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Opening Extract from...

Talk to Me

Written by Jules Wake

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Talk to Me

Jules Wake



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Prologue

If anyone could still look masculine in baby pink, it was Daniel. The fleece dressing gown, several sizes too small, emphasised his broad shoulders and revealed a subtly muscled chest dusted with a tantalising 'V' of dark blond hair.

His sheepish smile revealed a chipped tooth, which never failed to disarm me.

'Morning.' The tentative word had a tinge of huskiness as he stepped out of the bathroom.

All my hormones leapt to attention, the miserable traitors.

'Hi,' I squeaked back, with all the allure of Minnie Mouse, blushing like an over-ripe tomato. Why couldn't I be cool, calm and sophisticated about this morning-after stuff? He'd stayed over. For the first time. Perfectly normal. People got off with each other at parties. Came back. Spent the night. No biggie.

Should I offer him breakfast? Coffee? No, he didn't drink coffee. 'Do you want a cup of tea, I was just …' I nodded towards the kitchen, keeping my eyes fixed on his, wishing I'd shaved my legs before last night's party instead of being a lazy trollop.

'Thanks, Olivia, that'd be great,' he said with far more enthusiasm than a bog-standard cup of tea warranted. I'd hoped he'd retire to the lounge while I made it, but no, he had to trail down the corridor behind me.

Doing my best not to look his way, I busied myself filling the kettle, getting teabags and mugs out, straightening tea towels and wiping counter tops that didn't need wiping. Even so, I could see that the belt on the dressing gown had loosened and even more of his chest was exposed. The inside of my mouth felt as though every drop of moisture had been sucked out.

Automatically I spooned two sugars into his tea and stirred, then stopped. The intimacy of the moment glowed between us as I handed him the mug. His fingers brushed mine, and at his touch

a spark of electricity raced up my arm and a punch of longing hit me. I ducked my head, looking at the ingrained dirt in the lino that hadn't yet been replaced. Friends. We were friends. I could do this. He didn't need to know.

'Thanks Olivia …' his voice trailed off, as if derailed by a sudden awareness of the situation. 'Maybe I ought to, er …' He looked over my shoulder back down the corridor toward my flatmate's bedroom '… see if Emily would like one.'

There he'd said it. Said her name. My current lodger, Emily. My stomach doubled over as if a demolition ball had slammed into it. It might as well have done.

Giggles were coming from the room next door, still audible above Steve Wright's bloody Sunday bloody Love Songs. Probably not the best choice that morning, especially not when he had to go and play the world's most weepy ballad, Nilsson's 'Without You'. What the hell had gone wrong last night? My hormones had been doing the lambada in great expectation for the last week. Flirtatious texts had been exchanged between Daniel and me on a daily basis. A slinky, killer top had been bought to go with my favourite black trousers, which clearly begged the question was I wearing any underwear? All to no sodding avail. I really had thought that after all those years of near misses, we were finally going to cross the Rubicon.

Nilsson was building to a pitch. 'I can't liiiiiive, if living is without yooooooou. Can't live, I can't give anymorororor.'

Utter nonsense. Of course you could live, you just got on with it and you certainly didn't waste time feeling sorry for yourself listening to pappy songs on the radio.

A fresh gale of laughter came through the thin wall and I could hear Daniel's gruffer tones. Then it went quiet. My overactive imagination saw Emily's face alight with laughter and then the laughter cut off by a kiss.

Stomping to the radio, I abruptly turned it to Radio 4 and got

long wave by mistake. Great, cricket. I raised my eyes heavenwards. Not helping here.

Couldn't someone be on my side? Couldn't I have a break today? Cricket had its own connotations. All related to Daniel.

Not many people realised it but he was my friend first – but the minute he met my dad and brother, Ben, with that strange instant sports exchange men have, they discovered a mutual adoration of cricket. Before I knew it Daniel had joined the village cricket club, White Waltham, and became an inescapable fixture in my life and almost part of the family as my cousin, Barney, and cousin-in-law to be, Piers, played for the same team too.

I had to get out of the flat. I might as well go and do what I'd been putting off for ages and see if I could find the perfect outfit to wear to my cousin Lucy's forthcoming wedding. A horrible thought suddenly struck me. Please God don't let Daniel invite Emily to be his partner at the wedding. No, they wouldn't last that long. Surely this was just a one-night fling thing. Wasn't it?

Chapter One

What was it with wedding speeches? Whatever happened to, 'I'm nervous as hell? Doesn't my bride look great? Thanks for coming.'

As if he could hear my thoughts, Daniel looked across and gave me one of his zillion-kilowatt smiles, followed by a discreet wink as the groom proceeded to launch into a speech worthy of the Pride of Britain awards.

My heart did its usual Olympic gold-winning, one and a half somersault dive sending a hot flush around my system. Six weeks. He'd been going out with Emily for six, sodding, interminable weeks now and I still had that stupid reaction around him.

I gave a tense, polite smile back. I could do this. Friends, we're friends. Always have been and – I had to accept it once and for all – always will be.

Oh Lord, think brick walls, drowning orphans, paella with big juicy prawns and bits of chorizo … but it was no good, as usual my pulse was off, tripping the light fandango and making me feel slightly light-headed. Then the come down, the realisation. I felt sick. Again.

As Emily's hand crept around Daniel's shoulders I focused back on Piers the groom and his rambling tale of finding true love in Neasden in three minutes, trying to ensure that my face said completely-enraptured-by-this-story. I'd heard it before from Lucy but if I so much as glanced at the couple across from me, I might spontaneously combust in flagrant jealousy.

And now I felt small-minded and petty. They were happy. I should be happy for them.

The room erupted with laughter. I'd missed the groom's punchline. He was raising his glass to make the toast and then we were all on our feet.

Indecent or not, I left the table abandoning my half-eaten

dessert and headed to the ladies before everyone else. All the mirror told me was that my eyes were over-bright but that I still looked relatively normal. Jealousy did funny things to you on the inside and I was convinced it might start showing any day now on the outside.

Unfortunately I couldn't skulk in the loos for the rest of the reception so, tucking my clutch bag under my arm, I headed in search of much-needed liquid refreshment. Of course I bumped straight into my mother who must have been staking out the bar waiting for me, as she knows there's only so long I can go without a glass of wine. She flicked a triumphant glance at my Auntie Brenda, who was looking vibrant in a fuchsia pink silk suit.

'Well, Olivia, isn't that amazing? Lucy met Piers on a speed-date.'

'Yes, Mum. I did know.' And just because the bride and groom had met at a speed-date didn't mean the rest of the world should try it. Quite frankly, pulling out my own toenails with a pair of rusty pliers had more appeal. Unfortunately Lucy's success had given my other entrepreneurial cousin Barney a bright idea.

'See, it can work.' Her eyes twinkled, encouraging and pleading at the same time.

'Yes and I'm sorry,' I said, not feeling sorry at all. 'It's really not my thing. Anyone want a drink?'

'You do know that Barney's speed-dates are for the discerning single,' Auntie Brenda interrupted, her bright red curls clashing with her outfit as they bobbed with enthusiastic maternal pride. 'He doesn't let just anyone in, you know. Invitation only.'

'I know, Auntie Bren. Sounds wonderful,' I lied. Wonderfully awful. 'I'm sure Barney's doing brilliantly, but—'

'Olivia! You need to get back out there,' butted in my sister Kate.

No. All I needed was a drink. And where had Kate popped up from? It wasn't as if Mum needed reinforcements. She and Auntie Bren were doing just fine on their own.

‘Honestly, Mum. She’s turned into a right bore. No sense of adventure.’

And going to live in a plush flat in Sydney’s Darling Harbour made her Ranulph Fiennes? A pioneering spirit she was not. Other people went off to Australia with a well-worn rucksack that had earned its Glastonbury stripes, not a set of matching luggage Victoria Beckham would envy.

‘That’s not kind, Kate,’ said Mum, determined as always to treat us fairly, before turning to me with that I’m-concerned-about-you expression on her face. It was becoming a permanent fixture.

So I’d lost a bit of weight I could ill afford to lose. It had absolutely nothing to do with unrequited love – it was just a bit tricky eating sometimes. I’d taken to hiding in my room with a good book whenever Daniel was around, which meant I skipped a few dinners. Thankfully he was staying over a lot less now and I could top up at breakfast time.

‘It would be nice, though, if you helped your cousin.’ Mum was off again, like a seagull with a chip on the seafront. ‘He’s just starting his business. We should support him.’

‘The royal “we”?’ I asked with a flippancy I didn’t feel. In fact I felt a bit like that poor soggy chip – about to be gobbled up. I knew exactly where this was heading. ‘So you and Dad will be coming too?’

‘Don’t be silly now, dear.’

‘What about you?’ I turned to Kate with a limp grin. If I was going down, she could come too.

‘Sorry, hon, but I’ll be off back to Oz soon. Wouldn’t want to get their hopes up and then disappoint … besides I’ve got Greg.’

Ah yes, the perfect surf-stud stockbroker she’d met within a week of arriving in Australia. From her description of him you could bet the two of them made a stunning couple on Bondi beach or wherever the beautiful people of Sydney go. Kate is gorgeous and reminds me of one those pedigree Weimaraner

dogs, all glossy and sleek. Me? I'm more like a Golden Retriever: long legs, brown eyes and lots of blonde curls – although not quite so dopey.

'Olivia,' chipped in Auntie Brenda. 'Pretty girl like you. Barney's desperately short of attractive women, you know.'

Blatant flattery wasn't going to get her anywhere, especially not where Barney, my least favourite cousin, was concerned.

'It's time you got back in the water,' said Kate, her voice gentling with concern.

'What?' I said, determined that the smile on my face didn't slip. Red herrings were called for and quick. 'I've been in the water plenty, I just don't like to get in too deep.' Short and sweet suited me fine, although recently those had begun to pall.

'Olivia! Don't be like that. You really need to get over him.'

I gave her a startled glance. Oh God! Did Kate know? I thought I'd done a rather fabulous job that day, keeping my feelings hidden; smiling a lot, laughing too loudly, avoiding looking in a certain direction. Look folks, I'm having a fantastic time. I'm not the least bit in love with Daniel. Not the least bit bothered that Emily's all over him. Not the least bit … imagining what it would be like for him to lean over and nibble that little bit between my neck and ear … no, no don't go there.

Kate's face was bright with curiosity. Oh bugger, her sibling antennae were better tuned than I'd suspected. Had she sussed me after all?

'Mike didn't deserve you …'

Phew. Wrong. Thank you, thank you. Mike was another mistake, a different one. You'd think I was piling them up. He was Jurassic period, definitely ancient history. She was digging in the dark but I wasn't about to set her straight.

And then squinting over her shoulder, I spotted Daniel with Emily.

'Why not try it?' Kate finished.

Her face, drawn in earnest lines, made me want to hug her. She

hadn't a clue.

Like a shopaholic with the credit cards cut up, but unable to stay away from the shops, my eyes sneaked another peep beyond Kate. Emily's hand was snaking up Daniel's back, her fingers toying with the blond hair at the nape of his neck.

You'd think seeing them together all the time would have given me some kind of immunity by now, like building resistance against germs, but no, every time I saw the two of them together, I caught the cold all over again.

How wet was I? I needed to do something. Take positive action and stop being so pathetic and spineless.

I turned so that Kate's head obscured the two of them. Alternative therapy. Medicine. That's what I needed. It'd taste bloody awful but it might do the trick.

'OK.' I'm not sure who was more surprised by my calm acquiescence – me, Mum or Kate? Auntie Bren just smiled serenely.

That was it. Traffic light green for go. Kate's face lit up with a gleeful smile. I smiled back, ignoring the spasm of panic that clutched at me. I'd only said I'd go. She was going back to Australia soon. I could always get out of it later. I was brilliant at coming up with ideas, a creative thinker allegedly, according to those silly management profiles they do at work. I could dream up a million excuses. Voluntary root canal work, knitting lessons, appendicitis – any one would do.

Unfortunately, I hadn't taken account of the cunning Machiavellian strand lodged within Kate's DNA.

Daniel felt Emily nestle in next to him. Soft, warm. Her cleavage on display, inviting. He put an arm round her and looked down at the white-blonde hair. No denying, she was gorgeous especially when she smiled sleepily up at him, her eyes hinting at sex. Sweet, uncomplicated and very feminine.

Looking around the room he saw the DJ methodically packing

up his kit with the kind of fierce concentration that said, 'I'm off duty and headed home'. It was that time of night. Even the waitresses had been roused from their earlier resigned inertia and were whipping glasses off tables with super-heroic speed.

Across the table, Olivia and her sister had their heads together, tawny blonde and glossy brunette. His eyes narrowed as he watched Olivia lift her half-full wine glass. Her heart wasn't in it. She'd been putting on a brave face all day. He felt for her but it went with the territory. This was what she'd signed up for. As she took another sip she looked up and caught him watching. A tight-lipped smile flashed across her face.

Served her right and then he immediately regretted the thought. Unkind and unfair. No one deserved to be unhappy but God he wanted to shake her. Getting herself into such a mess.

Women, he'd never understand them, although he'd always thought he got Olivia. Straight arrow. Sensible, down to earth. He winced. Made her sound boring and she wasn't. How long was it that they'd known each other now? Since the second term of the first year at university. She was a fixture in so many of his memories. The voice of reason on nights out when student antics threatened to go too far. Calming things down in curry houses when the laddish behaviour overstepped the mark. And yet she always achieved it with humour and authority, without coming across like a Head Girl.

Daniel could see where she got those traits. Her family all had that same natural ability to lead without appearing overbearing.

Shit, what would her parents say if they knew? With a marriage as solid as theirs, he felt sure they would be horrified if they heard their daughter was going out with a married man. He could barely believe it himself. He sighed and felt Emily wriggle as he tightened his arm around her.

He gave himself a mental shake. Nothing to do with him. She was a grown woman and had made her bed. Good job Emily had tipped him off that night at the party otherwise he'd have gone

ahead and made a right dick of himself. You thought you knew people. Just went to show you didn't always know them as well as you thought. Emily had sworn him to secrecy, making him promise not to tell Olivia he knew. Something he regretted. Part of him wanted to remind her how awful it had been when his mother had an affair and the other part, the one that wanted to shake the living daylights out of her, couldn't believe she could forget. It felt like a betrayal.

He shook his head trying to shake away the hollow feeling. Olivia had to really love this guy.

Daniel gritted his teeth at the memory of the near miss. Emily's hand fluttered along the length of his tense jaw and then down over his thigh. He had a good idea where it was headed. Simple and uncomplicated, that's what he wanted. He certainly didn't want to be sitting here dwelling on the past and wondering what the hell Olivia was playing at.

Emily's hand moved up, her fingers sliding into the waistband of his trousers. He looked down to see the suggestive tilt of her eyebrow and her rosebud mouth pursed in invitation. He bent his head to kiss her. Yes, Olivia had made her bed, it was nothing to do with him.

About the Author



Bred but not born in Yorkshire, Jules considers herself an honorary Yorkshire woman and despite living in the Chilterns still misses proper hills. She's wanted to be a writer forever and blames her grandmother taking her at a young age to the Brontë's parsonage in Haworth.

After reading English at the University of East Anglia, she found herself in the glamorous and deeply shallow world of PR, which she rather enjoyed, and spent a number of years honing her fiction writing skills on press releases.

Upon completing a creative writing course and finding no local writing group, she set up the Tring Writers' Circle. As a result it was incumbent upon her to set a good example and actually write, which was rather fortunate as with a genuine allergy to cleaning, she finds writing offers perfect displacement activity. *Talk to Me* is her debut novel.

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