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When I Met You

Written by Jemma Forte

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When I Met You

JEMMA FORTE

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Also by

JEMMA FORTE

IF YOU'RE NOT THE ONE

ME AND MISS M

FROM LONDON WITH LOVE

This one's for you, Dad.

PROLOGUE

I sit up, wondering what time it is, what day it is even. My bedroom's completely dark and the light from the moon is the only thing enabling me to see anything at all. Rubbing my face, I switch on the bedside light and pick up my watch. Three minutes past nine. I only meant to shut my eyes but must have been asleep for ages.

Blurry with sleep, I sit staring blankly into space, wondering vaguely why the rest of the house is so silent until, overcome by both thirst and curiosity, I haul myself up and pad out onto the dark landing to investigate.

Downstairs, there's a note on the dining table from Mum. It reads '*Me and Mar gone to Sheena and Dave's anniversary dins. On mobile. Quiche in fridge. Pete at Josh's for night.*'

Of course, I'd forgotten they were going there. I feel cold and a bit shivery, so as soon as I've glugged back a pint of water, I make a cup of tea, grab some biscuits from mum's stash and head back to my room where I slump onto the bed. The same single bed I slept on throughout my teenage years, which serves as a constant reminder

that at the age of thirty-one I haven't come very far. Still, I've wasted enough hours lamenting my embarrassing woman-child status.

It occurs to me then that I should be making the most of the empty house by getting some violin practise in. The one thing I have progressed in over the years. When Mum's around, I only ever get away with playing for about half an hour before the complaints start – apparently classical music makes her feel like a patient in a mental institution – so it'll be nice not to have any interruptions.

I place the sheet music for Bach's solo sonata No. 1 in G minor on my stand. The music's hauntingly beautiful and incredibly hard to do justice to but, once I've practised my scales, arpeggios and a few studies, I feel ready to tackle it. It's not long before I'm completely lost in the music, oblivious to the storm that is brewing outside. The window is ajar, but the sound of the gale howling only adds to the majesty of the sonata. Then, just as I'm in the middle of an exceedingly challenging section, there's a huge rumble of thunder, the skies open and rain starts to pelt down, at which point I place my violin on the bed. I'm just about to pull the window shut when I hear a crashing sound coming from somewhere in our back garden. The security lights at the rear of the house instantly flick on. I jump out of my skin.

Heart thumping, I peer out, trying to see what made the noise. The lights give me a clear view of the patio below, which is undoubtedly the most furnished patio in Essex. You can hardly move on it for swing chairs, heat-

ers, loungers and the like. My stepdad, Martin, makes his living selling garden furniture and equipment. He's bizarrely passionate about it. I swear whenever he visits B&Q or Homebase to check out the competition he goes a bit quivery with anticipation. But I digress.

It doesn't take long to work out what caused the noise. On the right-hand side of the patio, a dustbin lid is lying on the ground and as the wind picks up again, it rolls around, its metal making a terrible din. I guess it must have blown off the bin. Either that or a fox must have disturbed it or something. I yank the window shut. The noise of the storm is instantly muffled but I can still hear the lid clattering around at which point I realise I have no choice but to go outside and put it back on.

Going through the house I switch on every single light. The house is carpeted throughout so as I pad down the stairs into our hallway I don't make a sound. Downstairs it smells in a synthetic, sickly way, of peach, due to the air freshener mum keeps constantly plugged in.

I pass the front room we never use and the downstairs loo, before carrying on straight ahead into our main living area. Usually I don't mind being on my own at night, but the storm's making me twitchy. I chastise myself for being silly.

What am I worried about? I'm not even sure. All I do know is that I'm planning on replacing the lid as quickly as is humanly possible so that I can race inside, upstairs and back to the non-creepy confines of my room.

The keys to the sliding doors, which lead out to the garden, are kept on a hook next to a hatch in the wall that divides the living room and kitchen. Once I've got them I unlock the doors and gingerly slide them open a touch. The wind is fierce. Rain immediately blows into my face but, taking the plunge, I step out into the elements at which point it's quite a struggle to slide the doors shut again. By now the rain's coming down in a torrent so, no matter how quick I plan on being, getting totally soaked is inevitable. Glad of security-conscious Martin's lights, I pick my way across the width of the patio. The wind is almost strong enough to knock me over but with a lot of effort I make it to the offending bin lid, only just as, while I'm bending down to pick it up, an extra strong gust blows it yet further out of my reach. At that point I stop and, with my heart in my mouth, I spin around as a sixth sense heightens the feeling I've been trying to ignore. That I'm not alone.

I must be mistaken though. Fear's playing tricks with my mind because there doesn't appear to be anyone there. Although, having said that, if someone were lurking in the shadows, I probably wouldn't be able to see them from here anyway. Not if they didn't want me to. They could easily hide themselves away down the alley that spans the side of our house.

'Who's there?' I yell, feebly and somewhat pointlessly. My voice was never going to carry very far against the noise of the storm. By now I'm soaked to the skin and shivering with cold. I pull myself together. My imagination

is running away with me. I just need to get the blasted lid back on the bin, get back inside and into a hot shower. Heart thumping, I make a dash down the lawn for the lid again. Got it. I grab it, then turn and run towards the passage that runs down the side of the house where the bins are kept. Rain pummels my head and face and, gasping for breath, I slam the lid on, making sure it's secure. As soon as it is, with adrenaline coursing round my body, I make for the house. Turns out, however, I wasn't being paranoid. All my instincts had kicked in for good reason, for just as I'm about to reach for the door, I hear heavy, terrifying footsteps behind me. At this point, I scream so loudly I almost don't recognise my own voice. It's a guttural sound, a scream of survival, because I honestly believe I'm about to be killed, raped, or both. Just as my fingertips make contact with the door handle, a strong arm makes a grab for me and in that instance I don't think I'll ever be able to describe the depth of pure terror that I feel.

I'm terrified, rendered totally incapable of rational thought. My body shuts down completely. My legs go to jelly. I want to scream again but as I try to, a black-gloved hand clamps my mouth shut. The man's gripping on to me so tightly now I can feel his breath on my face. Then, the most eerie thing of all happens. In a rasping, deep, terrifying voice, my assailant says, right into my ear, 'Don't scream, Marianne.'

Well, that does it. The fact he knows my name makes the whole experience beyond sinister and I honestly think

I'm going to pass out on the spot. This person has singled me out. He must have been watching the house. He knows everyone's out and now he's going to do something to me. I'm on the brink of collapse when the attacker says something else I'm not expecting. Though at first I think it's some kind of sick joke.

'Don't be scared. It's me. It's your dad.'

And in that second my whole life implodes.

CHAPTER ONE

ONE DAY EARLIER

'So, are we decided then? Warm Caramel for the overall colour with a few Heavenly Honey highlights taken through the front,' I said, flicking shut the colour chart.

'Fine,' agreed Mrs Jenkins.

It was Saturday morning and I was at work at Roberto's hairdressers on Chigwell High Road, certain then that this was precisely the kind of dull day that would pass without event or revelation, only to end up wiped from my memory. It often bothers me how an entire twenty-four hours can pass and all I will have done is function, chat on the phone, sit on the bus, watch TV, breathe, get through. It scares me. Too many instantly forgettable days and before you know it, life will have passed by completely. I think this is why I love travelling. When I'm away from home, in some exotic place, the quota of memorable days definitely increases.

After my A levels, much to the disappointment of my music teacher, Mrs Demetrius, who was desperate for me to apply to music college, I took a course in hairdressing,

got a job at Roberto's, saved up, then went backpacking round the world instead. It's not that I hadn't wanted to play music professionally, I can think of nothing better, but I'm not deluded. You don't see many adverts for violin players down the job centre, do you? College would have been very expensive, and besides, I'd always wanted to see places other than Essex. Earth is a big planet after all.

I'm thirty-one now though and it has occurred to me that unless I want to become a middle-aged crusty with friends dotted around the globe, but barely any on her own doorstep, who still lives with her parents, I probably need to start figuring out what to do with my life. Though in truth I'm not that bothered. Most of the time I'm happy existing in my perpetual cycle of working, saving and travelling. It's other people who assume I should be panicking about not being engaged/pregnant/a homeowner. Not me.

I admit, living with Mum and Martin has its moments. In an ideal world of course I'd love my own space. But on my wage I can't see it happening. I've looked into getting a mortgage a few times – every time mum and I have a row – but because I'm on my own I'd need a gargantuan deposit, so it's pointless. With rents so extortionate too, there's just never a good enough reason to leave home. I pay mum far less each month to live in her nice house than I would to live in a depressingly small flat, plus this way I can afford to save up to go away. My last trip was to Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. Next on the list is South America. It really helps that Roberto always has

me back in between, knowing he's getting a reliable cutter who hardly ever asks for a pay rise.

As soon as Mrs Jenkins was settled at the sink I headed to the tiny staff room at the back of the salon. On the way, I grinned at my reflection in one of the many mirrors. I was still getting used to my new, short, choppy bob, which is dyed a rich, burgundy plum colour. I like it. I think it suits me. In the staff room – which is where all the good magazines disappear to in case you're wondering – I flicked on the kettle and, while it boiled, went to fetch my mobile from my jacket pocket. I wished I hadn't when it rang immediately and stupidly I answered without checking caller ID first, only to find my sister, Hayley, on the other end.

Hayley loves me deep down – I mean really deep down. Imagine an oil rig drilling into the sea bed and you get the picture – but she has a strange way of showing it.

'So, make sure you're not late tomorrow. Gary's parents are coming at three and I don't want you turning up after they've got there. I need you to make an effort Marianne,' she'd managed to say before the phone had even reached my ear. 'And wear your black trousers or something that flatters you. Wendy's very classy so I don't want to be shown up like the time you wore those awful cut-offs and don't…'

I held the phone away from my ear and zoned out, as I often do when my sister's mid-way through one of her rants. Life's too short, as was my break, so rather than commit an offence punishable by death, that is to say,

rather than interrupt Hayley, I put the phone on the side so she could drone on to herself while I made a cup of tea.

Just then Jason poked his head round the door. 'Got a minute Marianne?'

Jason's dad owns Roberto's. Jason's dad *is* Roberto and the salon is very much a family-run business. His mum sits on reception and his two older brothers are cutters, as is their cousin Mark. Jase has become a good friend since I started working here. He's reliable, sweet and you've got to love him because unlike the rest of the male population he finds Hayley as irritating as I do.

I stirred my tea and pointed with my other hand towards my discarded phone from which a horribly familiar nagging sound was still being omitted.

'Hayley?' he mouthed.

I nodded wearily, before reluctantly picking up again. She was still going.

'…and don't refer to Mum as anything except Alison. Alli sounds so naff for a woman her age and Gary's parents hate nicknames.'

That at least *was* useful to know. I made a mental note never to mention my nicknames for her in-laws in their presence. Hyacinth Bucket for Wendy – she's a massive snob – and Cyclops for Derek – on account of his roving eye. 'Anything else?' I interjected 'Because I really should be getting back to work.'

Hayley tutted and put the phone down. Her own special way of signing off on phone calls, designed to make you

wonder, just for a second, if she might have been involved in a car crash, a mugging, or been kidnapped.

'How does Gary cope?' asked Jason, shaking his head, though deep down he knew the answer to that one. Hayley's stunning and, when she was at school, boys were always trying to come round ours for tea, just so they could catch a glimpse of her. Dwayne Richardson even told me once that Hayley was number one in year ten's 'wank bank'. You can imagine how charmed I was by that piece of information.

Hayley's thirty-three now and her rather glacial brand of beauty turns heads more than ever. Gary first clapped eyes on her six years ago, giving out pamphlets at a car show in Earls Court, wearing a pair of hot-pants and a small halter-neck top – Mum had told everyone she had a modelling gig. The minute he saw her he was smitten and when Hayley found out he owned his own car dealership in Ilford, so was she.

'Coming out tonight Marianne?' asked Jason casually.

'Saving.' My reply was automatic.

'You don't say,' he said with a hint of frustration. 'Look, it's Lindsey's birthday, everyone's coming and you haven't been out in ages. Besides, you should let your hair down before tomorrow.'

Gary's family were coming round en masse tomorrow, hence Hayley's nagging. To say I was dreading it would be an understatement.

'And by the way, Mrs Jenkins is ready, waiting for her transformation,' he winked.

'Thanks,' I said, slugging back the last of my tea. 'And I *might* come.'

Jason rewarded me with a big grin.

'I do have a job to get through tomorrow morning, but I suppose you could be right. A hangover might be the only way to cope with Hayley after that.'

'Yes!' he said, punching the air. 'Miss Haversham is actually coming out. I can't believe it. We'll have to brush the cobwebs off you first.'