Two people. Ten chances. One unforgettable love story.

One Day in December



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JOSIE SILVER

THE TOP TEN BESTSELLER & REESE WITHERSPOON PICK

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One Day in December

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josie Silver is the *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestselling author of five irresistible 'what if . . . ?' love stories, *One Day in December*, *The Two Lives of Lydia Bird*, *One Night on the Island*, *A Winter in New York* and *Slow Burn Summer*. She has been published in thirty-four languages (and counting) and has previously been featured in Reese Witherspoon's Hello Sunshine Book Club. Josie is an unashamed romantic and lives with her husband, their sons and an ever-changing cast of animals in Shropshire.

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For James, Ed and
Alex with love.

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21 December

Laurie

It's a wonder everyone who uses public transport in winter doesn't keel over and die of germ overload. In the last ten minutes I've been coughed on and sneezed at, and if the woman in front of me shakes her dandruff my way again, I might just douse her with the dregs of the lukewarm coffee that I'm no longer able to drink because it's full of her scalp.

I'm so tired I could sleep right here on the top deck of this swaying, rammed-full bus. Thank God I've finally finished work for Christmas, because I don't think my brain or my body could withstand even one more shift behind that awful hotel reception desk. It might be festooned with garlands and pretty lights on the customer side, but step behind the curtain and it's a soulless hellhole. I'm practically asleep, even when I'm awake. I'm loosely planning to hibernate until next year once I get home to the nostalgic familiarity of my parents' house tomorrow. There's something soothingly time warp-ish about leaving London for an interlude of sedate Midlands village life in my childhood bedroom, even if not all of my childhood memories are happy ones. Even the closest of families have their tragedies, and it's fair to say that ours came early and cut deep. I won't dwell though,

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because Christmas should be a time of hope and love and, most appealing of all at this very moment, sleep. Sleep, punctuated by bouts of competitive eating with my brother, Daryl, and his girlfriend, Anna, and the whole gamut of cheesy Christmas movies. Because how could you ever be too tired to watch some hapless guy stand out in the cold and hold up signs silently declaring to his best friend's wife that his wasted heart will always love her? Though – is that romance? I'm not so sure. I mean, it *kind* of is, in a schmaltzy way, but it's also being the shittiest friend on the planet.

I've given up worrying about the germs in here because I've undoubtedly ingested enough to kill me if they're going to, so I lean my forehead against the steamy window and watch Camden High Street slide by in a glitter of Christmas lights and bright, fuggy shop windows selling everything from leather jackets to tacky London souvenirs. It's barely four in the afternoon, yet already it's dusk over London; I don't think it got properly light at all today.

My reflection tells me that I should probably pull the naff halo of tinsel from my hair that my cow of a manager made me wear, because I look like I'm trying out for Angel Gabriel in a primary school nativity, but I find that I really can't be bothered. No one else on this bus could care less; not the damp, anoraked man next to me taking up more than his half of the seat as he dozes over yesterday's paper, nor the bunch of schoolkids shouting across each other on the back seats and certainly not dandruff woman in front of me with her flashing snowflake earrings. The irony of her jewellery choice is not lost on me; if I were more of a bitch I might tap her on the shoulder

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to advise her that she's drawing attention to the skin blizzard she's depositing with every shake of her head. I'm not a bitch though; or maybe I'm just a quiet one inside my own head. Isn't everyone?

Jesus, how many more stops is this bus going to make? I'm still a couple of miles from my flat and already it's fuller than a cattle truck on market day.

Come on, I think. *Move. Take me home.* Though home is going to be a pretty depressing place now that my flatmate, Sarah, has gone back to her parents'. Only one more day then I'll be out of here too, I remind myself.

The bus shudders to a halt at the end of the street and I watch as down below a stream of people jostle to get off at the same time as others try to push their way on. It's as if they think it's one of those competitions to see how many people can fit into one small space.

There's a guy perched on one of the fold-down seats in the bus shelter. This can't be his bus, because he's engrossed in the hardback book in his hands. I notice him because he seems oblivious to the pushing and shoving happening right in front of him, like one of those fancy special effects at the movies where someone is completely still and the world kaleidoscopes around them, slightly out of focus.

I can't see his face, just the top of his sandy hair, cut slightly long and given to a wave when it grows, I should imagine. He's bundled into a navy woollen reefer jacket and a scarf that looks like someone might have knitted it for him. It's kitsch and unexpected against the coolness of the rest of his attire – dark skinny jeans and boots – and his concentration is completely held by his book. I

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squint, trying to duck my head to see what he's reading, wiping the steamed-up window with my coat sleeve to get a better look.

I don't know if it's the movement of my arm across the glass or the flickering lights of dandruff-woman's earrings that snag in his peripheral vision, but he lifts his head and blinks a few times as he focuses his attention on my window. *On me.*

We stare straight at each other and I can't look away. I feel my lips move as if I'm going to say something, God knows what, and all of a sudden and out of nowhere I need to get off this bus. I'm gripped by the overwhelming urge to go outside, to get to him. But I don't. I don't move a muscle, because I know there isn't a chance in hell that I can get past anorak man beside me and push through the packed bus before it pulls away. So I make the split-second decision to stay rooted to the spot and try to convey to him to get on board using just the hot, desperate longing in my eyes.

He's not film-star good-looking or classically perfect, but there is an air of preppy dishevelledness and an earnest, 'who me?' charm about him that captivates me. I can't quite make out the colour of his eyes from here. Green, I'd say, or blue maybe?

And here's the thing. Call it wishful thinking, but I'm sure I see the same thunderbolt hit him too; as if an invisible fork of lightning has inexplicably joined us together. Recognition; naked, electric shock in his rounded eyes. He does something close to an incredulous double take, the kind of thing you might do when you coincidentally spot your oldest and best friend who you haven't seen for ages and you can't actually believe they're there.

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It's a look of *Hello you*, and *Oh my God, it's you*, and *I can't believe how good it is to see you*, all in one.

His eyes dart towards the dwindling queue still waiting to board and then back up to me, and it's as if I can hear the thoughts racing through his head. He's wondering if it'd be crazy to get on the bus, what he'd say if we weren't separated by the glass and the hordes, if he'd feel foolish taking the stairs two at a time to get to me.

No, I try to relay back. *No, you wouldn't feel foolish. I wouldn't let you. Just get on the bloody bus, will you!* He's staring right at me, and then a slow smile creeps across his generous mouth, as if he can't hold it in. And then I'm smiling back, giddy almost. I can't help it either.

Please get on the bus. He snaps, making a sudden decision, slamming his book closed and shoving it down in the rucksack between his ankles. He's walking forward now, and I hold my breath and press my palm flat against the glass, urging him to hurry even as I hear the sickly hiss of the doors closing and the lurch of the handbrake being released.

No! No! Oh God, don't you dare drive away from this stop! It's Christmas! I want to yell, even as the bus pulls out into the traffic and gathers pace, and outside he is breathless standing in the road, watching us leave. I see defeat turn out the light in his eyes, and because it's Christmas and because I've just fallen hopelessly in love with a stranger at a bus stop, I blow him a forlorn kiss and lay my forehead against the glass, watching him until he's out of sight.

Then I realize. Shit. Why didn't I take a leaf out of shitty friend's book and write something down to hold up against the window? I could have done that. I could even have

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written my mobile number in the condensation. I could have opened the tiny quarter-pane and yelled my name and address or something. I can think of any number of things I could and should have done, yet at the time none of them occurred to me because I simply couldn't take my eyes off him.

For onlookers, it must have been an Oscar-worthy sixty-second silent movie. From now on, if anyone asks me if I've ever fallen in love at first sight, I shall say yes, for one glorious minute on 21 December 2008.

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New Year's Resolutions

Just two resolutions this year, but two big, shiny, brilliant ones.

1) Find him, my boy from the bus stop.
2) Find my first proper job in magazines.

Damn. I wish I'd written them down in pencil, because I'd rub them out and switch them over. What I'd ideally like is to find the achingly cool magazine position first, and then run into bus boy in a coffee shop while holding something healthy in my hand for lunch, and he'd accidently knock it out of my clutches and then look up and say, 'Oh. It's you. Finally.'

And then we'd skip lunch and go for a walk around the park instead, because we'd have lost our appetites but found the love of our lives.

Anyway, that's it. Wish me luck.

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20 March

Laurie

'Is that him? I definitely got a bus-ish vibe from him just now.'

I follow the direction of Sarah's nod and sweep my eyes along the length of the busy Friday-night bar. It's a habit we've fallen into every time we go anywhere; scanning faces and crowds for 'bus boy' as Sarah christened him when we compared Yuletide notes back in January. Her family festivities up in York sounded a much more raucous affair than my cosy, food-laden one in Birmingham, but we'd both returned to the reality of winter in London with the New Year blues. I threw my 'love at first sight' sob story into the pity pot and then immediately wished I hadn't. It's not that I don't trust Sarah with my story; it's more that from that second forth she has become even more obsessed with finding him again than I am. And I'm quietly going crazy over him.

'Which one?' I frown at the sea of people, mostly the backs of unfamiliar heads. She screws her nose up as she pauses to work out how to distinguish her guy for my scrutiny.

'There, in the middle, next to the woman in the blue dress.'

I spot her more easily; her poker-straight curtain of

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white-blonde hair catches the light as she throws her head back and laughs up at the guy beside her.

He's about the right height. His hair looks similar and there is a jolting familiarity to the line of his shoulders in his dark shirt. He could be anyone, but he could be bus boy. The more I look at him, the more sure I am that the search is over.

'I don't know,' I say, holding my breath because he's as close as we've come. I've described him so many times, Sarah probably knows what he looks like more than I do. I want to inch closer. In fact I think I have already started inching, but then Sarah's hand on my arm stills me because he's just bent his head to kiss the face off the blonde, who instantly becomes my least favourite person on the planet.

Oh God, I think it's him! No! This isn't how it's supposed to happen. I've played out variants of this scene every night as I close my eyes and it never, repeat *never*, ends like this. Sometimes he's with a crowd of guys in a bar, other times he's alone in a cafe reading, but the one thing that never happens is he has a girlfriend who he snogs to within an inch of her shimmery blonde life.

'Shit,' Sarah mutters, pressing my wine into my hand. We watch as their kiss goes on. And on. Jeez, do these people have no boundaries? He's copping a thorough feel of her backside now, wildly overstepping the mark for a busy bar. 'Decency, people,' Sarah grumbles. 'He's not your type after all, Lu.'

I'm crestfallen. So much so that I pour the entire glass of chilled wine down my throat, and then shudder.

'I think I want to go,' I say, ridiculously close to tears.

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And then they stop kissing and she straightens her dress, he murmurs something in her ear, and then turns away and walks straight towards us.

I know instantly. He brushes right past us, and I almost laugh with giddy relief.

'Not him,' I whisper. 'Not even very much like him.'

Sarah rolls her eyes and blows out the breath she must have been holding in. 'Jesus, thank fuck for that. What a sleaze-dog. Do you know how close I came to tripping him up just now?'

She's right. The guy who just sauntered past us was high on his own self-importance, wiping the girl's red lipstick from his mouth on the back of his hand with a smug, satisfied grin as he made for the loo.

God, I need another drink. The search for bus boy is three months old. I better find him soon or I'm going to wind up in rehab.

Later, back at Delancey Street, we kick off our shoes and flop.

'I've been thinking,' Sarah says, crashed out on the other end of the sofa to me. 'There's this new guy at work, I think you might like him.'

'I only want bus boy,' I sigh, costume-drama melodramatic.

'But what if you find him and he's a twat?' she says. Our experience in the bar earlier obviously hit home for her too.

'You think I should stop looking?' I ask, lifting my heavy head off the arm of the sofa to stare at her. She flings her arms wide and leaves them there.

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'Just saying you need a contingency plan.'

'In case he's a twat?'

She raises her thumbs, probably because it's too much effort to raise her head.

'He could be an A-class, top-drawer super-knob,' she says. 'Or he could have a girlfriend. Or Christ, Lu, he could even be married.'

I gasp. Actually gasp. 'No way!' I splutter. 'He's single, and he's gorgeous, and he's somewhere out there waiting for me to find him.' I feel it with all the conviction of a drunk woman. 'Or maybe he's even looking for me.'

Sarah props herself up on her elbows and stares at me, her long red waves the worse for wear and her mascara end-of-the-night smudged.

'I'm just saying that we, *you*, might have unrealistic expectations, and you, *we*, need to proceed with more caution, that's all.'

I know she's right. My heart almost stopped beating in the bar earlier.

We look at each other, and then she pats my leg. 'We'll find him,' she says. It's such a simple gesture of solidarity, but in my boozy state it brings a lump to my throat.

'Promise?'

She nods and draws a cross over her heart, and a great snotty sob leaves my throat, because I'm tired and pissed and because sometimes I can't quite bring bus boy's face to mind and I'm scared I'll forget what he looks like.

Sarah sits up and dries my tears with the sleeve of her shirt.

'Don't cry, Lu,' she whispers. 'We'll keep looking until we find him.'

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I nod, dropping back to gaze at the Artex ceiling that our landlord has been promising to repaint ever since we moved in here several years ago. 'We will. And he'll be perfect.'

She falls silent, and then waves her pointed finger vaguely over her own head. 'He better be. Or else I'll carve "twat", right here in his forehead.'

I nod. Her loyalty is appreciated and reciprocated. 'With a rusty scalpel,' I say, embroidering the grisly image.

'And it'll go septic and his head will drop off,' she mumbles.

I close my eyes, laughing under my breath. Until I find bus boy, the lion's share of my affection belongs to Sarah.

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24 October

Laurie

'I think we've nailed it,' Sarah says, standing back to admire our handiwork. We've spent the entire weekend redecorating the tiny living room of our flat; we're both covered in paint splatters and dust. We're pretty close to done now and I'm feeling a warm glow of satisfaction – I only wish my crappy job at the hotel would make me feel even half as accomplished.

'I hope the landlord likes it,' I say. We aren't really allowed to make any material changes, but I don't see how he can object to our improvements.

'He should be paying us for this,' Sarah says, her hands on her hips. She's wearing cut-off dungarees over a Day-Glo pink vest that clashes violently with her hair. 'We've just increased the value of his flat. Who wouldn't love these boards more than that threadbare old carpet?'

I laugh, remembering our comedy sketch struggle to lug the rolled-up carpet down the stairs from our top-floor flat. By the time we reached the bottom we were sweating like miners and swearing like sailors, both plastered in chunks of loose foam underlay. We high-fived each other after we slung it into a neighbour's skip; it's been there half full of junk for ever, I don't think they'll even notice.

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The old oak floorboards have come up beautifully – in years gone by someone had obviously gone to the trouble of restoring them before the current landlord hid them beneath that patterned monstrosity. Our arm-aching efforts to buff them up all feel worth it now that we're standing in our mellow, light-filled room thanks to the fresh white walls and big old sash windows. It's a tired building with glamorous bones, Artex ceiling notwithstanding. We've added a cheap rug and covered the mismatched furniture with throws from our bedrooms, and all in all I think we've performed a shoe-string miracle.

'Boho chic,' Sarah declares.

'You've got paint in your hair,' I say, touching the top of my head to show her where and promptly adding a whole new splodge to mine.

'You too,' she says, laughing, then looks at her watch. 'Fish and chips?'

Sarah has the metabolism of a horse. It's one of the things I like most about her, because it allows me to eat cake guilt-free. I nod, starving. 'I'll go.'

Half an hour later, we toast our newly fabulous living room over fish and chips eaten off our knees on the sofa.

'We should jack in our jobs and become TV home-makeover queens,' Sarah says.

'We'd kill it,' I say. '*Laurie and Sarah's Designer Do-overs.*'

She pauses, her fork halfway to her mouth. '*Sarah and Lu's Designer Do-overs.*'

'*Laurie and Sarah's* sounds better,' I grin. 'You know I'm right. Besides, I'm older than you, it's only fair I should come first.'

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It's a standing joke; I'm a few months older than Sarah and I never miss a chance to pull rank. She splutters on her beer as I lean down to pick my bottle up off the floor.

'Mind the boards!'

'I've used a coaster,' I say, grandly.

She leans down and peers at my makeshift coaster, this month's supermarket offers flyer.

'Oh my God, Lu,' she says slowly. 'We've become coaster people.'

I swallow, sombre. 'Does this mean we're going to grow old and have cats together?'

She nods. 'I think it does.'

'Might as well,' I grumble. 'My love life is officially dead.'

Sarah screws up her finished-with fish-and-chip paper. 'You've only got yourself to blame,' she says.

She's referring to bus boy, of course. He's reached near-mythical status now, and I'm on the very edge of giving up on him. Ten months is a long time to look for a complete stranger on the off-chance that they'll be single, into me and not an axe murderer. Sarah is of the vocal opinion that I need to move on, by which she means I need to find someone else before I turn into a nun. I know she's right, but my heart isn't ready to let him go yet. That feeling when we locked eyes – I've never had that before, ever.

'You could have trekked around the entire globe in the time since you saw him,' she says. 'Think how many perfect men you could have shagged doing that. You'd have had tales of Roberto in Italy and Vlad in Russia to tell your grandkids when you're old.'

'I'm not going to have kids or grandkids. I'm going to

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search vainly for bus boy for ever and have cats with you instead,' I say. 'We'll start a rescue centre, and the queen will give us a medal for services to cats.'

Sarah laughs, but her eyes tell me that the time has come to pack my bus boy dreams away and let him go.

'I've just remembered I'm allergic to cats,' she says. 'But you still love me, right?'

I sigh and reach for my beer. 'It's a deal-breaker, I'm afraid. Find someone else, Sarah, we can never be together.'

She grins. 'I've got a date next week.'

I clutch my heart. 'You got over us so fast.'

'I met him in a lift. I held him to ransom with the stop button until he agreed to ask me out.'

I really need to take life lessons from Sarah – she sees what she wants and grabs it with both hands. I wish for the millionth time that I'd had the balls to get off that bus. But the fact is, I didn't. Maybe it's time to wise up, to stop searching for him and drunk crying every time I fail. There are other men. I need to make 'What would Sarah do?' my life motto – I'm pretty sure she wouldn't spend a year of her life moping.

'Shall we buy a picture for that wall?' she says, looking at the empty space over the fireplace.

I nod. 'Yeah. Why not? Can it be of cats?'

She laughs and bounces her screwed-up chip paper off my head.

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18 December

Laurie

'Try not to make any snap decisions when you meet David tonight? You probably won't think he's your type on first sight, but trust me, he's hilarious. And he's *kind*, Laurie. I mean, he gave up his chair for me the other day in a meeting. How many guys do you know who'd do that?' Sarah delivers this speech while on her knees pulling as many dusty wine glasses as she can find from the back of the kitchen cupboard in our tiny shared flat.

I cast around for an answer and, to be honest, it's slim pickings. 'The guy from the bottom flat moved his bike out of the way to let me through the front door this morning. Does he count?'

'You mean the same one who opens our mail and leaves trails of cold kebab on the hall floor every weekend?'

I laugh under my breath as I immerse the wine glasses in hot foamy water. We're throwing our annual Christmas party tonight, which we've held every year since we first moved into Delancey Street. Though we're kidding ourselves that this one will be much more sophisticated now we've left university, it's mostly going to involve students and a few colleagues we're still getting to know descending on our flat to drink cheap wine, debating things we don't really understand and – for me it would seem – getting off

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with someone called David who Sarah has decided is my perfect man. We've been here before. My best friend fancies herself as a matchmaker and set me up a couple of times when we were at uni. The first time, Mark, or it might have been Mike, turned up in running shorts in the depths of winter and spent the entire dinner trying to steer my food choices away from anything that would take more than an hour to work off in the gym. I'm a pudding girl; the main thing off the menu as far as I was concerned was Mike. Or Mark. Whichever. In Sarah's defence, he bore a passing resemblance to Brad Pitt, if you squinted and looked at him out of the corner of your eye in a dark room. Which I have to admit I did; I'm not normally one to sleep with guys on a first date, but I felt I had to give it a go for Sarah's sake.

Her second choice, Fraser, was only slightly better; I can at least remember his name. He was far and away the most Scottish Scotsman I've ever met, so much so that I only understood about fifty per cent of what he said. I don't think he mentioned bagpipes specifically, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he was packing a set underneath his jacket. His tartan bow tie was disconcerting, but none of that would have mattered. His real downfall came at the end of the date; he escorted me home to Delancey Street and then kissed me in the style of someone trying to administer CPR. CPR with an entirely inappropriate amount of saliva. I made a dash for the bathroom as soon as I got inside, and my reflection confirmed that I looked as if I'd been snogged by a Great Dane. In the rain.

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Not that I've got an impressive track record at choosing boyfriends for myself, either. With the exception of Lewis, my long-time boyfriend back at home, I seem to somehow keep missing the mark. Three dates, four dates, sometimes even five before the inevitable fizzle. I'm starting to wonder if being best friends with someone as dazzling as Sarah is a double-edged sword; she gives men unrealistic expectations about women. If I didn't love her to pieces, I'd probably want to poke her eyes out.

Anyway, call me stupid, but I knew none of those men were right. I'm a girl given to romance; Nora Ephron is my go-to answer for fantasy dinner party guest and I yearn to know if nice boys really do fucking kiss like that. You get the idea. I'm hoping that amongst all these frogs will one day come a prince. Or something like that.

Who knows what David is going to be like, perhaps it will be third time lucky. I'm not going to hold my breath. Maybe he'll be the love of my life or maybe he'll be hideous, but either way I'm undeniably intrigued and more than up for letting my hair down. It's not something I've done very often over the course of the last year; we've both had the upheaval of moving out of the cushioned world of uni into the reality of work, more successfully in Sarah's case than mine. She practically walked into a junior position with a regional TV network, whereas I'm still working on the reception desk at the hotel. Yes, despite my New Year's Resolution I am decidedly not working in my dream job yet. But it was that or go home to Birmingham, and I fear that if I leave London I'll never get back again. It was always going to come more easily

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for Sarah; she's the gregarious one and I'm slightly socially awkward, which means interviews don't tend to go so well.

None of that tonight though. I'm determined to get so drunk that social awkwardness is a complete impossibility. After all, we'll have the buffer of New Year to forget our ill-advised, alcohol-fuelled behaviour. I mean, come on, that happened *last year* for God's sake. Move on already!

It's also the night that I finally get to meet Sarah's new boyfriend. She's known him for several weeks already but for one reason or another I've yet to lay eyes on him in the apparently incredibly hot flesh. I've heard enough about him to write a book, though. Unfortunately for him, I already know he's a sex god in bed and that Sarah fully expects to have his children and be his wife once he's the high-flying media celeb he's clearly on track to becoming. I almost feel sorry for him having his future mapped out for the next ten years at the age of twenty-four. But hey, this is Sarah. However cool he is, he's still the lucky one.

She can't stop talking about him. She's doing it again now, telling me far more about their rampant sex life than I'd ideally like to know.

I scatter bubbles in the air like a child waving a wand as I hold my soapy fingers up to halt her flow. 'Okay, okay, please stop. I'll try not to orgasm on sight when I finally clap eyes on your future husband.'

'Don't say that to him though, will you?' she grins. 'The future husband thing? Because he doesn't know that bit yet and, you know, it might, like, shock him.'

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'You reckon?' I deadpan.

'Far better if he thinks it's all his own brilliant idea in a few years' time.' She dusts off the knees of her jeans as she stands up.

I nod. If I know Sarah, which I do, she'll have him wrapped round her little finger and more than ready to spontaneously propose whenever she decides the time is right. You know those people that everyone gravitates towards? Those rare effervescent birds who radiate this aura that draws people into their orbit? Sarah's that person. But if you think that makes her sound insufferable, you'd be wrong.

I first met her right here, the first year of uni. I'd decided to go for one of the university rentals rather than halls and I'd picked this place. It's a tall old townhouse split into three: two bigger flats downstairs and our attic perched on the top like a jaunty afterthought. I was utterly charmed when I first viewed it, my rose-tinted glasses jammed all the way on. You know that shabby-chic little flat Bridget Jones lives in? It reminded me of that, only more shabby and less chic, and I was going to have to share it with a total stranger to meet the rent. None of those drawbacks stopped me from signing on the dotted line; one stranger was easier to contemplate than a crowded, noisy hall full of them. I still remember carting all of my stuff up three flights of stairs on moving-in day, all the time hoping that my new flatmate wasn't going to crush my Bridget Jones fantasy dead.

She'd tacked a welcome note to the door, big, loopy red handwriting scrawled across the back of a used envelope:

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Dear new housemate,

Have gone to buy cheap fizzy piss to celebrate our new home. Take the bigger room if you like, I prefer being in stumbling distance of the bog anyway!

S x

And that was it. She had me in the palm of her hand before I'd even laid eyes on her. She's different to me in lots of ways, but we share exactly enough middle ground to get on like a house on fire. She's in-your-face gorgeous with waves of fire-engine red hair that almost reach her bum, and her figure is amazing, though she doesn't give a toss about how she looks.

Normally someone as gorgeous as her would make me feel like the ugly sister, but Sarah has this way of making you feel good about yourself. The first thing she said to me when she got back from the corner shop that day was, 'Fucking hell! You're a dead ringer for Elizabeth Taylor. We're going to have to get a deadlock on the door or else we're gonna cause a riot.'

She was exaggerating, of course. I don't look very much like Elizabeth Taylor. I have my French maternal grandmother to thank for my dark hair and blue eyes; she was quite a celebrated ballerina in her twenties; we have the prized programmes and grainy press cuttings to prove it. But I've always thought of myself as more of a failed Parisian; I have inherited my grandmother's form but not her grace, and her neat brunette chignon has become a permanently electrocuted mass of curls in my hands. Besides, there's no way I'd ever have the discipline for

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dancing, I'm far too fond of an extra chocolate biscuit. I'm going to be a goner when my metabolism catches up with me.

Sarah jokingly refers to us as the prozzie and the princess. In truth, she's not got an ounce of slut in her and I'm nowhere near ladylike enough for a princess. Like I said, we meet in the middle and we make each other laugh. She's Thelma to my Louise, hence the reason I'm disconcerted that she's suddenly fallen hook, line and sinker for a guy I haven't even met or vetted for suitability.

'Do we have enough booze, do you think?' she asks now, casting a critical eye over the bottles lined up across the kitchen work surface. No one could call it a sophisticated collection; it's pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap supermarket special offer wine and vodka we've been hoarding for the last three months to make sure our party is one to remember.

Or not remember, perhaps.

'More than. People will bring a bottle too,' I say. 'It's going to be great.' My stomach rumbles, reminding me that neither of us has eaten since breakfast.

'Did you hear that?' I say, rubbing my middle. 'My guts just asked you to make a DS special.'

Sarah's sandwiches are the stuff of Delancey Street myth and legend. She's taught me her holy breakfast trinity of bacon, beetroot and mushrooms, and it took us the best part of two years to settle on our signature dish, the DS special, named after our flat.

She rolls her eyes, laughing. 'You can make it yourself, you know.'

'Not the way you do it.'

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She preens a little, opening the fridge. 'That's true.'

I watch her layer chicken and blue cheese with lettuce, mayo and cranberry, an exact science that I've yet to master. I know it sounds hideous, but trust me, it's not. It may not be your average student food, but ever since we hit on the winning combo back in our uni days we make sure to always have the ingredients in the fridge. It's pretty much our staple diet. That, ice cream and cheap wine.

'It's the cranberry that does it,' I say after my first bite.

'It's a quantity thing,' she says. 'Too much cranberry and it's basically a jam sandwich. Too much cheese and you're licking a teenager's dirty sock.'

I raise my sandwich for another bite, but she lunges and pushes my arm down. 'Wait. We need a drink with it to get us in the party mood.'

I groan, because I realize what she's going to do when she reaches for two shot glasses. She's laughing under her breath already as she reaches into the back of the cupboard behind the cereal boxes for the dusty bottle.

'Monks' piss,' she says, pouring us each a ceremonial shot. Or Benedictine, to give the old herbal liqueur that came with the flat its proper name. The bottle informs us that it's a special blend of secret herbs and spices, and on first taste not long after we moved in we decided that one of those secret ingredients was almost certainly Benedictine monks' piss. Every now and then, usually at Christmas, we have one shot each, a ritual we've come to enjoy and loathe in equal measures.

'Down the hatch,' she grins, sliding a glass across the table to me as she sits back down. 'Happy Christmas, Lu.'

We clink and then knock our shots back, banging the empty glasses down on the table and wincing.

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'Doesn't get any better with age,' I whisper, feeling as if it's taken the skin off the roof of my mouth.

'Rocket fuel,' she rasps, laughing. 'Eat your sandwich, you've earned it.'

We lapse into sandwich silence, and when we've finished she taps the rim of her empty plate.

'I think, because it's Christmas, that we could add a sausage.'

I shake my head. 'You can't mess with the DS special.'

'There isn't much in life that can't be improved by a saveloy, Laurie.' She raises her eyebrows at me. 'You never know, you might get lucky tonight and see David's.'

Given the last two blind dates Sarah set me up on, I don't let the prospect overexcite me.

'Come on,' I say, dumping the plates in the sink. 'We'd better get ready, they'll be here soon.'

I'm three glasses of white in and definitely very relaxed when Sarah finds me and literally drags me from the kitchen by the hand.

'He's here,' she whispers, crushing the bones of my fingers. 'Come and say hi. You have to meet him right now.'

I smile apologetically at David as she pulls me away. I'm starting to see what Sarah meant about him being a grower. He's made me laugh several times already and he's kept my glass topped up; I'd just been considering a tiny exploratory snog. He's nice enough in a vaguely Ross from *Friends* kind of way, but I find I'm more intrigued to meet Sarah's soulmate, which must mean that Ross from *Friends* would be a regret come tomorrow. It's as good a barometer as any.

She tugs me through our laughing, drunk friends and a

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whole load of people I'm not sure either of us even know, until finally we reach her boyfriend standing uncertainly by the front door.

'Laurie,' Sarah is jittery and bright-eyed. 'Meet Jack. Jack, this is Laurie. *My* Laurie,' she adds, for emphasis.

I open my mouth to say hello and then I see his face. My heart jumps into my throat and I feel as if someone just laid electric shock pads on my chest and turned them up to full fry. I can't get any words to leave my lips.

I know him.

It feels like just last week I saw him first – and last. That heart-stopping glimpse from the top deck of a crowded bus twelve months ago.

'Laurie.' He says my name, and I could cry with the sheer relief of him being here. It's going to sound crazy but I've spent the last year wishing, hoping I'd run into him. And now he's here. I've scoured countless crowds for his face and I've searched for him in bars and cafes. I'd all but given up on ever finding bus boy, even though Sarah swears I've banged on about him so much that she'd even recognize him herself.

She didn't, as it turned out. Instead she's presented him to me as the love of her life.

Green. His eyes are green. Tree moss vivid around the iris edges, warm amber gold seeping in around his pupils. But it's not the *colour* of his eyes that strikes me so much as the look in them right now as he gazes down at me. A startled flash of recognition. A dizzying, headlong collision. And then it's gone in a heartbeat, leaving me unsure if the sheer force of my own longing made me imagine it had been there at all.

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'Jack,' I manage, thrusting my hand out. *His name is Jack*. 'It's so good to meet you.'

He nods, a skittish half-smile flickering over his lips. 'Laurie.'

I glance towards Sarah, crazy guilty, certain that she must be able to sense something amiss, but she's just grinning at us both like a loon. Thank God for cheap wine.

When he takes my hand in his, warm and strong, he shakes it firmly, politely almost, as if we're meeting in a formal boardroom rather than at a Christmas party.

I don't know what to do with myself, because all of the things I want to do wouldn't be okay. True to my word, I don't orgasm on the spot, but there is definitely something going on with my heart. How on earth has this colossal fuck-up happened? He can't be Sarah's. He's mine. He's been mine for an entire year.

'Isn't she fabulous?'

Sarah has her hand on the small of my back now, presenting me, actually propelling me towards him to hug because she's desperate for us to be new best friends. I'm wretched.

Jack rolls his eyes and laughs nervously, as if Sarah's obviousness makes him uncomfortable.

'Just as splendid as you said she was,' he agrees, nodding as if he's admiring a friend's new car, and something horribly like an apology creeps into his expression as he looks at me. Is he apologizing because he remembers or because Sarah is behaving like an overeager aunt at a wedding?

'Laurie?' Sarah turns her attention to me. 'Isn't he every bit as gorgeous as I said he was?' She's laughing, proud of him, as well she should be.

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I nod. Swallow painfully, even as I force a laugh. 'He certainly is.'

Because Sarah is so desperately keen for us to like each other, Jack obligingly leans in and touches his lips briefly against my cheek. 'It's good to meet you,' he says. His voice matches him perfectly; coolly confident, rich, shot through with gentle, knowing wit. 'She never shuts up about you.'

My fingers close around the familiarity of my purple pendant, looking for comfort as I force a laugh, shaky. 'I feel as if I know you too.' And I do; I feel as if I have known him for ever. I want to turn my face and catch his lips with my own. I want to drag him breathlessly to my room and close the door, tell him that I love him, strip off my clothes and climb into bed with him, drown in the woody, clean, warm scent of his skin.

I'm in hell. I hate myself. I take a couple of steps away from him for my own sanity and grapple with my wretched heart to stop it banging louder than the music.

'Drink?' Sarah suggests, light-hearted and loud.

He nods, grateful to be thrown a lifeline.

'Laurie?' Sarah looks at me to go with them.

I lean back and peer down the hallway towards the bathroom, jiggling as if I'm in dire need of the loo. 'I'll catch you up.' I need to get away from him, from them, from this.

In the safety of the bathroom, I slam the door and slide on to my backside with my head in my hands, gulping air down so as not to cry.

Oh God, oh God. Oh God! I love Sarah, she's my sister in all but biology. But this . . . I don't know how to

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navigate safely through it without sinking the ship with all of us aboard. Hope flares bright in my chest as I fantasize running out there and just blurting out the truth, because maybe then Sarah will realize that the reason she's so drawn to him is that, subconsciously, she recognized him as bus boy. God knows I've all but drawn him for her. What a misunderstanding! How we'll laugh at the sheer absurdity! But . . . then what? She graciously steps aside and he is *my* new boyfriend, easy as pie? I don't even think he recognized me, for Christ's sake!

Lead-heavy defeat crushes the delicate, ridiculous hope as reality creeps in. I can't do it. Of course I can't. She has no clue, and Jesus, she's so happy. It shines from her brighter than the star of fucking Bethlehem. It might be Christmas, but this is actual life, not some crappy Hollywood movie. Sarah is my best friend in the entire world, and however much and for however long it kills me, I'll never silently, secretly hold up signs to tell Jack O'Mara, without hope or agenda, that to me he is perfect, and that my wasted heart will always love him.

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19 December

Jack

Fuck, she's so beautiful when she's asleep.

My throat feels like someone shovelled sand down it and I think Sarah might have broken my nose when she smacked her head back in bed last night, but right now I can forgive her anything because her scarlet hair is strewn out around her shoulders on the pillows, almost as if she's suspended in water. She looks like the Little Mermaid. Though I realize that thought makes me sound like a pervert.

I slide from the bed and fling on the nearest thing to hand: Sarah's dressing gown. It's covered in pineapples, but I've no clue where my own clothes went and I need headache pills. Given the state of the stragglers last night I wouldn't be surprised to find one or two of them still strewn across the living-room floor, and I figure pineapples will offend them less than my naked arse. Shit, it's pretty bloody short though. I'll just do a quick dash.

'Water,' Sarah croaks, flinging her hand out towards me as I skirt round the edge of the bed.

'I know,' I murmur. Her eyes are still closed as I lift her arm and carefully tuck it back under the quilt, and she makes a noise that might mean *Thanks* and might be *For God's sake help me*. I drop a kiss on her forehead.

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'Back in a sec,' I whisper, but she's already slid under the fog of sleep again. I don't blame her. I plan to climb back in there and do the same thing myself within the next five minutes. Glancing at her again for a long second, I back quietly out of the room and click the door shut.

'If you need paracetamol, they're in the cupboard on the left.'

I pause for a beat, swallowing hard as I open the cupboard door and root around until I spot the small blue box.

'You read my mind,' I say, turning to Laurie. I force a casual smile, because in truth this is really fucking awkward. I've seen her before – before last night, I mean. It was just once, fleetingly, in the flesh, but there have been other times in my head since: random, disturbing early-morning lucid dreams where I jolt awake, hard and frustrated. I don't know if she remembers me. Christ, I hope not. Especially now I'm standing in front of her in a ridiculous pineapple-strewn ball-grazing dressing gown.

Her dark hair is piled high on her head in a messy bun this morning and she looks as if she's as much in need of medication as I am, so I offer her the box.

Sarah has banged on about her best friend so much that I'd built a virtual Laurie in my head already, but I'd got her all wrong. Because Sarah is so striking, I'd lazily imagined that her choice of friend would be equally colourful, like a pair of exotic parrots perched up here in their cage. Laurie isn't a parrot. She's more of a . . . I don't know, a robin, maybe. There's a contained peace about her, and a quiet, understated sense of being okay with herself that makes her easy to be around.

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'Thanks.' She takes the tablets, popping a couple out into her hand.

I run her a glass of water and she raises it to me, a grim 'bottoms up' as she knocks the pills back.

'Here,' she says, counting how many are left in the packet before she hands it over. 'Sarah likes –'

'Three,' I jump in, and she nods.

'Three.'

I feel a little as if we're competing to prove who knows Sarah best. She does, of course. Sarah and I have only been together for a month or so, but Christ, it's been a whirlwind. I'm running to keep up with her most of the time. I met her first in the lift at work; it jammed with just the two of us inside, and by the time it moved again fifteen minutes later I knew three things. Firstly, she might be a fill-in reporter for the local TV station now, but one day she's likely to take over the world. Two, I was taking her for lunch as soon as the lift got fixed, because she told me so. I was going to ask her anyway, for the record. And lastly, I'm pretty sure she stopped the lift herself and then released it once she'd got what she wanted. That mildly ruthless streak is a turn-on.

'She's told me a lot about you.' I fill up the kettle and flick it on.

'Did she tell you how I like my coffee?'

Laurie reaches for some mugs out of the cupboard as she speaks, and I hate the reflex that sends my eyes down her body. She's in PJs, more than respectably covered, yet still I observe the fluidity of her movements, the curve of her hip, the navy polish on her toes.

'Erm . . .' I concentrate on hunting down a teaspoon,

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and she stretches across to tug out the drawer to show me where they are.

'Got it,' I say, reaching in at the same moment as she does, and she jerks her hand away, laughing to soften the suddenness.

As I start to spoon the granules out she folds herself on to a spindle-backed chair, one foot tucked underneath her backside.

'To answer your question, no, Sarah didn't tell me how you like your coffee, but if I had to guess, I'd say . . .' I turn and lean against the counter to study her. 'I'd say you take it strong. Two spoons.' I narrow my eyes as she watches me without giving any hint. 'Sugar,' I say, passing my hand across the back of my neck. 'None. You want to, but you deny yourself.' What the actual fuck am I saying? I sound like I'm coming on to her. I'm not. I'm really not. The last thing I want her to think is that I'm a player. I mean I've had my share of girlfriends, a couple even edged towards serious, but this thing with Sarah feels different somehow. More . . . I don't know. I just know I don't want it to end any time soon.

She pulls a face, then shakes her head. 'Two sugars.'

'You're kidding me,' I laugh.

She shrugs. 'I'm not. I take two sugars. Two and a half sometimes, if I'm in the mood.'

The mood for what, I wonder. What makes her need more than two sugars? God, I really need to get out of this kitchen and back to bed. I think I've left my brain back there on the pillow.

'Actually,' Laurie says, standing up, 'I don't think I want coffee right now after all.' She backs towards the door as she speaks, and I can't quite read the expression in her

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