly shins*. Then I get out my phone. I *have* to text Fliss. I quickly type:

He's doing it!!!

A moment later her reply appears on my screen:

Don't tell me u r texting me in the middle of a proposal!!!

In Ladies. Taking a moment.

V exciting!!! You make a great couple. Give him a kiss from me. xxx

Will do! Talk later xxx

'Which one is he?' says the blonde girl as I put away my phone. 'I'm going to have a look!' She darts out of the Ladies, then returns a few seconds later. 'Ooh, I saw him. The dark guy

in the corner? He's fab. Hey, your mascara's smudged.' She passes me a make-up eraser pen. 'Want to do a quick fix?'

'Thanks.' I smile companionably at her and start to erase the tiny black marks below my eyes. My wavy chestnut hair is swept up in a chignon, and I suddenly wonder whether to let it down so it tumbles over my shoulders for the big moment.

No. Too cheesy. Instead, I pull some tendrils out and twist them around my face while I assess everything else. Lipstick: nice coral colour. Eyeshadow: shimmery grey to bring out my blue eyes. Blusher: hopefully will not need touch-up as will be flushed with excitement.

'I wish *my* boyfriend would propose,' says a long-haired girl in black, watching me wistfully. 'What's the trick?'

'Dunno,' I reply, wishing I could be more helpful. 'I suppose we've been together a while, we know we're compatible, we love each other.'

'But so do my boyfriend and I! We've been living together, the sex is great, it's all great.'

'Don't pressure him,' says the blonde girl wisely.

'I mention it, like, once a *year*.' The long-haired girl looks thoroughly miserable. 'And he gets twitchy and we drop it. What am I supposed to do? Move out? It's been six years now.'

'*Six years?*' The old woman looks up from drying her hands. 'What's wrong with you?' The girl with the long hair flushes.

'Nothing's *wrong* with me,' she says. 'I was having a private conversation.'

'Private, pfft.' The old woman gestures briskly around the Ladies' room. 'Everyone's listening.'

'Aunt Dee!' The redhead looks embarrassed. '*Shush!*'

'Don't you shush me, Amy!' The old woman regards the long-haired girl beadily. 'Men are like jungle creatures. The minute they've found their kill, they eat it and fall asleep. Well, you've handed him his kill on a plate, haven't you?'

'It's not as simple as that,' says the long-haired girl resentfully.

'In my day, the men got married because they wanted sex.'

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That was motivation all right!’ The old woman gives a brisk laugh. ‘All you girls with your sleeping together and living together and *then* you want an engagement ring. It’s all back to front.’ She picks up her bag. ‘Come along, Amy! What are you waiting for?’

Amy shoots us all desperate looks of apology, then disappears out of the Ladies with her aunt. We all exchange raised eyebrows. What a nutter.

‘Don’t worry,’ I say reassuringly, and squeeze the girl’s arm. ‘I’m sure things will work out for you.’ I want to spread the joy. I want *everyone* to have the good luck that Richard and I have had: finding the perfect person and knowing it.

‘Yes.’ She makes an obvious effort to gather herself. ‘Let’s hope. Well, I wish you a very happy life together.’

‘Thanks!’ I hand the eraser pen back to the blonde girl. ‘Here I go! Wish me luck!’

I push my way out of the Ladies and survey the bustling restaurant, feeling as though I’ve just pressed ‘play’. There’s Richard, sitting in exactly the same position as when I left him. He’s not even checking his phone. He must be as focused on this moment as I am. The most special moment of our lives.

‘Sorry about that.’ I slide into my chair and give him my most loving, receptive smile. ‘Shall we pick up where we left off?’

Richard smiles back, but I can tell he’s lost a bit of momentum. We might need to work back into things gradually.

‘It’s such a special day,’ I say encouragingly. ‘Don’t you feel that?’

‘Absolutely.’ He nods.

‘This place is so lovely.’ I gesture around. ‘The perfect place for a . . . a big talk.’

I’ve left my hands casually on the table, and, as I intended, Richard takes them between his. He takes a deep breath and frowns.

‘Speaking of that, Lottie, there’s something I wanted to ask.’

As our eyes meet, his crinkle a little. 'I don't think this will come as a *massive* surprise . . .'

*Oh God, oh God, here it comes.*

'Yes?' My voice is a nervous squawk.

'Bread for the table?'

Richard starts in shock and my head jerks up. A waiter has approached so quietly, neither of us noticed him. Almost before I know it, Richard has dropped my hand and is talking about brown soda bread. I want to whack the whole basket away in frustration. Couldn't the waiter *tell*? Don't they train them in imminent-proposal spotting?

I can tell Richard's been thrown off track, too. Stupid, *stupid* waiter. How dare he spoil my boyfriend's big moment?

'So,' I say encouragingly, as soon as the waiter's gone. 'You had a question?'

'Well. Yes.' He focuses on me and takes a deep breath – then his face changes shape again. I turn round in surprise, to see that *another* bloody waiter has loomed up. Well, to be fair, I suppose it's what you expect in a restaurant.

We both order some food – I'm barely aware of what I'm choosing – and the waiter melts away. But another one will be back, any minute. I feel more sorry for Richard than ever. How's he supposed to propose in these circumstances? How do men *do* it?

I can't help grinning at him wryly.

'Not your day.'

'Not really.'

'The wine waiter will be along in a minute,' I point out.

'It's like Piccadilly Circus here.' He rolls his eyes ruefully, and I feel a warm sense of collusion. We're in this together. Who cares when he proposes? Who cares if it's not some perfect, staged moment? 'Shall we get some champagne?' he adds.

I can't help giving him a knowing smile. 'Would that be a little . . . *premature*, do you think?'

'Well, that depends.' He raises his eyebrows. 'You tell me.'

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The subtext is so obvious, I don't know whether I want to laugh or hug him.

'Well in that case . . .' I pause a delicious length of time, eking it out for both of us. 'Yes. My answer would be yes.'

His brow relaxes and I can see the tension flood out of him. Did he really think I might say no? He's so unassuming. He's such a darling man. Oh God. We're getting married!

'With all my heart, Richard, yes,' I add for emphasis, my voice suddenly wobbling. 'You have to know how much this means to me. It's . . . I don't know what to say.'

His fingers squeeze mine and it's as though we have our own private code. I almost feel sorry for other couples who have to spell things out. They don't have the connection we do.

For a moment we're just silent. I can feel a cloud of happiness surrounding us. I want that cloud to stay there for ever. I can see us now in the future, painting a house, wheeling a pram, decorating a Christmas tree with our little toddlers . . . His parents might want to come and stay for Christmas and that's fine, because I *love* his parents. In fact, the first thing I'll do when this is all announced is go and see his mother in Sussex. She'll adore helping with the wedding, and it's not as though I've got a mother of my own to do it.

So many possibilities. So many plans. So much glorious life to live together.

'So,' I say at last, gently rubbing his fingers. 'Pleased? Happy?'

'Couldn't be more happy.' He caresses my hand.

'I've thought about this for ages.' I sigh contentedly. 'But I never thought . . . You just don't, do you? It's like . . . what will it *be* like? What will it *feel* like?'

'I know what you mean.' He nods.

'I'll always remember this room. I'll always remember the way you're looking right now.' I squeeze his hand even harder.

'Me too,' he says simply.

What I love about Richard is, he can convey so much simply with a sidelong look or a tilt of his head. He doesn't need to say much, because I can read him so easily.

I can see the long-haired girl watching us from across the room, and I can't help smiling at her. (Not a triumphant smile, because that would be insensitive. A humble, grateful smile.)

'Some wine for the table, sir? Mademoiselle?' The sommelier approaches and I beam up at him.

'I think we need some champagne.'

'*Absolument.*' He smiles back at me. 'The house champagne? Or we have a very nice Ruinart for a special occasion.'

'I think the Ruinart.' I can't resist sharing our joy. 'It's a very special day! We've just got engaged!'

'Mademoiselle!' The sommelier's face creases into a smile. '*Félicitations!* Sir, many congratulations!' We both turn to Richard – but to my surprise he's not entering into the spirit of the moment. He's staring at me as though I'm some sort of spectre. Why does he look so spooked? What's wrong?

'What—' His voice is strangled. 'What do you mean?'

I suddenly realize why he's upset. Of course. Trust me to spoil everything by jumping in.

'Richard, I'm so sorry. Did you want to tell your parents first?' I squeeze his hand. 'I completely understand. We won't tell anyone else, promise.'

'Tell them what?' He's wide-eyed and starey. 'Lottie, we're not engaged.'

'But . . .' I look at him uncertainly. 'You just proposed to me. And I said yes.'

'No I didn't!' He yanks his hand out of mine.

OK, one of us is going mad here. The sommelier has retreated tactfully, and I can see him shooing away the waiter with the bread basket, who was approaching again.

'Lottie, I'm sorry but I have no idea what you're talking about.' Richard thrusts his hands through his hair. 'I haven't mentioned marriage or engagement, or anything.'

'But . . . but that's what you meant! When you ordered the champagne, and you said, "You tell me," and I said, "With all my heart, yes." It was subtle! It was beautiful!'

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I'm gazing at him, longing for him to agree; longing for him to feel what I feel. But he just looks baffled and I feel a sudden pang of dread.

'That's . . . *not* what you meant?' My throat is so tight I can barely speak. I can't believe this is happening. 'You didn't mean to propose?'

'Lottie, I *didn't* propose!' he says forcefully. 'Full stop!'

Does he have to exclaim so loudly? Heads are popping up with interest everywhere.

'OK! I get it!' I rub my nose with my napkin. 'You don't need to tell the whole restaurant.'

Waves of humiliation are washing over me. I'm rigid with misery. How can I have got this so wrong?

And if he wasn't proposing, then *why* wasn't he proposing?

'I don't understand.' Richard is talking almost to himself. 'I've never said anything, we've never discussed it—'

'You've said plenty!' Hurt and indignation are erupting out of me. 'You said you were organizing a "special lunch".'

'It is special!' he says defensively. 'I'm going to San Francisco tomorrow.'

'And you asked me if I liked your surname! Your *surname*, Richard!'

'We were doing a jokey straw poll at the office!' Richard looks bewildered. 'It was just chit-chat.'

'And you said you had to ask me a "big question".'

'Not a big question.' He shakes his head. 'A question.'

'I heard "big question".'

There's a wretched silence between us. The cloud of happiness has gone. The Hollywood Technicolor and swooping violins have gone. The sommelier tactfully slides a wine list on to the corner of the table and retreats quickly.

'What is it, then?' I say at last. 'This really important, medium-sized question?'

Richard looks trapped. 'It's not important. Forget it.'

'Come on, tell me!'

'Well, OK,' he says finally. 'I was going to ask you what I

should do with my airmiles. I thought maybe we could plan a trip.'

'Airmiles?' I can't help lashing out. 'You booked a special table and ordered champagne to talk about *airmiles*?'

'No! I mean . . .' Richard winces. 'Lottie, I feel terrible about all this. I had absolutely zero idea . . .'

'But we just had a whole bloody conversation about being engaged!' I can feel tears rising again. 'I was stroking your hand and saying how happy I was and how I'd thought about this moment for ages. And you were agreeing with me! What did you *think* I was talking about?'

Richard's eyes are swivelling as though searching for an escape. 'I thought you were . . . you know. Going on about stuff.'

'“Going on about stuff”?’ I stare at him. 'What do you mean, “Going on about stuff”?'

Richard looks even more desperate.

'The truth is, I don't always know what you're on about,' he says in a sudden confessional rush. 'So sometimes I just . . . nod along.'

*Nod along?*

I stare back at him, stricken. I thought we had a special, unique silent bond of understanding. I thought we had a private code. And all the time he was just nodding along.

Two waiters put our salads in front of us, and quickly move away as though sensing we're not in any mood to talk. I pick up my fork and put it down again. Richard doesn't seem even to have noticed his plate.

'I bought you an engagement ring,' I say, breaking the silence.

'Oh God.' He buries his head in his hands.

'It's fine. I'll take it back.'

'Lottie.' He looks tortured. 'Do we have to . . . I'm going away tomorrow. Couldn't we just move away from the whole subject?'

'So, do you *ever* want to get married?' As I ask the question

## WEDDING NIGHT

I feel a deep anguish inside. A minute ago I thought I was engaged. I'd run the marathon. I was bursting through the finishing tape, arms up in elation . . . Now I'm back at the starting line, lacing up my shoes, wondering if the race is even on.

'I . . . God, Lottie. I dunno.' He sounds beleaguered. 'I mean, yes. I suppose so.' His eyes are swivelling more and more wildly. 'Maybe. You know. Eventually.'

Well. You couldn't get a much clearer signal. Maybe he wants to get married to someone else, one day. But not to me.

And suddenly a bleak despair comes over me. I believed with all my heart that he was The One. How could I have got it so wrong? I feel as though I can't trust myself on anything any more.

'Right.' I stare down at my salad for a few moments, running my eyes over leaves and slices of avocado and pomegranate seeds, trying to get my thoughts together. 'The thing is, Richard, I *do* want to get married. I want marriage, kids, a house . . . the whole bit. And I wanted them with you. But marriage is kind of a two-way thing.' I pause, breathing hard but determined to keep my composure. 'So I guess it's good that I know the truth sooner rather than later. Thanks for that, anyway.'

'Lottie!' says Richard in alarm. 'Wait! This doesn't change anything—'

'It changes everything. I'm too old to be on a waiting list. If it's not going to happen with us, then I'd rather know now and move on. You know?' I try to smile, but my happy muscles have stopped working. 'Have fun in San Francisco. I think I'd better go.' Tears are edging past my lashes. I need to leave, quickly. I'll go back to work and check on my presentation for tomorrow. I'd taken the afternoon off, but what's the point? I won't be phoning all my friends with the joyful news after all.

As I'm making my way out, I feel a hand grabbing my arm. I turn in shock to see the blonde girl with the beaded headband looking up at me.

‘What happened?’ she demands excitedly. ‘Did he give you a ring?’

Her question is like a knife stabbing at my heart. He didn’t give me a ring and he isn’t even my boyfriend any more. But I’d rather die than admit it.

‘Actually . . .’ I lift my chin proudly. ‘Actually, he proposed but I said “no”.’

‘Oh.’ Her hand shoots to her mouth.

‘That’s right.’ I catch the eye of the long-haired girl, who’s eavesdropping blatantly at the next table. ‘I said “no”.’

‘You said “no”?’ She looks so incredulous I feel a pang of indignation.

‘Yes!’ I glare at her defiantly. ‘I said “no”. We weren’t right for each other after all, so I took the decision to end it. Even though he really wanted to marry me and have kids and a dog and everything.’

I can feel curious eyes on my back, and swivel round to confront yet more people, listening agog. Is the whole bloody *restaurant* in on this now?

‘I said “no”!’ My voice is rising in distress. ‘I said “no”. *No!*’ I call over loudly to Richard, who is still sitting at the table, looking dumbfounded. ‘I’m sorry, Richard. I know you’re in love with me and I know I’m breaking your heart right now. But the answer’s “no”!’

And, feeling a tiny bit better, I stride out of the restaurant.

I get back to work to find my desk littered with new Post-Its. The phone must have been busy while I was out. I slump down at my desk and heave a long, shuddering sigh. Then I hear a cough. Kayla, my intern, is hovering at the door of my tiny office. Kayla hovers a lot round my door. She’s the keenest intern I’ve ever met. She wrote me a two-side Christmas card about how inspiring I was as a role model, and how she would never have come to intern at Blay Pharmaceuticals if it weren’t for the talk I gave at Bristol University. (It *was* a pretty good talk, I must admit. As recruitment speeches for pharmaceutical companies go.)

## WEDDING NIGHT

'How was lunch?' Her eyes are sparkling.

My heart plummets. *Why* did I tell her Richard was going to propose? I was just so confident. It gave me a kick, seeing her excitement. I felt like an all-round superwoman.

'It was fine. Fine. Nice restaurant.' I start to riffle through the papers on my desk, as though searching for some vital piece of information.

'So, are you engaged?'

Her words are like lemon juice sprinkled on sore skin. Has she no finesse? You don't ask your boss straight out, 'Are you engaged?' Especially if she's not wearing a huge, brand-new ring, which clearly I'm not. I might refer to this in my appraisal of her. *Kayla has some trouble working within appropriate boundaries.*

'Well.' I brush down my jacket, playing for time, and swallowing the lump in my throat. 'Actually, no. Actually, I decided against it.'

'Really?' She sounds confused.

'Yes.' I nod several times. 'Absolutely. I concluded that for me at my time of life, at my career point, this wasn't a smart move.'

Kayla seems poleaxed. 'But . . . you guys were so great together.'

'Well, these things aren't as simple as they appear, Kayla.' I riffle the papers more quickly.

'He must have been devastated.'

'Pretty much,' I say after a pause. 'Yup. Pretty crushed. In fact . . . he cried.'

I can say what I like. She'll never see Richard again. *I'll* probably never see him again. And like a bludgeon to the stomach, the enormity of the truth hits me again. It's all over. Gone. All of it. I'll never have sex with him again. I'll never wake up with him again. I'll never hug him again. Somehow that fact, above all others, makes me want to bawl.

'God, Lottie, you're so inspiring.' Kayla's eyes are shining. 'To know that something is wrong for your career, and to have

the courage to make that stand, to say, “No! I *won't* do what everyone expects.”’

‘Exactly.’ I nod desperately. ‘I was making a stand for women everywhere.’

My jaw is trembling. I have to conclude this conversation right now, before things go horribly wrong in the bursting-into-tears-in-front-of-your-intern department.

‘So, any vital messages?’ I scan the Post-Its without seeing them.

‘One from Steve about the presentation tomorrow, and some guy named Ben called.’

‘Ben who?’

‘Just Ben. He said you’d know.’

No one calls himself ‘Just Ben’. It’ll be some cheeky student I met at a milk-round talk, trying to get a foot in the door. I’m really not in the mood for it.

‘OK. Well. I’m going to go over my presentation. So.’ I click busily and randomly at my mouse till she leaves. Deep breath. Firm jaw. Move on. Move on, move on, move on.

The phone rings and I pick it up with a sweeping, authoritative gesture.

‘Charlotte Graveney.’

‘Lottie! It’s me!’

I fight an instinct to put the receiver straight back down again.

‘Oh, hi, Fliss.’ I swallow. ‘Hi.’

‘So, how *are* you?’

I can hear the teasing note in her voice and curse myself bitterly. I should never have texted her from the restaurant.

It’s pressure. All hideous pressure. Why did I ever share my love life with my sister? Why did I ever even tell her I was dating Richard? Let alone introduce them. Let alone start talking about proposals.

Next time I meet a man, I’m saying *nothing to anybody*. Nada. Zip. Not until we’ve been blissfully married for a decade and have three kids and have just renewed our wedding vows.

## WEDDING NIGHT

Then, and only then, will I send a text to Fliss saying: 'Guess what? I met someone! He seems nice!'

'Oh, I'm fine.' I muster a breezy, matter-of-fact tone. 'How about you?'

'All good this end. So . . .?'

She leaves the question dangling. I know exactly what she means. She means, *So, are you wearing a massive diamond ring and toasting yourself with Bollinger as Richard sucks your toes in some amazing hotel suite?*

I feel a fresh, raw pang. I can't bear to talk about it. I can't bear her sympathy gushing over me. Find another topic. Any topic. Quick.

'So. Anyway.' I try to sound bright and nonchalant. 'Anyway. Um. I was just thinking, actually. I really should get round to doing that Masters on business theory. You know I've always meant to do it. I mean, what am I waiting for? I could apply to Birkbeck, do it in my spare time. What do you think?'