Is the grass always greener on the single side of the fence?

a year of being SINGLE

FIONA COLLINS

Fiona Collins

A Year of Being Single: The bestselling laugh-out-loud romantic comedy that everyone's talking about

Аннотация

'A fabulously entertaining story!' –Rachel's Random Reads (top 1,000 Amazon Reviewer)Three friends. One year. Absolutely no men…Imogen is supposed to be on the most romantic weekend of her life and instead she's quickly realised that her current boyfriend definitely isn't 'The One' and actually One Big Mistake.Frankie is fed up. Fed up of her good-for-nothing husband and her four, unappreciative children. Well, they hardly notice her anyway, maybe it's time to shake it up a little…Grace thought she had the perfect life. Gorgeous little boy and perfect, hardworking husband. Or rather, she did, until she realised her husband was shagging his 'work'.These single ladies don't need to put a ring on it…right?Perfect for fans of Jane Costello, Helen Fielding and Fiona Gibson, don't miss this brilliant debut bestseller from Fiona Collins!What readers are saying about A Year of Being Single:'It's harder than it seems to stay single for a year…a fabulously entertaining story!' – Rachel's Random Reads (top

1000 Amazon Reviewer)‘A laugh-out-loud hilarious book with a deft turn of phrase and a very real grasp of what it’s like to be a woman… a real cut above your usual chick lit!.’ – Sam (top 1000 Amazon Reviewer)‘Not at all a predictable ending…something a little out of the ordinary.’ – Sal’s World of Books‘Fiona’s writing style is wonderful and packed with warmth and humour.’ – Bookaholic Holly‘I loved this book and read it in one night – I couldn't put it down!’ – Amazon Reviewer‘A light-hearted, fun read, perfect for a rainy day, or lying on a beach.’ – Ceri (Amazon Reviewer)‘Absolutely wonderful…A joy to read. I would recommend this book wholeheartedly.’ – Michelle (NetGalley Reviewer)A thoroughly enjoyable, light-hearted and fun read.’ – A Spoonful of Happy Endings

Best friends Imogen, Frankie and Grace decide to test whether the grass really *is* greener on the single side of the fence…

Imogen is supposed to be on the most romantic weekend of her life and instead she's quickly realised that her current boyfriend definitely isn't 'The One' and is actually One Big Mistake.

Frankie is fed up. Fed up of her good-for-nothing husband and her four, unappreciative children. Well, they hardly notice her anyway, maybe it's time to shake it up a little…

Grace thought she had the perfect life. Gorgeous little boy and perfect, hardworking husband. Or rather, she did, until she realised her husband was shagging his 'work'.

It's time for a change – and to ditch the men who are dragging them down! It's time for a year of being single. Swearing off men, these single ladies don't need to put a ring on it…*right*?

Perfect for fans of Jane Costello, Helen Fielding and Fiona Gibson, *A Year of Being Single* is the laugh-out-loud debut that everyone's talking about!

A Year of Being Single

Fiona Collins

FIONA COLLINS

lives in the Essex countryside with her husband and three children, but also finds time for a loving relationship with a Kindle. She likes to write feisty, funny novels about slightly (ahem) more mature heroines. Fiona studied Film & Literature at Warwick University and has had many former careers including TV presenting in Hong Kong; talking about roadworks on the M25 on the radio; and being a film and television extra. She has kissed Gerard Butler and once had her hand delightfully close to George Clooney's bum. When not writing, Fiona enjoys watching old movies and embarrassing her children. You can follow Fiona on Twitter: @FionaJaneBooks

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Prologue

They had a charter. An unofficial one. It wasn't written on parchment scroll in swirly feather quill or drawn up on foolscap by a portly, provincial solicitor or even scrawled in biro on the back of a magazine. It wasn't written down anywhere. But it was a charter, nonetheless, and it went something like this:

They were independent women – self-sufficient, autonomous. They could change their own light bulbs and the batteries in their smoke alarms, refill their own windscreen wash bottles in their

cars, put out their own bins, carry their own suitcases, take their own cars through the carwash and unscrew the lids on their own jars. If they didn't know how to do something they would ask each other, as one of them probably would. Or they would ask Google and work it out.

They would provide each other with emotional support and babysit each other's children. If one needed another, they would come over.

They had freedom, they had power; they could please themselves and would make sure they did.

None of them had a man. None of them wanted a man. None of them needed a man.

And they would be single for one year to prove it.

Chapter One: Imogen

If Imogen had screamed out loud, no one would have heard her. If she'd screamed, it would have been swallowed by the unconcerned Paris traffic roaring below. If she'd screamed, nobody would have given a monkey's. Least of all, the giant male ape inside her sumptuous hotel room.

She was standing on the tiny balcony of a massive hotel room, on the top floor of an enormous hotel. A room that she was paying for. The Ape's contribution was zilch. He thought it enough to enjoy the room and the balcony and the whole posh Paris hotel experience as fully and as enthusiastically as possible. Especially the bar, the breakfast buffet, the three gorgeous restaurants and the extensive room-service menu. He'd enjoyed

the whole trip. He'd larked about photo-bombing people at the bottom of the Eiffel Tower, stuffed his face with madeleines at Blé Sucré – whilst attempting a French accent that made him sound like a crumb-spitting Pepé le Pew – and danced up the escalator to the Louvre with a silly grin on his face… Oh, he'd had a great time.

He was enjoying himself at this very moment. As Imogen grabbed the balcony's railing and flung her head up to the heavens and the grey Paris sky – to ask, Why? Why another bloody loser? – he was stuffed into a Chesterfield armchair and tucking into another sodding triple-deck club sandwich, irritatingly picking up each triangular section by the cocktail stick that held it together, and nibbling round the stick like an appreciative beaver. It was his fifth that weekend.

When he was done, he'd probably sniff, scratch his balls, burp and top it all off with a long and loud fart. This man couldn't possibly be The One! He shouldn't even have been a vague *someone* in her life.

He was a waste of space; he was lazy, greedy and quite repulsive. She'd been really stupid with this one. She wanted to get away from him as soon as possible. Their train home couldn't come quick enough.

Imogen's perfect nails dug into the palms of her Shea Butter-moisturised hands, and she silent-screamed again.

Thirty minutes before, she had arranged her legs into an attractive position on the bed. She had adjusted the long tulle skirt

of her dress. Fanned her hair out on the pillow. The pillowcase alone probably cost two hundred euros. The suite was how much? Eight hundred and ninety-five euros, for one night. Imogen had thought it would be worth it. To stay in the same suite as Carrie Bradshaw in the last episode of *Sex and the City*. She had thought it would be romantic. It had turned out to be anything but.

Like Carrie, Imogen had been waiting, but not for Aleksandr Petrovsky, fiddling with a trendy light installation in a gallery somewhere across the city, but for Dave Holgate, who had been locked in the bathroom for absolutely ages and was showing no signs of coming out.

What the hell is he doing in there? she'd thought, picking a down feather off the bed and tucking it under the coverlet. *He's been at it for over twenty minutes*!

She'd sat up and sighed. She was bored and uncomfortable, and beginning to feel ridiculous with her hair fanned out like that. She wasn't bloody Rapunzel. She wasn't even some young, hopeful ingénue – she was a forty-year-old woman who had been there, done that and got several disappointment-stained T-shirts. She should be well beyond hair-fanning. She should be well beyond pinning any kind of hopes on any kind of pathetic man.

At last Imogen had heard the toilet flush and Dave had come out of the bathroom, in his boxers. He'd looked dishearteningly tubby. He'd put on a fair bit of timber since she'd met him, three months ago. As he stood by the window to the balcony

and scratched his large bottom, Imogen sighed again. Oh dear. It appeared *she* had turned him into this chubby monstrosity. It was all those meals out they'd had, wasn't it? All those dates. Dates she'd embarked on with a hope that gradually went the way of Dave's greedily guzzled food: down the pan.

Their first month of dating – very successful and full of laughs, actually – they went to mid-range restaurants in London. His choice. The second, they started going to restaurants in hotels. Her choice. They did the rounds of all of them: The Marriott, the Dorchester, the Landmark, Claridge's. Imogen *loved* restaurants in five-star hotels. She loved the whole thing: concierges in top hats showing you in, the clack of heels across marble lobbies, the uniformly attentive waiting staff and the fact there were hotel rooms above you where all sorts of glamorous things were happening – chocolates on pillows, Hollywood stars ordering room service, lovers loving each other, secret assignations. One day she'd be proposed to in one of these hotel restaurants.

It wouldn't be Dave who would be proposing to her, at least she hoped not. By date six and the restaurant at The Mandarin Oriental, she'd realised he was a lost cause, but unfortunately it was too late. On a high, she'd stupidly booked a trip to Paris after their first, misleadingly brilliant month. A month that had ended with an email landing in her inbox advertising Luxury Hotels of the World, and her reaching happily for the phone with unfounded excitement.

She had had to persevere with him. They had Paris; his name

was on the damn tickets. She'd thought if they kept going to all those fab hotel restaurants, even after she knew they were wasted on him (though his stomach would have said the opposite), they might somehow elevate their relationship, elevate *him*.

They didn't.

Equally and idiotically optimistic, Imogen had thought the romantic setting of the Hôtel Plaza Athénée might magically transform him, after three months of dating and dining, to someone she wanted him to be.

It hadn't.

'I'd give that ten minutes if I were you,' Dave had said, with another giant sniff and a ping of his straining waistband.

Who said romance was dead?

He'd crossed the room and huffed his backside into an armchair, knocking a book that had been sitting on one arm to the floor. He hadn't moved to pick it up. It was Imogen's: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. She'd hoped to instil some culture in Dave somehow, by leaving it lying around. Fat chance.

Then he'd crossed his muscly, hairy legs. The foot that was raised pointed towards her, like a joint of meat. One big toe was nonchalantly being aired. It was a *really* big, fat big toe. Hairy, too. She was revolted. And not for the first time.

'I can't wait to get out of here,' he'd sighed happily and inexplicably, all his actions suggesting the contrary. 'I fancy pie and mash tomorrow night. Or we could go up Romford dogs. My treat. Who said I wouldn't treat you like a goddess?' He'd

chuckled to himself, enjoying his own joke. Imogen had smiled sarcastically and resisted the temptation to flip him the bird. Instead she'd flapped her tulle skirt in a huff, allowing him a quick glimpse of her redundant Agent Provocateur underwear. He didn't even seem to notice. What a waste. He didn't deserve the underwear, the skirt, the suite. It was all wasted on the fat pig. *She* deserved better.

Dave Holgate had turned out to be huge mistake. She'd plumped for him for a *change*. A change from the steady and long-term succession of upper class twits and rich, Impressive On Paper city boys she had selected and then discarded – for being commitment-phobes, or freaks, or crashing bores, or arrogant sods, or cheats, or already married, or all of the above. She had thought a more down-to-earth man like Dave – a man not quite so Good On Paper – could give her what she wanted. Adoration, a good laugh and, perhaps, commitment; God knows no one else had come up with it.

Dave was cheeky, happy-go-lucky. He spoke estuary English, he talked about blokes not chaps, geezers not guys, unlike her posher consorts. He liked pie and mash and liquor, pints of lager, a night out at the dogs. Okay, he wasn't as rich as the others, but, as she'd found to her cost, money wasn't everything, right? *She* made a decent wage. And Dave had a very decent job halfway up a very ambitious ladder in the world of maritime insurance.

When she'd met him, at a bar in Spitalfields, she had viewed laugh-a-minute Dave as a work in progress. He wasn't her

usual impressive, finished article; he was someone who seemed impressed by *her*. He said he was lucky to have met her. Said she was different. Feisty, funny, classy. And she'd liked him, before he'd revealed his irritating true colours on that sixth date. (In hindsight, she wondered, did he have a *rule*? Six dates and it all hangs out?) He'd relaxed, got comfortable, *too* comfortable. He began referring to women as 'birds'. Stroking his stomach as though it were a puppy. Eating with his mouth open. Her heart had sunk as swiftly as his decorum had deserted him.

For Paris's sake, she'd valiantly tried to pretend the true colours weren't shining through. She'd tried to ignore the fact that he was absolutely *terrible* in bed. When he'd laughed her into it that first month, he'd seemed quite good (although she *was* really drunk) but subsequent encounters had proved highly unsatisfying. Imogen had to do all the work, she had to go on top, he'd eaten too much, his 'belly' was hurting, could she shift over to the left a bit…?

The awful truth was that he was as far from her perfect man as you could get. She knew that even if he was the marrying kind, any proposal from him would be highly indecent and wholly unwelcome.

Only her good friends knew it, but Imogen wanted to get married. To everyone else, she put on a pretty good act of thinking it was all a load of rubbish, this marriage lark – she was ballsy, she was career driven, she took no nonsense or prisoners – but she wanted it. She wanted The Day, the years, the life;

she wanted to be someone's wife. When it finally happened, she would surprise everyone who didn't know her as well and say she was trying marriage out as a giddy experiment, that if she made it to seven years like Madonna and Guy Ritchie it would be something. That it was a hoot, a mad adventure. But deep down she took it all quite seriously. That's what this succession of no-hopers had all been about. Her end game was for one of these men to turn out to be *amazing*. Amazing enough to be her perfect husband.

One of these days, one of her Good on Papers would come up with all the goods.

Dave, less Good on Paper and pretty dreadful everywhere else, was never going to be that amazing guy. Imogen should have known it. She laughed to herself bitterly that she ever thought he was *remotely* marriage material, that she went to dinner after dinner with him hoping he'd magically become someone else.

If he *had* acted strangely protective over his bags or had anxiously patted his jacket pocket, as though checking something was there, at the start of the many amazing meals they'd had in Paris, she would have had a blue fit. The man was repugnant.

Three hours after she'd silent-screamed on the balcony, Imogen was on the Eurostar, sitting across from a slumbering Dave who was soporific from carbs and several hot chocolates with squirty cream and marshmallows. His eyes were firmly shut, greasy eyelids twitching slightly; hers were fully open. She not only saw the wood for the trees, she saw the entire forest and it

was desolate and scrappy.

She'd had it. Men were a waste of time. Useless, hopeless, feckless disappointments, every one of them. She didn't want to get married! What was she thinking? Why be saddled with one of the losers? She had a good life, a good job and good friends. It wasn't like she even believed in love. Or wanted it. Love had happened to her once – just the once – and she had come out of it very, very badly. Love was not for her.

She didn't even want to go *out* with any of these no-hopers any more. She was dumping Dave as soon as they stepped foot back on English soil and he'd put his last fast-food wrapper in the bin. And then she was swearing off men. For good.

Chapter Two: Frankie

Frankie's silent scream was made at the sink, after another unappreciated Sunday roast. Three and a half hours it had taken her. Three and a half hours! Roast beef, roast potatoes, six – six! – different types of veg because the fussy so-and-sos all liked different things, Yorkshire puds, stuffing and gravy. The whole bloody works. For her family to wolf it down in five minutes without a word of praise or thanks; abandon all their plates amongst cutlery scattered like dropped straws; and push back their chairs, leaving them all out from the table like boats in a flotilla.

She was left sitting alone at the kitchen table, as usual, unhappily polishing off all the roast potatoes because she'd damn well cooked them and they were really nice, not that that any of

those ungrateful sods had the consideration to tell her so. Well, her three-year-old had grinned whilst eating one, before she'd taken it out of her mouth with her hand and gleefully mushed it onto the table. It was a kind of appreciation, Frankie supposed.

From the rest of those ingrates there had not been one expression of thanks, not one murmur or slight hint that anything was remotely delicious, or even just passable. Or even edible. Although they did eat it. Some of them. Some of it. Not enough. Not enough for the slaving she'd done.

Her cheeks were bright red from the oven, her hair had frizzed up from the vapour off the vegetable pans; she had an exclamation mark of gravy on her white, straining T-shirt.

As Frankie scraped four whole *starving children in Africa*'s meals into the stinky pedal bin and clattered the dirty plates into the sink, her silent scream spiralled upwards like steam from a boiling kettle.

Last night Frankie had run away for the night to the local GetAway Lodge. An out-of-the-blue, unprecedented, solo flight away from the house and the husband and the four children. A long-overdue escape.

She'd been dreaming of it for months. Every now and then, in that house, she had imagined what it would be like to just take off to the local budget hotel, on her own, for a night of solitude. For a single night away from it all. She'd had that GetAway room in her mind's eye like a beacon in the dark. She'd craved it. She could see it. She could almost smell it. Clean, sterile.

A navy blue headboard and a single, solitary scatter cushion. An inexplicable strip of shiny material running near the bottom of the bed. A dark brown wooden unit housing a television. A black and silver kettle. A small wicker basket containing packets of not-very-nice biscuits and diddy milk cartons and sachets of sugar and sweeteners: these meagre offerings would have to be supplemented with a carrier bag of chocolate and treats from the nearby service station.

There would be a bathroom that smelt of bleach and had three toilet rolls, one on the holder and a tower of two on the floor, on a silver stick thing. A single wardrobe with hangers that couldn't be wrenched from the rail. A rough, thin dark blue carpet.

She would add magazines, a book and silence. Bliss. Peace and quiet. No one to talk to. No one to talk to *her*. No one to bother her. More than just 'me' time. Way more. Time to save herself.

Yesterday, she'd finally gone. She'd fled to The GetAway Lodge on reaching the end of an extremely frayed tether that had been fraying for *years*.

It had been just after three on Saturday afternoon and Frankie had been upstairs considering whether to tidy the children's bedrooms or not. They were all absolute tips and if she tidied they would only be absolute tips again in a couple of days. What was the point? She'd decided not to bother. On her way down she'd noticed an open screwdriver set on the hall floor and was coming to tell her husband, Rob, off about it. She found her family in the

sitting room and had stood in the doorway, surveying the scene.

The carpet had been used as a litter bin. All her carefully (long ago, when she thought it had remotely mattered) chosen sofa cushions had been thrown all over the place; one was even balancing on top of the television, which was blaring way too loudly. Children were draped on the sofas and the floor, all eating something they shouldn't. One was meandering around with a piece of French bread in her hand, dropping crumbs on the carpet like an errant Gretel from *Hansel and Gretel*. There was lots of annoying larking about. Noise. Mess. Chaos. Downright disregard.

The meandering child kicked a small yellow football (long since banned) against the radiator. It made a jarring, reverberating thwack and a wedding photo in a silver frame, sitting on a small shelf above, wobbled then fell with a heavy *plonk* face down on the carpet. It was a wonder it hadn't smashed. Nobody moved to pick it up. The kids carried on screeching and larking about. Rob lay on the sofa watching *Deadly Sixty* and let a second Mars Bar wrapper fall from his outstretched arm onto the carpet.

It was nothing out of the ordinary. It was a scene that was pretty commonplace in that household. But Frankie had suddenly pictured herself standing in exactly the same spot five years from then. Ten years from then. Standing in the doorway, with everyone bigger (including Rob, probably, if he carried on eating all that chocolate) but absolutely nothing changed. Chaos,

disorder, disregard. Nothing would *ever* change, would it?

'Would anyone notice or care if I just left you all to it?' she'd said.

There was silence.

'If I just walked out and didn't come back?'

Still silence.

Something crunched within Frankie. A switch that had been threatening to be pressed clunked down with a thump. She'd had enough. She turned and slowly walked back upstairs, like a robot.

It had all ground to a halt. Her enthusiasm for family life. Her energy for any of it. Her cooking mojo had been worn down to a nub. It had disappeared on a wave of non-appreciation and apathy. She didn't want to iron another work shirt. She didn't want to pick up another cowpat of compressed jeans and pants that Rob simply stepped out of before getting into bed. She didn't want to look for another missing item whilst a shouting man stomped round the house. She didn't want to load or unload another dishwasher. Or put anything else in the bin. Or answer any more questions. She loved them all so much – well, Rob, not so much, let's be honest here – but they were driving her mad.

If she ever got time to do a full day of housework and get the house pristine, there were five brilliantly effective saboteurs who could trash all her good work in seconds. There really *was* no point. And she had a few stock laments that she trotted out almost daily to completely deaf ears: 'Why is there cheese all over the floor?', 'Why does no one, *no one*, hang up the bath mat but me!'

and, 'For the love of God, can't you, just once, put things *away*!'

No one had explained it properly. No one had spelled it out to her. She'd had this ridiculous, fuzzy vision of marriage and babies when she was younger: a sweet-smelling, talcum-powder-dusted oasis of flowers and baby bubble bath and sunny days and holding hands with her husband while her beautiful children ran fresh-cheeked through a meadow. No one had spelled it out to her that marriage and babies actually meant years and years of drudgery.

And, most devastatingly, giving up any semblance of your life. The life you had before.

She was done.

Except she could never be done. This was not a job she could resign from. She had to stay here for ever. In that house. With that husband. With those children…

She had to get out.

Now.

Or she would go stark, staring insane.

Frankie went into her bedroom, silently packed a small overnight bag, and walked out of the house. She was shaking but determined. She was going.

The GetAway Lodge was five miles away. As she'd driven there, 'Young Hearts Run Free' had come on the radio and tears had clichéd down her cheeks. She was a lost and lonely wife. Well, not lonely. The opposite of lonely. She was surrounded by loads of the buggers. But lost, for sure. Self-preservation. That's

what needed to go on today. GetAway Lodge, GetAway Lodge, GetAway Lodge. She was coming. It had been a bright light, an oasis, a little piece of heaven in the distance.

She'd gone, breathless, to reception and asked for a room for the night. The girl there had looked at her in a funny way. Was it because Frankie's surname was Smith? Frankie had almost laughed. Was this young girl – clearly hung-over and looking like she had hastily slapped Saturday's make-up on top of Friday night's – expecting some swarthy fella to suddenly appear from behind the potted plant, in a jaunty necktie? With a lascivious look. And dubious shoes.

'Just you?' the girl had said, her over-drawn eyebrows twitching and vodka breath distilling over in Frankie's direction.

'Yes, it's just me.'

After checking in, Frankie had walked to the neighbouring petrol station and bought four magazines, three bags of Minstrels, a Galaxy, a Boost and a large bag of salt and vinegar Kettle Chips. Then she'd returned to her lovely room, and ate and watched telly until midnight. Unhindered. Uninterrupted. Unbothered. She'd replied, *I'm fine*, to each and every one of several texts from Rob, once she'd told him where she was. He shouldn't have been surprised. She'd threatened it often enough. His texts had started off angry, then worried, then resigned. He obviously thought she was just having an *episode*. She could visualise him, on the sofa at home, trying and failing to work out when she'd had her last period, before returning to his television and snacks.

I'll be back tomorrow, was the final text she'd sent, at about midnight, before she'd turned out the light and snuggled down, alone, under the white cotton sheet and the limited comfort of the dodgy striped comforter. The thought of being *back* had filled her with dread, but for those rapidly passing hours of bliss, she was free.

Frankie had arrived home at ten this morning and it was like she'd never been away. Actually, it was worse than if she'd never been away. She had let herself quietly in the front door. Shoes had littered the hall. A child's padded jacket had been flung on the second stair up. A congealing, pink plastic cup of milk had been randomly placed on a windowsill.

She'd walked into the kitchen. There had been remains of a Saturday night takeaway strewn all over the table, an empty styrofoam burger box open on the floor like a Muppet's mouth, an almost-empty bottle of lemonade on its side on the worktop, a sticky dribble coming from it and dripping down the under-counter fridge. Cupboard doors and drawers were gaping; there was a sink full of dishes and empty tins filled with water, and an overflowing bin. For God's sake!

'Rob!'

Silence. There had just been the slight rustle of the white plastic bag the takeaway had come in, left redundant on the table and flicking in the chilly January breeze coming through the wide open back door.

'*Rob*!'

‘In the garden!’

They had all been out there. Rob, in his bright red fleece and Timberlands and, despite the weather, those bloody shorts she detested, the ones with the tar stains on the knees. Harry and Josh, duelling with cricket bats. They duelled with anything these days: light sabres, plastic pirate swords, and if it came to it, rolling pins and tubes of tin foil and cling film. At least they were doing it in the garden; they usually fenced at the top of the stairs when she was trying to come down with a massive basket of laundry. Tilly was doing cartwheels on the wet grass in double denim, and three-year-old Alice was plomped on her bottom on the overgrown lawn (where was the waterproof-backed picnic blanket?) and noshing on a very unseasonal choc ice. Half of it appeared to have exploded over her face, and all the children looked overexcited and under-dressed.

‘Mummy!’ Tilly had hollered, mid-wheel, and Alice had run over to Frankie and wiped her chocolatey cheeks on her mother’s leg. Frankie hugged Alice, waved ‘hello’ at the other children then retreated back to the kitchen, where she’d started tidying up. Within ten minutes, Harry had come into the kitchen for something and ended up telling her she was ruining everything, as always (she had dared ask him if he had finished his science project for school tomorrow) and Rob had stormed into the kitchen demanding to know where his phone was.

‘How the hell should I know?’ said Frankie, swiping at a ketchup splodge on the table with a sodden yellow sponge.

‘It’s been moved,’ growled Rob, ominously and incorrectly, and he marched off upstairs, huffing about ‘turning this place upside down until I find it.’

‘Oh, bog off!’ Frankie had mumbled, under her breath, then felt her spirit die a little as she remembered she’d promised them a big Sunday roast this weekend.

She’d only just got back, but she wanted out again.

Frankie gave a deep sigh as she peeled a Brussels sprout off the floor with one hand and scraped a strand of frizzy hair off her face with the other. The blissful night at the GetAway Lodge was becoming a distant memory. As soon as she’d stepped through the door and seen those littered shoes and the congealing cup of milk, the wife and motherhood juggernaut had started its engine and it was now rumbling again at full, reluctant pelt as she cleared up the aftermath of the roast dinner. She scraped more dishes in the bin, wiped the table, put the table mats away, swept the kitchen floor, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. She still wanted out. She wanted her P45. She’d had enough.

She shook her head and tried to rally, which was quite difficult as she’d just stood on a squished, half-chewed potato and nearly slipped over. She’d *chosen* this life! She’d wanted this husband, these children. She’d not said ‘no’ to any of them, when she had the chance. They were hers and she was theirs. She just had to get on with it. *Embrace* them. Continue to smother them all in love and roast potatoes…

It was no use. She felt worse than before she’d escaped. Crisis

point had been reached and there was only one solution. A solution that would give her time on her own, like those blissful hours at the GetAway Lodge, at least every other weekend.

It was radical. It was major. It would cause a hell of a lot of upheaval. But it could be done. She knew a school mum who had this very set-up. Free, blissful time on her own every other weekend. Every other Friday she'd have a chilled night with her girlfriends. Every other Saturday she'd go out and get wrecked. Alternate Sundays she'd lie on the sofa until 5p.m., her shoes from the night before still toppled together on her (Frankie imagined) white, fluffy rug. She wanted some of that and there was only one way she could get it.

Frankie chucked the flattened roast potato into the bin and kicked the dishwasher door shut.

She could leave Rob.

Chapter Three: Grace

Grace's silent scream was at the side of a Sunday morning football pitch whilst having a bit of mindless small talk with Charlie's mum.

'Oh bless, look at my Charlie, one of his socks has fallen down.'

'Oh yeah. Yeah, look at him. Oh bless.' Grace smiled and put her hands in the back pockets of her skinny jeans. She didn't really know where to put them. She barely knew where to put herself.

That bastard! How could he do this to me?

‘At least they’ve got good weather for it. It was chucking it down yesterday.’

‘Yeah, that’s right. It’s cold, but it’s nice to see the sun.’ Another smile, another platitude. Grace didn’t really know what she was saying.

Cheat! Liar! I’m never going to let him come back. Ever.

‘Goal! Yes! Go on Charlie!’

‘Yay! Brilliant. Well done, Charlie.’

No man is going to hurt me like that again.

Grace grinned in what she hoped looked like happiness, or at least something that didn’t look like her soul had been wrenched from her body, and she and Charlie’s mum walked towards the brick changing rooms.

Anyone glancing at her would think she was a normal, contented football mum enjoying the bright, crisp January day, the white clouds scudding across a chilly marine sky and her son’s hat-trick. That the worst part of her day would be cleaning muddy football boots and scouring the freezer for what to cook for tea. To a casual onlooker, Grace knew she would look *perfectly* at ease.

Blimey, she was good at this, she acknowledged. She should maybe have been an actress, instead of someone who worked in a hat boutique. No acting required there. Well, maybe a bit. She sometimes had to tell old battle-axes they looked nice in their pink mother-of-the bride hats or *anyone* they looked good in a fascinator.

Charlie's mum had certainly fallen for her act this morning. She had no clue that Grace's husband of twelve years had admitted to her before football this morning that he was cheating on her.

Grace had kicked him out. Kicked him to the kerb. He'd talked to the hand 'cause the face wasn't listening. They used to watch programmes like that together. *Jerry Springer*. At the weekends. They loved trash TV. They'd laugh smugly at all those pathetic people airing all their hilarious, dirty laundry in public. The affairs, the drama, the grubby awfulness. Awful Jerry. The terrible people with mullets and missing teeth. Those appalling beefed-up bouncers hamming it up and marching around. It was the sort of programme you could really enjoy for an hour or two, before it started making you feel ill.

She now felt *really* ill: sicker than she'd ever felt. A terrible, grubby drama had played out in her own kitchen and James's dirty laundry had flapped everywhere like filthy pigeons' wings, whacking her in the face and making her fight for breath.

He'd talked to the back of her head as he'd packed his bag. Each time he'd tried to wheedle his way out of things, she'd turned her body. Every time he tried to say it wouldn't happen again, she'd edged further away. Eventually, she'd found herself in a corner of the kitchen, by the bin, facing the tiles and thinking they needed a good scrub.

She'd heard the front door close. She'd turned round to find James gone and Daniel standing by the fridge, with his football

bag. Grace had to find a way to tell him.

That his father had done the dirty on her and wouldn't be coming back.

Grace smiled again at Charlie's mum and nodded at a story about the funny thing Charlie had said at dinner last night. Her silent scream was nowhere near loud or long enough.

The Wednesday before, at about half past seven in the evening, she had grabbed James's phone to check the weather for Daniel's district cross-country rally the next day. She needed to know exactly what to bring: fleeces or raincoats or both. (James wasn't coming of course; too busy.) She wanted to get the bag of water and energy-boosting snacks packed and ready for the morning. She wanted to be organised.

Grace kept a pristine, and ridiculously tidy and organised home. Everything had its place. If things didn't work or weren't needed, they were gone. If there was a mess anywhere, it was eradicated immediately. Her friends always teased her and said that you needed to hold on to your handbag in that house; if you put it down on a table for longer than five seconds, Grace would chuck it out.

Her phone was upstairs. James's was on the hall table. As she'd picked it up, she saw there was a thumbnail photo on the screen. It looked like a breast. A naked breast! She quickly clicked on the photo and made it full-size. Yes, a breast. A big one. Bigger than hers, certainly. With a really dark, erect nipple. It was just the one. Not a pair. Sender: *work*. The breast looked like it was

lying on a bed, on its side.

Grace had been so startled. What the hell was this and who'd sent it? *Work*? That was a bit vague. She swallowed and threw the phone back down on the table. Oh God. Was James cheating?

'What the hell's this?' she'd said, furious and unnerved, as James came out of the downstairs loo, fiddling with his tie. He'd looked at the phone and laughed.

'It's nothing,' he'd said. He said a friend had sent it to him, that it was just a photo doing the rounds: one of those photos blokes pass around 'for a laugh'. Hilarious, she'd thought. He did always think it all a laugh, that sort of thing – looking at girls on the street, gawping at *Baywatch*-type beauties on the telly. She'd catch him at it and he'd say, 'What?', all laughing innocence.

She accepted his explanation, but still, she wondered about it, after he'd slid his phone into his briefcase, kissed her fleetingly on the lips and left the house. He had a very important meeting that day: he was high up in oil. They'd met when he'd been further down in oil and Grace had worked in the millinery department at John Lewis in Oxford Street.

The photo wasn't especially porn-y. The breast wasn't edged in black lace or peeping out of red PVC. It didn't look sensational enough to be something shared over and over, however pervy and childish the men were. It looked like a real woman's breast, on a real woman's bed; it looked *personal*. But, she'd really wanted to believe him. She liked a quiet life. Her, James and Daniel. The three of them. She was desperate to believe him and for life to

carry on as normal.

So it had. For four days she'd bought it.

Until this morning. Way before her alarm was supposed to go off so she could wake Daniel for football, Grace had been woken by a random truck clattering down the road. She couldn't get back to sleep so lay there for a while. James was sound-o. Over his sleeping body she could see his phone on his bedside table. He'd been a bit funny with that phone since the breast episode – protective. He'd even started taking it into the bathroom with him.

She'd got up and, careful to avoid all the annoying creaks in their new-build floorboards, had tiptoed round to his side of the bed and picked it up. She knew his password, tapped it in and swiped. There was a message on the screen.

Bleach!

Bleach? How strange. What did that mean? And who would send that? His mother? Why? James didn't *clean* – and neither did his mother, actually. Was it a random message sent by mistake?

Then she saw it was from '*Work*'.

Her heart pounding, she clicked open the message thread. From the top of the screen, in their jaunty speech bubbles, the messages went like this:

Great night on Thursday!

Mmm. Great, great night! Thank u ☺

Did you get that gravy off your blouse?

Blouse? When was I wearing a blouse? ;-)

At dinner, sexy!

Oh yes I remember! Briefly. Yes, I managed to get it off.

With a lot of scrubbing? Friction?

Funny. Ha.

Then in the same grey reply bubbles:

No.

Bleach!

James stirred in his sleep, made one of his little noises. Grace carefully placed his phone back on the bedside table, walked into the en-suite bathroom and quietly threw up.

When she'd staggered back into the bedroom, her face red, her eyes bloodshot, her hands shaking and an awful taste in her mouth, she'd paced, left to right, right to left. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. This couldn't be happening. This *couldn't* be happening.

This was happening.

She'd sat on the bed, on James's feet.

'Ow!'

'Wake up.'

He harrumphed, turned over and pulled the duvet over his head.

'Wake *up*!'

'*What?!*'

'Wake up, NOW!' She was hissing; she didn't want to wake Daniel.

Reluctantly, James sat up. Grace shoved the phone and the messages in his face.

'You're having an affair.'

He actually snorted! It turned into a cough. He ran the back of his hand across his mouth.

'What! You've *well* got the wrong end of the stick! That's just a client I went out for dinner with. Just a random client.'

'A random client you call *sexy*?'

'For God's sake. That's just a turn of phrase! Business speak.'

'*Sexy* is not a turn of phrase!' she snarled, in a terrified whisper. 'Come on, James! I'm not a bloody idiot! I suppose rubbing and friction is some business jargon, too! Was it *an all-hands meeting*? Did you have an *ideas shower*? She said her blouse was off! You're shagging her!'

His head was lowered. He wouldn't look at her.

'That was *her* breast,' she said quietly.

'What breast?'

'You're unbelievable, James. The *breast* on your phone.'

'Oh, that.'

'Yes, that!'

He shrugged. 'A tit's a tit,' he said. His hair was all sticking up and he had a five o'clock shadow. She used to find it endearing. Now she just hated him.

It was typical of the sort of thing he always said, with that cheeky, handsome smile of his. *Tits are just tits; there's no harm in looking; more than a handful is a waste* (although considering

the size of *Work*'s, he didn't stand by this sentiment). She was appalled to realise that she actually used to find it funny when he spoke about women like that. Everyone did. He was a *good bloke* was James, a laugh. If he said things like that, people just shrugged and smiled. He could get away with it. He was a top man. The best.

Grace had had a lot of boyfriends; she was one of those girls who always had a boy waiting in the wings. They were all okay, nothing special. Not quite good enough for her. Then James had come along. He *was* special. Tall and dark blond and ridiculously handsome. Funny and brilliant and surrounded by adoring people – his mum, his brothers and sisters, his work colleagues. Everyone she met when she was with him told her what a great guy he was: she was surprised he didn't receive applause just for walking down the street. She had thought, yes, *at last*. James was special. James *deserved* her; at last there was somebody who did.

That was all gone now.

'A tit – God I hate that word – is *not* just a tit! I want you to admit it, James.' James was ruffling his sticky-up hair like Stan Laurel, but he still looked unruffled, unaffected. 'So I can kick you out. Have you been sleeping with someone: yes or no?'

'What?' He turned his baby blues directly towards hers. Those eyes with the eyelashes that were longer than hers. Those eyes she had stared into on their wedding day and seen *everything* in.

'Yes or no? Tell the truth. I'll respect you more.'

Another hair ruffle. Was he about to do the Stan Laurel whimper? Unlikely. He wasn't the whimpering kind. He tried to turn on his age-old charm. He smiled his slow, sexy smile and narrowed his eyes. 'If I tell you the truth would there be a chance I don't have to go?'

'Yes.'

He paused, then said, 'Okay, then it's true. I'm bang to rights. Sorry, Grace.' And his winning smile became a pleading smirk, one that always made her stomach flip and made her forgive him anything. Not now. She felt like she'd been punched in the gut. She would have collapsed onto the bed next to him if she could bear to be that close. She would never put her body that close to his again.

'I lied,' she said. 'You have to go. Now.'

She knew he would have loved to slam the back door as he left, but he chose not to let the entire neighbourhood know he was highly displeased. He was all about appearances, our James. And Grace had to keep up hers.

She'd had to swallow down the tears she wanted to cry her heart out with and take Daniel to Sunday football.

That evening, after the football kit had been washed and tumble-dried and Daniel had gone to bed with his iPad, Grace put love in the bin. Large cream, wooden letters that spelt L.O.V.E. to be exact. They used to sit on the mantelpiece in the living room, when love had meant something. Along with them she dumped a wooden plaque that said LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE and

a slate heart that had hung in the kitchen on the wall by the fridge that said MR and MRS. It left a lighter, heart-shaped space on the paintwork. She frowned; she'd have to touch that up.

The lid of her posh, soft-close bin settled back into place and she opened the fridge and took out a bottle of wine. She wasn't much of a drinker, but tonight she needed wine. She'd stopped off at the Co-op on the way home from football to get some while Daniel had waited in the car. A glimpse of herself in the reflection of the shop's chiller door had horrified her. It was a catastrophic hair day. Really bad. The wind on the football pitch had whipped her thick, blonde curls into an unruly bush. A cowlick bounced on her forehead. James liked her hair; he always said it was cute. Bastard. Maybe she'd straighten it now; maybe she'd iron out everything James had ever liked about it.

She stood by the fridge and poured some of the bottle into the glass ready and waiting on the worktop, and her eye caught her calendar. It had three columns, one for James, one for her, one for Daniel. She used three different coloured pens for each of them, perfect and precise.

She quite liked it when her friends called her 'Princess Grace'. They didn't mean it nastily; she wasn't *princess-y*: she didn't have pouting hissy fits and expect people to bring her cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off, on velvet cushions or anything, nor was she a J-Lo style demanding diva. But she did like kitten heels and pale pink nail varnish, cashmere cardis and pretty ballerina flats. She never overdid her make-up or wore

tarty clothes. She liked small, delicate stud earrings. She would be horrified at anything remotely Pat Butcher. She was a princess but not *princess-y*: if she had the perfect life she had worked hard to get it.

She believed in morals. She believed people got what they deserved. Her favourite book, as a child, was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and she knew *exactly* what Roald Dahl was saying. Good children were given chocolate factories; awful children got what was coming to them. Follow the path; toe the line.

She took a pair of scissors from the kitchen drawer, carefully cut off James's column from the calendar and threw it in the bin. The calendar was now lopsided so she took some Blu-Tack and glued the drooping corner to the back of the kitchen door. Then she took the green pen from her neat pen pot and threw that into the bin as well.

She was done. With James. With men. If James, the very best man of all, had turned out to be a traitor, a hurter, a destroyer, then there would be no more men for her. H.O.M.E as declared in big letters on the wall of her living room was now just about her and Daniel.

Men were a mistake. A big mistake.

And no man would ever hurt her again.

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