

NUALA ELLWOOD



'Nuala Ellwood has a gift for delving into the
"what if" of life' JANE CORRY

FROM THE AUTHOR OF

Day
of the
Accident

THE PERFECT LIFE

SHE'D KILL TO GET IT

'A brilliant concept' EMMA CURTIS, *The Night You Left*

What readers are saying about

The Perfect Life

‘A **compelling** and **twisty** thriller – I was **hooked**’

Joanne, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

‘A **great** read – found myself doing that “**just one more chapter**” thing’

Stephanie, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

‘I **couldn’t put this down**’

Lisa, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

‘**Loved** this one! So easy to read and **lots of twists and turns** along the way’

Kelly, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

‘Oh my! **Hooks** you right from the start. **Suspenseful** and **twisting** – simply **brilliant**’

Cathy, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

‘Full of **mystery** and **drama**’

Shabana, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

‘**Fast-paced** and **thrilling**. Nuala Ellwood knows how to get the reader **enthralled** from the start’

Julie, *Netgalley*

★★★★★

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nuala Ellwood is the author of three bestselling novels: *My Sister's Bones*, for which she was selected as one of the *Observer's* 'New Faces of Fiction 2017', *Day of the Accident* and *The House on the Lake*. Nuala lives in York with her young son.

The Perfect Life

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I wanted to make some content notes available for you to inform yourself, if you wish – but some readers may consider these spoilers, so please skip the rest if you would rather not see.

This story touches on some difficult topics, including sexual assault. I have tried my best to portray these issues delicately and I hope this comes across as you read *The Perfect Life*.

If these are topics that you are sensitive to, please be aware.

Nuala x

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For my mother

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‘Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist.
Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy
tales tell children the dragons can be killed.’

– G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*

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Prologue

Goring-on-Thames – August 2018

‘What a view,’ says the estate agent. ‘I’d imagine you can see right across the county from here.’

Her eyes flash with delight. She’ll be thinking of the possible commission, a hefty sum on a property this expensive.

‘It’s stunning,’ I say as I look out on to the milky-blue river and clear, unpolluted sky. ‘So tranquil.’

‘Yes,’ she says, stepping away from the window. ‘The only noise you’ll hear is the sound of birdsong and the trickle of water. Quite a change from the bustle of London.’

I nod my head, smiling. How surprisingly easy this has all been.

‘The current owners are retiring and want to down-size,’ says the estate agent as she leads me through to the drawing room. ‘As you can see, this has been a wonderful home for them. Now it’s ready to be passed on to another family.’

She gestures to the huge seating area, which is larger than the average London flat. Plush moss-green velvet sofas surround a beautifully crafted bamboo coffee table, which is piled artfully with a spread of books and a vase overflowing with freshly picked hydrangeas.

‘You said you had three children, is that right?’

‘Oh yes,’ I say. ‘Two boys and a girl.’

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‘How lovely,’ she says, smiling warmly. ‘I bet they keep you on your toes.’

‘I love them but they’re hard work; the boys are so naughty sometimes. That’s why I thought I’d make this trip alone,’ I say, running my hands over the soft velvet armchair. ‘But my little Lavender is an angel, and I wouldn’t swap any of them for the world.’

‘I bet they’d love the space to run around here,’ the estate agent continues, selling this idyllic place to me even though my heart already knows what it wants.

‘Oh yes, Freddie would go mad with all this space to play football and Barclay would run wild and most likely break an arm like he did on his ninth birthday last year! He’s forever getting into trouble,’ I chuckle.

‘Imagine the birthday parties you could give them here,’ she says, unlocking a side door that leads out to a sweeping stone terrace.

I step outside and breathe in the crisp morning air. As I stand on the terrace the air fills with children’s laughter. I see trestle tables groaning with party food, guests bearing brightly coloured parcels, music filtering out from the kitchen, balloons and bunting and candles on a cake, birthday wishes to be made.

‘It’s perfect,’ I whisper as the estate agent leads me back into the house. ‘Just perfect.’

But as we walk back through the living room and head towards the hallway, a chill ripples through me. What would Connor say if he could see me?

‘Now,’ says the estate agent, consulting her brochure. ‘Let’s show you the first floor, shall we, Imogen?’

I nod my head.

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If only you knew, I think to myself as I follow this poor, unsuspecting young woman up the winding staircase. That there are no children, no birthday parties, no prospect of a commission. That Imogen isn't even my real name. That all this is a perfect lie.

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PART ONE

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I. Now

Wimbledon, South West London
August 2018

I sit in my sister's living room, sipping coffee from a cup that says MUM, though I have no children to call my own, my eyes transfixed by the laptop screen in front of me. I know I shouldn't have logged on, know that this addiction will be the ruin of me, but nothing else will help tonight, nothing else will stop the dark thoughts invading or stem the fear that is creeping like poison through my body.

I think back to five days earlier, the momentary happiness I had felt as I walked up the driveway and saw the topiary animals and the griffins, smelt the faint scent of honeysuckle in the air. I think of the look on his face as he answered the door, the smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Don't think about it, I tell myself. Not tonight. Tonight, I need to escape it all. So I let the memory fade and, instead, try to focus on the website, wincing as I take a sip from the coffee that has now gone tepid. Nothing new has been added in the last few hours, but simply seeing the familiar listings is reassuring.

'Everything okay?'

I look up and see my sister standing in the doorway. She's wearing her oversized navy-and-white-striped apron. The smell of roasted vegetables wafts from the

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kitchen. Georgie is a great cook, like my mum was. I, on the other hand, can just about rustle up a basic pasta if I have to.

‘Yes, all fine,’ I say, minimizing the window on my screen. ‘Just having a look at some job sites. Seeing what’s out there.’

Georgie gives me that look, the one I’ve become accustomed to these last few weeks: a mixture of sympathy and bewilderment. A look that says *How did my ambitious, confident little sister get herself into this state?* It’s a question I’ve been asking myself a lot too.

‘Dinner won’t be long,’ she says, wiping a strand of dark hair from her face. ‘I’m making stuffed peppers.’

‘Thanks, Georgie,’ I say, aware of the fact that she is trying her best to perk me up. ‘They smell delicious.’

She goes to speak but is interrupted by a loud hammering on the door. My heart leaps in my chest as she goes to answer it.

Breathe, I tell myself; try to focus back on the page I’ve been looking at.

I hear muffled voices in the passageway and my throat tightens. I scroll down the page, cast my net a bit wider. Draining the last of the coffee, I try to think of somewhere new, somewhere I’ve never been before. But my brain is muddy, nothing will come, so instead I close my eyes and type a random letter into the search engine. *G*. I shiver at its meaning, then quickly click on the first suggestion – Gloucestershire – before his face has a chance to appear in my head.

I’ve never been to Gloucestershire but now, through the power of the internet, I can. My skin tingles as I enlarge

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the picture and step into a golden world. A world where everyone is wealthy and secure, where the floors are polished and gleaming, the gardens manicured and bursting with fragrant plants and flowers. A world of laughter and sunshine and families gathered together at outdoor tables, an abundance of food and drink. It should be making me feel better, but as I wander through this fantasy land, it only reminds me of what I have lost.

‘Come through.’

Georgie’s voice cuts into my thoughts and I look up. What I see makes the room constrict and my hand, poised over the computer mouse, starts to shake. There are two police officers standing in the doorway, one male, one female. Behind them I see my sister’s face, all colour drained away.

‘Iris Lawson?’ says the male officer, his eyes fixed on me.

The name sinks like a stone in my stomach, but I nod my head all the same.

Georgie pushes past them and comes to stand next to me.

‘There must be some mistake,’ she says, placing her hand on my shoulder, her voice solid and commanding, ever the older sister. ‘Her name is —’

‘Shh,’ I interrupt, shrugging my sister’s hand away. ‘It’s okay, Georgie.’

‘I’d like to ask, Miss Lawson,’ continues the officer, a flabby-faced man who looks to be in his mid-fifties, ‘if you know a man named Geoffrey Rivers?’

I look up at him. His eyes are the colour of damp autumn leaves. I turn from him to my sister. She shakes her head. We both know the significance of the name.

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‘Yes,’ I whisper, my hand still hovering on the mouse.
‘Yes, I do.’

The officer nods his head then takes a step forward.

‘Well, in that case, Miss Lawson,’ he says, his voice hardening, ‘I’d like to ask you to accompany me to the police station. We need to ask you a few questions.’

‘Why do you need to do that?’ cries Georgie. ‘What’s happened?’

‘I’m afraid Mr Rivers was found dead at his home in Hampstead,’ he replies, his voice steady.

I hear my sister inhale sharply. In front of me the screen darkens, obliterating Gloucestershire and polished floors and perfect lives, leaving me only with the stark truth of what I have done.

2. Then

July 2017

The hooded figure rises from its haunches and creeps towards the unsuspecting young woman. She is looking up at the stars, trying to pick out Venus. So lost is she in her stargazing, she doesn't sense the shadow that has just crossed her path. Somewhere in the distance an oboe strikes up, playing a single note. It's an ominous sound, funereal. It gets louder and louder as the hooded figure bears down on the woman and clasps its bony hands around her throat. She tries to break free, but the figure is stronger than she is and soon she's overwhelmed. Her body loosens and flops backwards like a limp rag doll. In her final moments she turns her head to look at her killer, but her eyes are full of starlight.

'Bloody hell,' whispers Lottie, in the seat beside me, as the curtains close and the audience strikes up a reticent applause. 'The things you make me do, Nessa.'

She starts to giggle.

'Puppet theatre for adults?' she says, shaking her head. 'I mean, really?'

'Oh God, I'm sorry, Lottie,' I say as the lights come up in the auditorium. 'It got such a good write-up in the *Observer* too. Still, at least we didn't have to pay for the tickets.'

'Murderous gothic puppets,' says Lottie, her eyes widening.

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She looks at me and her face is so astounded that we both burst into fits of giggles. A woman with cropped grey hair and a batik-print jumper, sitting in the row in front, turns to us with an expression of dismay.

‘Come on,’ I say, sliding out of the seat. ‘Let’s get out of here before they do an encore.’

‘Christ, yes,’ says Lottie, stumbling behind me.

When we reach the exit I turn and take Lottie’s hand and, released from the deathly quiet auditorium, we explode into loud laughter.

‘Remind me to thank Georgie for the tickets,’ says Lottie as we make our way down the corridor to the bar. ‘I wonder why she passed them on to us.’

As senior curator of a successful independent art gallery in Mayfair, my sister is always being given free tickets for exhibitions and theatre shows of the more experimental kind. Tonight’s murderous puppets were part of a six-part show produced by a Danish theatre company who specialize in something called ‘Puppetry of the Macabre’. I smile as I imagine Georgie trying to convince Jack, my rugby-loving, no-nonsense brother-in-law, to go and watch a puppet show. ‘Give the tickets to Vanessa,’ he would have said. ‘She likes fairy stories.’ He would have been right about that. I do. Though, if I’m honest, there was something about the puppet show that got under my skin.

‘Next time, I get to choose,’ says Lottie as we walk into the rather crowded Royal Court Theatre bar. ‘And I’m going full-on musical theatre. You’re going to have to sit through two hours of *Mamma Mia* or *9 to 5* to make up for that, agreed?’

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I smile. Lottie really is the light to my darkness. It was the same at university. I loved Emily Brontë, she was more Jane Austen. I liked listening to PJ Harvey – whose records Georgie had introduced me to – while Lottie loved cheesy pop. On paper, we shouldn't be friends, but somehow we balance each other out.

'Agreed,' I say as we spot two vacant seats by the bar. 'Now, what can I get you to drink?'

Lottie purses her lips. She always does this when she has a decision to make. Or, at least, when she feels she has to look as though she's making a decision. I know for a fact that after a minute's deliberation she will say, 'A glass of Merlot, please.' Her usual. The drink she always has. Yet she will still give herself a moment to weigh up the options.

'Er . . . I'll just have a glass of Merlot, please,' she says, pushing her hand through her thick red curls.

'What a surprise,' I say, shaking my head. 'Dry-roasted nuts?'

Lottie smiles widely. One of the great things about our friendship is the fact that we know and understand the little things, the things that other people might not find important, but mean everything to us. I know that Lottie always drinks Merlot on a night out but has to have a packet of peanuts with it to line her stomach. She knows that I have to drink my coffee when it's steaming hot because tepid coffee makes me feel queasy. And I know never to engage her in conversation or ask important questions of her before eight in the morning because it takes at least two coffees and a shower before her brain is able to function. Little things. Silly things, some would say. But remembering these things and honouring them

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is what, I have always felt, has kept our friendship going for so long. We're like a married couple, just without all the boring relationship complications.

'So,' I say when the drinks arrive. 'How was today? Craig behaving himself?'

She rolls her eyes. Craig is her colleague and desk partner at the children's charity where Lottie works as case manager. She'd always got on well with him until last week when he got very drunk on an office night out and told Lottie he thought he was in love with her.

'He's been very quiet, thankfully,' she says, taking a sip of wine. 'Though it's tricky when you're sharing a desk. I keep catching him staring at me.'

'Awkward,' I say, taking a handful of nuts from the opened packet. 'That's why I'm glad I have an office to myself.'

'Yeah, well, we can't all be super executives like you,' says Lottie, tapping me playfully on the arm. 'My mum says you're like Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*. We watched it together on her birthday. Pure eighties yuppiedom.'

'I'm hardly a yuppie, Lottie,' I say with a laugh. 'My office is no bigger than a cupboard. *Yuppies*. I remember my mum using that term to describe my dad's sister, my Aunt Yvonne. She worked in the City and used to wear trouser suits with huge shoulder pads.'

'She sounds ace,' says Lottie. 'I bet she drank Campari and lemon. We should be more yuppie.'

'Yeah, I'd like to see you try that in your office,' I say, feeling merry with wine. 'What was the name of the guy Michael Douglas played in that film? The one where he says "lunch is for wimps"?''

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‘Gordon Gekko!’

We both remember the name at the same time and collapse into giggles.

‘Lowering the tone as ever, Miss Adams?’

I look up and see Damian Astley. He’s the finance officer at Luna London and the man I go to when I need extra cash for my – as he likes to call them – ‘ambitious’ marketing campaigns. He’s in his late fifties but keeps himself so trim and groomed he could easily pass for a man in his forties, though I would never tell him that or his ego would go through the roof.

‘Fancy seeing you here,’ I say as he approaches the bar. ‘I didn’t think theatre was your thing.’

‘It isn’t,’ he says, smirking. ‘We’re here for the booze.’

He gestures to his friend, who is standing on the far side of the bar, to join us.

‘We were just talking about you, actually,’ I say with a smile. ‘Gordon Gekko. Remember that old eighties film, *Wall Street*?’

‘Old eighties film,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘Thus spake the millennial. It’s an absolute classic, though I’m guessing it came out before you were born.’

‘A few years after,’ I say, watching as Damian’s friend comes towards us, a bottle of beer in each hand. He’s very attractive, with dark curly hair and deep-brown eyes. He smiles as he approaches and I find myself blushing.

‘Guys, this is Connor,’ says Damian, pulling out a bar stool for Connor to sit down. ‘Connor, meet Vanessa Adams, our marketing miracle worker, and . . . sorry, love, I didn’t catch your name.’

‘It’s Lottie.’

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‘Ah, Lottie. Same name as my wee niece, I’ll remember that,’ says Damian, his old Northern Irish charm surfacing. ‘What do you do, Lottie?’

While Lottie and Damian discuss Lottie’s job, Connor pulls his chair further towards me.

‘Nice to meet you, Vanessa,’ he says. His voice is deep, with a trace of northern accent. ‘Damian speaks very highly of you.’

‘Ah, that’s good to know,’ I say, taking a sip of wine. ‘I always feel bad for getting him to loosen the company purse strings for my ad campaigns. How do you two know each other?’

‘Damian was a friend of my dad’s,’ says Connor. ‘They were at uni together. When Mum and Dad split up, Damian stuck around for me. He’s a sort of unofficial godfather.’

His eyes glisten slightly and I get an urge to reach out and touch his arm, reassure him. It’s an odd feeling. I’ve only just met this man yet I want to protect him. Beside us I hear Lottie telling Damian about the ‘murderous puppets’. She’s laughing and doing impressions, much to Damian’s delight.

‘I read about that show in the *Observer*,’ says Connor, leaning in to me and raising his voice above the din of the bar. ‘It sounded interesting. What did you think?’

‘I actually quite enjoyed it,’ I say, edging my seat away from Lottie. ‘Though I feel bad for subjecting Lottie to it. It was a bit dark for her tastes.’

‘Why would you feel bad?’ he says, a frown passing across his face. ‘It’s not your fault she didn’t enjoy it.’

‘I guess not.’

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‘What did you like about it?’ he says, flinching slightly as Damian lets out a roar of laughter at something Lottie has said.

‘It reminded me of the children’s stories I enjoyed when I was a kid,’ I say. ‘You know, the Grimms’ fairy tales, ghost stories, that sort of thing.’

‘Yeah, ghost stories were a big thing when I was at primary school,’ he says, staring at me intently. ‘The girls loved them, though I could never see the appeal. Remember those Holly Maze books?’

I breathe in sharply. For a moment the memory of my mum driving into sharp sunlight flashes in front of me. I can’t allow myself to think about that, not tonight.

‘No, I don’t remember those. I was more into *The Demons of Winter Valley*.’

‘Sorry, I interrupted you,’ he says, touching my arm. ‘You were saying?’

‘The show just reminded me of those stories,’ I say, the wine loosening my tongue. ‘Good versus evil, morality lessons, if you like. The main character wasn’t as sweet as she made out. She was playing with the audience, hiding her true nature from them. But the hooded figure, the one we imagined was bad, was actually her guilty conscience. And when he . . . oh, I’d better not spoil the ending for you in case you go and see it.’

‘No, do,’ he says. ‘I’d like to hear.’

‘Well, in the end, the hooded figure kills her.’

‘Ah, hence the murderous puppet?’ he says, gesturing to Lottie.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘But the murder was . . . well, it didn’t look like he was killing her. The way the puppeteer worked the

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puppet's hands made it look like he was embracing her, like he was, in some weird way, saving her.'

'Saving her from herself, I suppose,' he says, fixing his brown eyes on me.

'Yes, exactly that,' I say excitedly.

It's a relief to talk about the show like this. I love Lottie but she can be so fixed in her likes and dislikes that sometimes I feel I have to adapt my own to suit her.

'I'm a bit of a nerd when it comes to theatre,' he says, placing his beer bottle on the bar. 'Though it's the look of the stage that really intrigues me. I studied set design at college before changing tack and going into art direction. That dress you're wearing, for example. It caught my eye immediately because it brings out the shade of your eyes. Blue is definitely your colour – Christ, that probably makes me sound rather vacuous.'

'Not at all,' I say, my stomach fluttering as I look down at my dress, a pale-blue Zara number I've had for years. 'I know a lot of people think that about my work in cosmetics. People view the beauty industry as something frivolous and lightweight, but for me it's about storytelling, creating different characters for each occasion.'

'It sounds like you love your job,' says Connor with a smile. 'You're lucky. There are so many people trapped in jobs and lives that they hate.'

'You're right,' I say, feeling myself relax. 'Before I got the job at Luna London I'd spent years temping. God, some of those places were really dire. I remember one time I was working on the reception desk of a marketing company in the City and the boss asked me to sew a button on his shirt.'

'Christ, what a dinosaur,' he says, shaking his head.

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‘Yep,’ I say, remembering those years. Jobs like that had left my confidence battered. ‘It was the last straw. A couple of days later I saw the job ad for Luna London and decided it was now or never.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I’ve always been rather shy,’ I say. ‘When I was a kid I used to be scared of meeting new people, putting myself out there, even when it was for my own good. I realized I was still doing that after university. I was playing it safe, not daring to go for what I wanted in case I made a fool of myself.’

‘I understand that,’ he says, taking a sip of beer. ‘Those first few years after uni are pretty tough. You have to develop a thick skin.’

‘I knew I’d have to do that or else spend the rest of my life trapped in dead-end jobs,’ I say, recalling how nervous I’d been when I turned up to the interview at Luna London. ‘Though I still felt like an imposter those first few months.’

‘That’s interesting,’ he says, narrowing his eyes. ‘Do you still feel that way?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘And that’s down to Anne.’

‘Anne?’

‘My boss. She’s amazing, a real inspiration. She took a chance on me, someone with very little experience, and spent the next year mentoring me in every aspect of the job. I’ll always be grateful to her for that.’

‘Everyone needs an Anne in their life,’ he says, smiling. ‘She sounds great.’

I go to speak but I’m interrupted by Lottie tapping my arm.

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‘Sorry to be a pain but our table’s booked at Rossi’s for 9 p.m.,’ she whispers. ‘Unless you want to cancel it.’

She darts her eyes towards Connor and smiles. I feel my cheeks redden.

‘No, of course we should go,’ I say, draining my wine. ‘It was really nice to meet you, Connor.’

‘Likewise,’ he says, running his hand through his hair. ‘We should have a drink sometime, maybe.’

‘Um, sure,’ I say, watching as he takes his phone out of his pocket.

As I give him my number, Damian appears behind me.

‘Nice to see you two getting along,’ he says, placing a hand on my shoulder. ‘Connor’s a lovely chap.’ He whispers this last bit in my ear and I get a waft of beer and peanuts.

‘See you on Monday, Damian,’ I say, shaking my head as he winks playfully at me.

As we walk out of the bar, Lottie squeezes my arm.

‘God, he was a bit intense, wasn’t he?’ she says, rolling her eyes. ‘I would have rescued you, but Damian was telling me a long-winded story about his sister who works for an animal charity in Tanzania.’

‘I actually kind of enjoyed talking to him,’ I say, aware, as we step out on to Sloane Square, of an invisible gap widening between myself and Lottie, like I don’t really want to break the spell by telling her the way Connor made me feel. ‘Anyway, let’s get a move on or we’ll be late to dinner.’

As we hurry towards the restaurant, Lottie chattering beside me, I feel an overwhelming sense of loss. I could quite easily have talked to Connor all evening. He had made me feel so at ease, like I could be completely myself. It was strange and lovely in equal measure.

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When we've ordered our food, Lottie takes her phone and shuffles up next to me.

'Come on then, let's check him out,' she says, opening up Instagram and holding the phone up so I can see. 'Your Mr Wonderful.'

'Oh, don't be so dramatic,' I say as I take a sip of sparkling water. 'He was just a nice guy, no need to stalk him.'

'This isn't stalking,' says Lottie, looking up at me, her large amber eyes sparkling in the half-light. 'This is trying before you buy.'

'Oh God, Lottie, that's terrible,' I say, shaking my head. 'How the hell did people manage before social media?'

'Er, they got big surprises,' she says, raising her voice above the Ed Sheeran song that has just started up. 'Like, "Ooh, I had no idea Colin used to be morbidly obese. He never had any old photos lying about."'

'You're evil,' I say, laughing, as she thrusts the phone at me.

'Here we are,' she says as Connor's Insta profile looms in front of me. 'Connor Dawkins. Art Director @TurnerMathersPR. Foodie. Runner.' His profile photo shows him standing against a tiled doorway. It looks like Spain or Portugal. He's tanned and wearing sunglasses and a crisp white shirt.

'Right, let's see his dirty secrets,' says Lottie, scrolling further down the page. 'God, it's all work stuff. Drawings of sports people and banners. Ooh, hang on, what have we here?'

She passes me the phone. There's a photo of Connor, with shorter hair, wearing a navy suit and holding hands with a slim, blonde-haired woman. She's wearing a

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tight-fitting, shimmery pink dress and is holding a glass of champagne. It looks like they're at a wedding as she's got what must be an order of service in her hand. I barely know this man yet I get a twisted feeling in my stomach looking at him holding hands with a woman.

'Well, he definitely has a type,' says Lottie, taking the phone from me. 'Blonde, blue-eyed, slim. Let's see when this was taken. Ah, January of this year. And no other photos of women since. Looks like he's single, at least. Now, what about Facebook.'

'That's enough, Lottie,' I say as the waiter arrives with our food: Spaghetti Carbonara for Lottie, Penne Arrabiata for me. Our usual. 'I feel awful stalking the poor guy like this.'

'Try before you buy,' she says, raising her glass of water at me. 'It's the only way.'

Later, when we've paid the bill, Lottie heads to the loo. I'm just getting my coat on when my phone vibrates. It's a text.

I was going to play it cool and wait a few days but then I thought, sod it, I've never been cool. Would you like to have brunch with me tomorrow at 11? At the cafe in Battersea Park? Do tell me to piss off if you want, Connor

My stomach does a little fluttery dance as I type out my reply.

Ha! I've never been cool either. Brunch sounds perfect.
See you then.

I quickly put my phone away as Lottie returns to the table, but she has clocked me.

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