

The Cinderella Moment

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Extract

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Prologue

‘I need another couple of weeks.’

There was a long silence at the far end of the phone line and then the man said slowly, in an even voice, ‘James, we both know you’ve had long enough. I want my money back, every last penny – or . . .’ He paused. The quiet that filled James Devlin’s office was darker, colder and more eloquent than any *or else*.

James Devlin nodded even though he knew that the caller couldn’t see him. ‘I just need a couple more weeks, that’s all,’ he said, making the effort to keep his voice steady, calm, confident.

‘A week,’ said the man. ‘And if you don’t pay up then –’

‘I know,’ said James Devlin, to the empty burring line. ‘And what I don’t know, I can guess.’

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‘So, would you like to tell us in your own words exactly why you’d like this job, Ms . . . Ms . . . ?’ asked the woman, fishing around for a name. She had a face like a bullmastiff and a moustache to match. Had she never heard of waxing? Moustache fluttering in the breeze, the woman peered down at the application form in front of her. An application form with a ghost of pasta sauce smeared across the top right-hand corner.

‘Mrs Hammond,’ offered Cass helpfully. Not that anyone was listening.

‘Ms Hammond?’ the woman read. She smiled in Cass’s general direction, although it didn’t look as if she was experiencing any particular joy at the hand life had dealt her. ‘So . . .’ steeping her fingers, making determined eye contact, ‘*why would* you like to work for Peck, Reckett and Gore?’

Good question. Cass hesitated. There had to be a reason – she’d filled in the application form,

posted it and everything. ‘Because . . .’ Cass took a deep breath, teetering, toes over the edge of the gaping crevasse that her mind had just become. ‘Because . . .’

The woman leaned forward a little more in a gesture presumably meant to encourage her, and as she did the draught from an open window sent a ripple through the forest of hair on her chin that Cass had been struggling to ignore.

Damn. Cass grimaced, fighting to concentrate on the speech she’d concocted on the way there, while trying to hold back a honking great giggle.

She glanced at the rest of the interview panel; God they were ugly. The opening bars of the giggle slipped out.

She mumbled an apology, swallowing the giggle down with a cough. What would happen if she told them the truth? *Well, you’ve seen my CV; I’m not exactly spoilt for choice, am I? I need the money, my life is shit, my credit card bill would bankroll a small multinational, my son needs new shoes, and the man who swore he would love me until hell froze over and the seas ran dry has just buggered off with the girl who did our ironing, so not only am I heartbroken I’m also horribly creased.*

The Moustache tipped her head to one side and, glancing at her watch, tried out another smile.

Maybe the truth wasn’t such a great idea after all.

‘Take your time,’ said one of the men on the

panel. The one who had spent most of the last fifteen minutes trying to get a really good look down the front of her blouse.

Cass painted on an expression that she hoped would suggest cheery enthusiasm, tempered with reliability and competence – a bit of a tall order with only the one face, but worth a shot.

Smile, relax . . . Taking a deep breath, Cass started to speak. It felt as if she was launching a heavy dinghy, pushing the answer away from the side: ‘Well, I’m looking for a position that offers me a combination of interesting personal challenges, job satisfaction and a decent career structure – I think Feckett, Reckett and Snore can give me . . .’

Feckett, Reckett and Snore? Had she really said that? Cass felt a great breathless flash of heat and panic. Maybe her brain had just pretended, to keep her on her toes. Maybe they hadn’t noticed. She looked anxiously from face to face. Across the table the panel were nodding, yawning and fiddling with their pens.

‘. . . all those. This position seems ideal in . . . in, in lots of ways.’

It wasn’t going well.

‘. . . I’m a good team player with a mature approach to problem solving and good people skills. This project looks exciting and challenging and . . . and . . .’

Cass took another look, trying to work out how well she was doing. Did it all sound a bit too gushy? A bit too Miss World? A bit too, *I want*

to help old people, learn to play the guitar and promote world peace? Maybe if she could master the pout, wiggle and flutter . . .

‘. . . a jolly good thing to be part of . . .’ Her voice faded. It had to be said that it wasn’t the greatest finish of all time. Did any of them really believe this bullshit?

Cass tried out another smile. Blouse-man raised his eyebrows a couple of times and then winked conspiratorially while sucking something troublesome out of his teeth. Cass held his gaze and the smile, wondering, when he’d said his role in the company’s new project was very much hands-on, how literally she ought to take that.

‘Well,’ said the Moustache briskly, glancing left and right at her two male compatriots. ‘Thank you. I think that just about covers everything. Thank you very much for coming in, Ms Er . . . er.’

‘Mrs Hammond.’

‘Miss Hammond. I think we’ve heard enough, don’t you, gentlemen?’

There was an outbreak of synchronised nodding and paper shuffling. Cass looked from face to face. What exactly did *heard enough* mean? Did it mean heard enough to know she was exactly what they were looking for, or heard enough to know that they wouldn’t employ her if she was the last creature walking upright on earth? Cass realised she still had her mouth open and snapped it tight shut.

‘It’s been a real pleasure meeting you,’ said the woman, without looking up.

Blouse-man got to his feet, signalling the interview was most definitely at an end.

‘Thank you,’ said Cass, scrabbling her things together and stuffing them into her handbag.

‘Thank you for coming today, Ms Hammond. We’ll be in touch over the next couple of days to let you know our decision,’ he said, easing himself out from behind the desk and guiding her to the door by the elbow. His handshake had all the charm of a bag of warm haddock. At the threshold Cass looked back into the shabby conference room.

The woman with the moustache was already thumbing through the next application and the third member of the panel – a tall balding man with a very pronounced Adam’s apple and a pigeon chest, who hadn’t said a single word during the entire interview – was busy picking his nose.

Cass nodded to the man by the door. ‘Thank you for your time. It’s been a pleasure to meet you,’ she lied.

He leered back at her, in a way Cass felt he hoped conveyed that lots of women felt exactly the same way.

Why would anyone ever want to commute?

The train journey home was hell. Worse than hell. It was hell with sweat and swaying and strange smells and people gibbering into mobile phones with earpieces so you couldn’t tell the difference between those who were just plain barking mad and life’s over-achievers, taking conference calls

from Japan on the way home. And then there was the prospect of Danny waiting on the station platform with Jake – their next-door neighbour, who'd picked him up from school – asking her when David was coming home.

'Will Daddy be home tonight, Mummy?'

No, actually, the man whose arse you think the sun shines out of is currently tucked up in bed with a girl half Mummy's age who is thinking about how to spend the rest of her gap year, adultery not being that well paid.

There was no place for the truth there either.

'No, sweetie, not tonight. How about we go home and cook some chicken dinosaurs and chips? And there's ice cream.' Not that he was so easily distracted.

'When will Daddy be home? Will he still be coming on the school trip?'

'I don't know, sweetheart.'

'To the museum? He said he would. He promised. He said me and him could sit together on the bus. Can we ring him when we get back?' And those big, big brown eyes, David's eyes, looking up at her. Cass closed hers and tried very hard not to lean against the man who was wearing after-shave so potent it cast a shadow.

The train had emptied once they got to Cambridge. Cass finally sat down; the seat opposite was strewn with newspapers and coffee cartons. There was the *Evening Standard* and bits of *The Times* and *Guardian* that people always

left behind, some sections folded back on themselves, some tented. Travel, sport and lifestyle, slim catalogues for expensive gadgets, stair lifts and garden awnings, a colourful clutter of them.

‘Hi, sorry to disturb you – is that seat taken?’

‘Sorry?’

‘The seat? Is anyone sitting there?’

Standing opposite her in the aisle was a tall man with floppy dark blond hair, a tanned weather-beaten face and a rather nice, white button-down oxford shirt, broad shoulders and – and? And Cass stopped the thought dead in its tracks. What on earth was she doing? How was it her fancying radar was still up and running when she was feeling so miserable? Even if it was on standby, this was most certainly not the moment to start eyeing up strange men. She was supposed to be feeling heartbroken, angry, hurt and hard done by – and she did.

‘No, you’re fine,’ Cass said casually. ‘Help yourself.’

‘Yours?’

‘Sorry?’

He indicated the great scatter of debris. ‘I wondered if they might be yours.’ He spoke slowly, as if there was some chance she was deaf or foreign.

Cass held up her novel without smiling. Did she really look like the kind of woman who bought three newspapers, two takeaway coffees, something hot and greasy from the sandwich stand, then gutted them all over the carriage? God, some people could be annoying. He mimed contrition.

Cass flipped over the page and let her mind fix on the print. Now, where was she? Ah yes . . . Like a knitter finding a lost stitch, she picked up the end of the sentence she'd just read.

Across the small table that divided the seats, the man tidied and then settled down before picking up a review section. He had very long legs. It took him a while to get comfortable.

He smiled at her. It was a smile meant to placate and invite.

Cass sighed. She knew from experience that however grumpy or miserable she felt on the inside it didn't show itself on the outside, nor was it conveyed in her tone of voice. It was a curse. Since she'd been a child she'd always had to tell people she was angry and then they would look amazed and say things like, 'Really? I'm surprised. You always strike me as so easy-going and laid-back about life. I can't image you being angry.' This when she was livid. It seemed that, amongst a very rich repertoire of facial expressions God in his infinite wisdom had given her, he had left looks-bloody-furious off the drop-down menu.

The smile warmed up. Cass stared determinedly at her book.

'It's really good to sit down. I've been standing since King's Cross.'

She nodded just a fraction; she'd been standing too, but decided not to mention it in case it encouraged him.

'Long day,' he said.

Cass wasn't altogether certain whether that was a statement or a question, so didn't say anything.

'Me too,' he said, as if she had. It was meant as an opening, she was meant to say something. He stretched. 'It's been a good day, though.'

Depends on where you're standing, Cass thought grimly as she stared at the page; she had read the same line three times.

'This is such a beautiful part of the country, people really have no idea.'

Was that in general or just about the beauty of East Anglia in summer? growled her brain. Cass closed her eyes; if she wasn't careful, she was going to turn into a curmudgeonly old woman who talked to herself and who nobody loved.

What do you mean, *turn into*? snapped her inner bitch.

'It is breathtaking, isn't it?' the man said, staring longingly out of the carriage window at the great rolling expanse of the fens. The fens, flat as a newly brushed billiard table, stretched from horizon to horizon as far as the eye could see. Picked out on the pitch-black soil were row after row of celery heads and lollo rosso lettuces in startling greens and scarlets, and above them a cloudless cerulean blue sky that seemed to go on forever. It did have a peculiar, unforgiving beauty.

Cass looked across at him; he was still smiling at her. Maybe it was time to admit defeat. It was obvious that he was impervious to indifference and people who couldn't look grumpy however

hard they tried, and whatever had happened to him that day, it was obviously an ice age away from Feckett, Reckett and Snore.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes. It is.’

‘Good-oh.’ He grinned as if her response was a personal triumph. ‘There,’ he said with delight. ‘That wasn’t so bad, now, was it?’

Cass laughed. ‘What?’

He opened up the rucksack at his feet. ‘Do you fancy a peach? I bought all sorts of fruit from this fantastic street market. Kind of celebration. I’ve had so much to sort out, lots of financial stuff – but I think I may have pulled it off. I think it’s going to be OK after all.’ He pulled out a selection of brown paper bags and set them down on the table. Some were damp at the corners where things inside had been squashed.

‘Sorry, I’m sure you don’t want to hear all my woes. Oh, how about cherries? Look at these, aren’t they wonderful? Please feel free. Help yourself; there’s loads.’

Cass stared at him over the growing pile of fruit. He had to be mad or, worse, he was a social worker or a psychiatric nurse; maybe he cared in the community and got people to make raffia lampshades and sing ‘Kumbya’ while he played the guitar. Whichever it was, he was obviously relentlessly cheerful.

He grinned, shaking a bag in her direction. ‘It’s all right, I’m not mad – it’s just that I’ve had a really good day.’

Cass found it was particularly unnerving when people read minds, or told you they weren't mad. He held out a peach. 'Try one of these,' he said. 'They're absolutely amazing. Really.' He waved it at her again.

Cass took a bite. He was right.

'Sadly, blah blah blah, high number of exceptionally well-qualified applicants. Blah blah, on this occasion you lucked out, chuck.' Cass screwed the paper into a ball and slam-dunked it into the swing bin before taking a long pull on her coffee. 'Another one bites the dust.'

'Try and resist humming the tune, would you,' said Jake. 'From Messrs Moustache, Lecher and Nosepicker, I presume?'

'Uhuh – the very same. I could have done that job standing on my head while juggling puppies and playing the banjo.'

'Maybe you should have mentioned that in your CV.'

'This is driving me nuts, Jake. I've got to find a job. I needed this job. I've sent out dozens of applications, I haven't made the short list on half of them. What the bloody hell is wrong with me?'

'Nothing. If it's any consolation – and I can see that it probably isn't – in this particular case it sounds as if it was already a done deal. They'd got someone in the frame but they're still obligated to advertise.'

'Bastards. What the hell am I going to do? I have

to get a job. Maybe I should put a card in the post office window. Cleaning – or how about dog walking?’ She sighed. It was just after nine in Cass’s kitchen, the sun was shining and Cass was dressed in her interview suit. Well, most of it, the long-line flattering-for-the-pear-shaped-woman-jacket that she had bought on the recommendation of someone in the *Mail on Sunday* was hanging on the back of the kitchen door, well away from all the stray buttered toast, cat and dog hair.

‘Maybe I’ve been setting my sights too high. Don’t pull that face. I’ve got to find a way to earn some money, Jake. I’ve got a house, a dog, a cat and kid to look after, and you can’t do that on nothing. Maybe I should take in washing?’

‘What you need to do is go back and talk to your solicitor. David should be helping.’

‘He did, remember? He helped himself to the hired help and buggered off.’

‘Cass, if I made you a suggestion, would you promise not to slap me or go off on one?’

‘Depends. If it’s sex, then the answer is still no, Jake. I’m still way out there on the rebound.’ She mimed a far distant horizon. ‘And I draw the line at pensioners.’

He mimed deep hurt and then said, ‘And if it’s not?’

She smiled. ‘Try me.’

‘Well, I’ve got this friend –’

‘Fitting me up with one of your peculiar mates is the same as having sex. You’re my neighbour,

we're good friends, we've been good friends for a long, long time, and I love you dearly, but I don't need you to procure men for me.'

'Wait, wait,' Jake said, holding up his hands in protest. 'I wasn't going to mention it, but please hear me out. I've got this friend who runs a little place in Brighton. Barney Roberts – you must have heard me talk about him. Anyway, he owns this great little gallery, deals in all sorts of art, there's some workshop space, a craft and gift shop. He's looking for someone to help him out for the summer.'

Cass glanced at her watch. 'Your point being . . . ?'

'Barney is an awkward old bastard. He's just had an operation on his back and needs a hand. Last time I spoke to him, he was like a bear with a boil on its arse.'

'Uhuh.' She took her jacket down off the hanger and slipped it on. 'Take my advice, Jake: don't ever go into advertising.'

'I know it's a long way away, but you can't keep going through all this. You need a change of scenery – a break. What do you think?'

'What do you mean, what do I think? I've just done a nine-year crash course in living with a miserable bastard. And, as you mentioned, it's in Brighton. Lest we forget, Jake, I live in Norfolk. And at the moment, as things are, I can barely afford to live here, let alone there. I read somewhere that it's more expensive to live in Brighton than London –'

‘Yes, but that isn’t the point. You need to change your luck, Cass, do something different. Underneath, Barney is basically a really good guy. OK, so maybe it’s a long way underneath at times – but he’s prepared to make nice and easy for the right person.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Well, for a start he’s got a great big basement flat he’s rolling around in, and he’s lonely.’

‘Oh, come off it, Jake – this sounds like procurement to me. I’m not a nurse. I’m sure Brighton is jam-packed full of people looking for jobs.’

‘Yes, but he doesn’t know any of them. He’s not good with people – he can be funny – and besides, I’ve already told him about you.’

‘Oh well, that was kind of you,’ Cass said grimly. ‘You told him about me? So I’m a charity case now, am I?’

‘No, but please think about it, Cass. I don’t want to see you go, but I do know that the offer is genuine. Barney is as straight as a die, and he really does need someone to help him out. I thought of you straight away.’

‘Because?’

Jake sighed. ‘Because you need to get away from here and stop mooning around. This way you could do some of your own stuff – paint, for God’s sake – and still work. You look awful, Cass. You’re not eating properly. When was the last time you picked up a pencil or a paint brush? Everyone is worried about you; you know that, don’t you? David is stupid.’

‘Everyone?’ Cass said thickly. The sound of David’s name still made something hurt deep inside her. How could she have been so blind? How was it she hadn’t seen it coming?

‘*Everyone*,’ Jake murmured, leaning forward to stroke the hair off her face. Cass looked up at him; Jake was sixty-five if he was a day. He’d come round the day she moved into the cottage with a chicken-and-bean casserole and a bottle of red wine and had been part of her life ever since.

Cass smiled up at him; they were probably as close as two unrelated adults could get, without romance getting in the way. She loved him and he loved her, which had sustained them even when they didn’t like each other very much. Like when Jake married Amanda (who had hated all his friends and especially Cass, although to be fair, eventually – so’s no one would feel left out – Amanda had ended up hating Jake most of all), or when Cass caught vegetarianism and with all the zealous enthusiasm of a true convert had referred to his superb Beef Wellington as an act of evil, barbaric bloody murder, during a dinner party for one of his best clients. The memory could still make her cringe on dark and stormy nights.

‘I’ll keep an eye on this place. It would do you good to get away from here for a while,’ he said gently.

Cass felt her eyes prickle with tears. ‘Don’t make me cry, I’ve got an interview to go to and

mascara doesn't grow on trees, you know. Took me bloody ages to do this eyeliner.' And then, after a moment's pause, 'I don't know what I'm going to do, Jake,' Cass whispered miserably. 'I loved David so much. Why did he leave me?'

'Because he's an amoeba,' Jake said, handing her a bit of kitchen roll. 'An amoeba and an idiot and a complete wanker. Anyway, all those people who love you thought you were far too nice and far too good to end up with a clown like David.'

'I married an amoeba?'

'You surely did.'

'My parents thought he was really lovely,' Cass sighed. 'I suppose that says it all, really. You'd think by the time we got to our age it would be easier, that we'd have it all sewn up and sorted.'

Jake nodded.

'And he hated you,' she sniffed.

'I know.'

'She's eighteen, Jake. *Eighteen*.'

He nodded. 'I know.'

'I thought I was doing her a favour. Some pocket money, baby-sitting, bit of housework. She told me she wanted to travel. It's so sordid.'

'I know.'

'David kept complaining about her, saying she wasn't doing things properly. Like he would know! How she annoyed him, how she was always getting in his way, and how we were paying her too much. I should have guessed, Jake. I should have known. That's what makes it so terrible. How come I

didn't see it coming? I love him, Jake – I've got the worst taste in men.'

'Your taste in men is legendary, Cass. Now just shut up and go, will you, or you're going to miss the train. When you get back, we could take Danny and the dog down to the beach, if you like, and then I'll cook supper.'

'You're such a nice man, Jake.'

'With instincts like that, it's no wonder you always pick total bastards.'

'And wankers,' said Cass, picking up her handbag. 'Let's not forget the wankers. You're OK to pick Danny up from school today?'

'I've already said yes, and I've laid in a stock of food shaped like extinct amphibians. Who is it today?'

Cass picked up a sheaf of papers in a manila folder from the kitchen table and read the letter-head on the inside page. 'Dumb, Bum and Stumpy, looking for someone to work in Human Resources.'

'You can do that?'

'I can try.'

'Cass, honey, this is ridiculous – you're an artist.'

'And a woman with a mortgage.' Cass looked at him and sighed. 'David said I needed to grow up and get a proper job. Now, hand me my briefcase.'

He picked it up and looked at it thoughtfully. 'Where the hell did you get that from?'

Cass licked a finger and scrubbed at a smear

of blue poster paint on the handle. 'The dressing-up box at Danny's school; they said I could borrow it till the end of term.'

Jake looked heavenwards. 'You don't have to do this.'

'I do. David told me that I see the world through rose-tinted spectacles and that my relentless optimism got him down. He said that I'd never be able to manage on my own in the real world without him. He said I was far too naïve.'

'Come off it, Cass. He was being cruel, that's all. You've got nothing to prove.'

'I have, Jake. I have to show him that I don't need him, that Danny and I can manage without him, thank you very much. And I need to do better than just manage – I need to do well. The worst thing I can do to David is be happy, solvent and successful.'

'Yes, but not like this. Why don't you at least think about Brighton?'

Cass nodded, even though she had no plans to give Brighton a second thought.

She checked herself in the mirror. 'What do you think? Will I do?' she asked, her attention on her reflection, doing a little half-turn so that she could check her back.

Jake looked her up and down. 'Just the job. You put me in mind of a young Margaret Thatcher.'

Cass growled at him and headed for the front door.

* * *