A Hopeless Romantic

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Laura Foster was a hopeless romantic. Her best friend Jo said it was her greatest flaw, and at the same time her most endearing trait, because it was the thing that most frequently got her into trouble, and yet falling in love was like a drug to her. Having a crush, daydreaming about someone, feeling her heart race faster when she saw a certain man walk towards her – she thrived on all of it, and was disastrously, helplessly, hopelessly incapable of seeing when it was wrong. Everyone has a blind spot. With Laura, it was as if she had a blind heart.

Anyone with a less romantic upbringing would be hard to find. She wasn't a runaway nun, or the daughter of an Italian count, or a mysterious orphan. She was the daughter of George and Angela Foster, of Harrow, in the suburbs of London. She had one younger brother, Simon, who was perfectly normal, not a secret duke, nor a spy, nor a soldier. George was a computer engineer, and Angela was a part-time translator. As Jo once said to her, about a year after they met at university, 'Laura, why do you go around pretending to be Julie Andrews, when you're actually Hyacinth Bucket?'

But Laura never stopped reality getting in the way of fantasy. By the time she was eighteen she had fallen for: a runny-nosed, milk-bottle-glasses-wearing primary-school outcast called Kevin

(in her mind Indiana Jones, with specs); her oboe teacher Mr Wallace, a thin, spotty youth, over whom she developed a raging obsession and calluses on her oboe-playing fingers, so ferociously did she practise (she would stand outside his flat in Camden in the hope she might see him; she wore a locket which contained a bus ticket he'd dropped around her neck); and about fifteen different boys at the boys' school around the corner from hers in Harrow.

When she went to university, the scope was even greater, the potential for romance limitless. She wasn't interested in a random pull at a club. No, Laura wanted someone to stand underneath her window and recite poetry to her. She was almost always disappointed. There was Gideon, the budding theatre director who hadn't quite come out of the closet. Juan, the Colombian student who spoke no English. Or the rowing captain who was much more obsessed with the tracking machine at the gym than her. Her dentist, who charged her far too much and then made her pay for dinner. And the lecturer in her humanities seminar who she never spoke to, and who didn't know her name, who she wasted two terms staring at in a heartfelt manner.

For all of these Laura followed the same pattern. She went off her food; she mooned around; she was acutely conscious of where they were in any room, thought she saw them around every corner – was that the back of his curly head going into the newsagent's? She became a big, dumb idiot whenever any of them spoke to her, so fairly often they walked away, bemused that this nice girl with dark blonde hair, a sweet smile and a dirty laugh who seemed to like them was suddenly behaving like a nun in a shopping centre, eyes downcast, mute. Or they'd ask her out – and then Laura, for her part, usually came tumbling down to earth with a bang when she realised they weren't perfect, weren't this demigod she'd turned them into in her mind. It wasn't that she was particularly picky – she was just a really *bad* picker.

She believed in The One. And every man she met, for the

first five minutes, two weeks, four months, had the potential in her eyes to be The One – until she reluctantly realised they were gay (Gideon from the Drama Society), psychopathic (Adam, her boyfriend for several months, who eventually jacked in his MA on the Romantic Poets and joined the SAS to become a killing machine), against the law (Juan, the illegal immigrant from Colombia), or Josh (her most recent boyfriend, whom she'd met at a volunteer reading programme seminar at work, decided was The One after five minutes, dated for over a year, before realising, really, all they had in common was a love of local council literacy initiatives).

It's fine for girls to grow up believing in something like The One, but the generally received wisdom by the time Laura was out of university, as she moved into her mid-twenties, as her friends started to settle down, was that he didn't really exist – well, he did, but with variations. Not for Laura. She was going to wait till she found him. To her other best friend Paddy's complaints that he was sick of sharing their flat with a lovesick teenager all the time, as well as a succession of totally disparate, odd men, Laura said firmly that he was being mean and judgemental. James Patrick – Paddy to his friends – was a dating disaster, what would he know? To Jo's pragmatic suggestions that she should join a dating agency, or simply ask out that bloke over there, Laura said no. It would happen the way she wanted it to happen, she would say. You couldn't force it. And that would be it, until five minutes later when a waiter in a restaurant would smile at her, and Laura would gaze happily up at him, imagining herself and him moving back to Italy, opening a small café in a market square, having lots of beautiful babies called Francesca and Giacomo. Jo could only shake her head at this, as Laura laughed with her, aware of how hopeless she was compared to her level-headed, realistic best friend.

Until one evening, about eighteen months ago, Jo came round to supper at Paddy and Laura's flat. She was very quiet; Laura often worried Jo worked too hard. As Laura was attempting

to digest a mouthful of chickpeas that Paddy had marvellously undercooked, and as she was trying not to choke on them, Jo wiped her mouth with a piece of paper towel and looked up.

'Um . . . Hey.'

Laura looked at her suspiciously. Jo's eyes were sparkling, her heart-shaped little face was flushed, and she leant across the table and said,

'I've met someone.'

'Where?' Paddy had asked stupidly. But Laura understood what that statement meant, of course she did, and she said,

'Who is he?'

'He's called Chris,' Jo replied, and she smiled, rather girlishly, which was even more unusual for her. 'I met him at work.' Jo was a conveyancing solicitor. 'He was buying a house. He yelled at me.'

And then – and this was when Laura realised it was serious – Jo twisted a tendril of her hair and put it in her mouth. Since this was a breach of social behaviour in Jo's eyes tantamount to not sending a thank-you card after a dinner party, Laura put her hand out across the table and said,

'Wow! How exciting.'

'I know,' said Jo, unable to stop herself smiling. 'I know!'

Laura knew, as she looked at Jo, she just knew, she didn't know why. Here was someone in love, who had found The One, and that was all there was to it.

Chris and Jo moved into the house she'd helped him buy after six months; four months after that, he proposed. They started planning a December wedding, a couple of weeks before Christmas, in a London hotel. Jo eschewed grown-up bridesmaids, saying they were deeply, humiliatingly naff, much to Laura's disappointment – she was rather looking forward to donning a nice dress and sharing with her best friend on this, the happiest day of her life. Instead, she was going to be best woman, and Paddy was an usher.

It seemed as if Jo and Chris had been together forever, and Laura could barely remember when he hadn't been on the scene. He slotted right in, with his North London pub ways, his personality so laidback and friendly, compared to Jo's sometimes controlled outlook on life. He had friends who lived nearby – some lovely friends. They were all a gang now, him and Jo, his friends, Paddy and Laura, sometimes Laura's brother Simon, when he wasn't off somewhere being worthy and making girls swoon (where Laura was always falling in love, Simon was usually falling into bed with a complete stranger, usually by dint of lulling them into a false sense of security by telling them he worked for a charity). And there was Hilary too, also from university and christened Scary Hilary – because she was – and her brother Hamish, their other friends from work or university, and so on. And so Laura's easy, uncomplicated life went on its way. She had a brief, intense affair with a playwright she thought was very possibly the new John Osborne, until Paddy pointed out he was, in fact, just a prat who liked shouting a lot. Paddy grew a moustache for the autumn. Laura got a pay rise at work. They bought a Playstation to celebrate – games for him, karaoke for her. Yes, everything was well within its usual frame, except Laura began to feel, more and more, as she looked at Jo and Chris so in love, and as she looked at the landscape of her own dull life, that she was taking the path of least resistance, that her world was small and pathetic compared to Jo's. That she was missing out on what she most wanted.

Under these circumstances, it's hardly surprising that the next time Laura fell, she fell badly. Because one day, quite without meaning to, she woke up, got dressed and went to work, and everything was normal, and by the next day she had fallen in love again. But this time she knew it was for real. And that's when everything started to go wrong.

CHAPTER TWO

Chris the groom coughed and stood up, looking rather nervous. Laura smiled at him, pretending to listen. She should have been paying attention but she was daydreaming, in a reverie of her own. She was thinking about her grandmother, Mary Fielding. Laura's grandmother was the person Laura loved most in the world (apart from whoever it was she was in love with at that moment), even more so perhaps than her parents, than her brother.

Mary was a widow. She had lost her husband, Guy, eight years before, and she lived on her own in a small but perfectly formed flat in Marylebone. There were various reasons why Laura idolised Mary, wanted to be just like her, found her much more seductive than her own parents. Mary was stylish – even at eighty-four she was always the best-dressed person in a room. Mary was funny – her face lit up when she was telling a joke, and she could make anyone roar with laughter, young or old. But the main reason Laura adored her grandmother was that Mary had found true love. Her husband, Guy, was the love of her life, to an extent Laura had never seen with anyone else. They had met when each was widowed, in Cairo after the Second World War. Mary already had a daughter, Angela, Laura's mother. Guy also had a daughter, Annabel, whom Laura and Simon called aunt, even though she wasn't really related to them.

Because of her mother's natural reserve, it was Mary whom Laura told about her love life, her latest disasters, the person she was currently in love with. Because she lived in central London, and so not that far from Laura's work, it was Mary whom Laura called in to see, to talk to, to listen to. And it was Mary that Laura learnt from, when it came to true love, in large part. She did not learn it from her own unemotional parents. No, she learnt that true love was epic stuff.

One of Laura's favourite stories was how Mary and Guy had realised they were in love on a trip out to the pyramids to see the sun rise. It had been pitch black as they rode out, crammed in a Jeep with the other members of their club in Cairo. And as the sun rose, Guy had turned to Mary, and said, 'You know I can't live without you, don't you?' And Mary had replied, 'I know.'

And that was that. They were married six months later.

George and Angela, by contrast, had met at a choral society function off the Tottenham Court Road, when they were both at university. Somehow, Laura felt this wasn't quite the same.

'You are the love of my life,' she heard a voice say. 'The woman I want to grow old with. I love you.'

He was staring at her intensely, his eyes boring into hers. Laura raised her hand to his chest, and said, breathlessly, 'I love you too.'

Beyond them the sun was rising, flooding the vast desert landscape with pink and orange colour. Sand whipped in her face, the silk of her headscarf caught in the breeze. She could feel the cold smoothness of the material of his dinner jacket against her skin, as he caught her and pulled her towards him.

'Tell me again,' Laura whispered in his ear. 'Tell me again that you love me.'

And then, suddenly, a microphone crackled loudly, jerking Laura back to reality, as someone cleared their throat and said,

'To my beautiful wife, Jo!'

‘Aah,’ the wedding guests murmured in approval, as Laura came back down to earth with a bump. There was some sniffing, especially from Jo’s mother up on the top table, as Chris raised a glass to his new bride, kissed her, and then sat down to a welter of applause and chair-shuffling.

‘Aah,’ Laura whispered to herself, leaving her daydream behind with a sigh. She looked at Jo, her best friend, so beautiful and happy-looking, and found tears were brimming in her eyes. She turned to her flatmate Paddy, sitting next to her, and sniffed loudly.

‘Look at her,’ she said. ‘Can you believe it?’

‘No,’ said Paddy, raising an eye at Chris’s cousin Mia. Paddy had recently begun to teach himself how to raise one eyebrow, in a ‘come to me, pretty laydee’ way. This involved several hours of grimacing into Laura’s hand-mirror in the sitting room of their flat, whilst Laura was trying to watch TV. She got very irritated with her flatmate when he did this, and was frequently telling him that being able to raise one eyebrow was not the key to scoring big with the ladies. Wearing matching socks was. As was having a tidy room. And not acting like a crazy stalker when some girl said no after you asked her out. These were the things that Laura frequently told Paddy he should be concentrating on, and yet, much to her deep chagrin, he ignored her every time. For Paddy’s retort would always be that what Laura knew about dating was worthless.

What a perfect, happy day, Laura thought, as she gazed around the room, clapping now the speeches were over. She was gripping her glass, searching for someone. Suddenly her eye fell on Jo and she watched her for a moment, truly radiant, happy and serene in an antique lace silk dress, her hand resting lightly on her new husband’s as they sat at the top table. Laura couldn’t help but feel a tiny pang of something sad. It wasn’t just any bride sitting there in the white dress, with the flowers and the black suits around her. It was Jo – Jo whom she had danced with all night in various Greek nightclubs, with whom

she had spent hours in Topshop changing rooms, whom she had stayed up all night with whilst she sobbed her heart out after her last boyfriend Vic dumped her. It was her best friend, and it was weird.

She blinked and caught Jo's eye, suddenly overcome with emotion. Jo smiled at her, winked, and mouthed something. Laura couldn't tell what it was, but by the jerking of her head towards the best man, Chris's newly single brother Jason, Laura thought she could guess what Jo was on about. Laura followed her gaze, shaking herself out of her mood. Jason was nice, yes. Definitely. But he wasn't . . . dammit, where *was* he?

'Who are you looking for?' said Paddy suspiciously, as Laura cast her eyes around the room.

'Me?'

'Yes, you. Who is it? You keep looking round like you're expecting to see someone.'

'No one,' said Laura, rather huffily. 'Just looking, that's all.'

'There's Dan,' said Paddy.

'Who?' asked Laura.

'Dan. Dan Floyd. He's raising his glass. He's talking to Chris.'

'Right,' said Laura calmly. 'Ah, there's Hilary. And her mum. I should go and say –'

'Laura!' said Jo, coming up behind her, dragging someone by the hand. 'Don't go! Here's Jason! Jason, you remember Laura?'

'Hey. Of course,' said Jason, who was an elongated, blonder version of Chris. 'Hi, Laura.'

'Er,' said Laura. 'Hi, Jason, how are you?'

There is nothing more likely to induce embarrassment in a single girl than the obvious set-up at the wedding in front of friends. Laura smiled at Jason, and once more cast a fleeting glance around the room. Where was he?

'Good, thanks, good,' said Jason, as Jo nudged Paddy and grinned, much to Laura's annoyance.

‘See the match on Wednesday?’ Paddy asked Jason, in an attempt at blokeish comradeship.

‘What match?’ said Jason.

‘Oh . . .’ Paddy said vaguely. ‘You know. The match. The big game.’

‘What, mate?’ Jason repeated, scratching his head.

‘Anyway, great to see you, mate,’ said Paddy, changing tack and banging Jason hard on the shoulder, so that he nearly doubled up. ‘So, Laura was just saying – Laura? Help me out here.’

Jason gazed at Paddy, perplexed. Laura looked wildly around her, searching for an escape, and then someone over Jason’s shoulder caught her eye.

‘Jason split up from Cath two months ago,’ Jo hissed in her ear, in a totally unconvincing stage whisper, as Laura gazed into the distance. It was him, of course it was him, she would know him anywhere. ‘You know, he’s living in Highbury now? Laura, you should –’

But Laura was no longer standing next to her, she had turned around to say hello to their friend Dan, who had appeared by her side. Vaguely she heard Jo’s tutting, vaguely she was aware that she should be making an effort.

For Jo hadn’t seen the look on Laura’s face after she was tapped on the shoulder by Dan. In fact, Jo and Paddy hadn’t been seeing quite a lot of things lately, and if they had, they would have been worried. Especially knowing Laura like they did.

‘You had a good evening, then?’ Dan was saying to Laura, smiling wickedly at her.

‘Yes, thanks,’ she replied, looking up at him, into his eyes. ‘Good speeches.’

‘Great,’ he said, shifting his weight so that he was fully facing her. It was a tiny movement, almost imperceptible to Jo, Paddy, or any of the other hundred and fifty people in that room, but

it enclosed the two of them in together as tightly as if they were in a phone box.

Dan smiled at her again, as Laura pulled her shawl over her shoulder and she smiled back helplessly, feeling her stomach turn over at his sheer perfectness. His dark blond hair, the boyish curling crop which curled over his collar. His tanned, strong face, wide cheekbones, blue eyes, lazy smile. He reminded her of a cowboy, a farmhand from the Wild West. He was so relaxed, so easy to be with, so easy to be happy with, and Laura glowed as she gazed up at him, simply exhilarated at the prospect of a whole evening in his company – a whole evening, where anything could happen. Suddenly she could barely remember whose wedding it was.

He was here. She was here with Dan, and he was hers for the rest of the evening, and for those hours only she could indulge herself with the secret fantasy that they were a couple who'd been going out for years. Perhaps they were married already. Perhaps Jo and Chris had been the only witnesses at their beach wedding in Barbados two years ago. Dan in a sarong – he would suit a sarong, unlike most men. Her in a silk sundress, raspberry pink, her dark blonde hair falling loose behind her back. Some spontaneous locals and other couples gathered at the seashore, crying with joy at how perfect, how in love they obviously were, totally pole-axed by the strength of emotion, the purity of their love. Laura and Dan, Dan and Laura. Perhaps . . .

'Laura!' a voice said sharply. 'Listen!'

Laura realised she was being prodded in the ribs. The lovely bubble of daydream in her head burst, and she tore herself away from Dan, and looked around to see Paddy glaring at her.

'I was talking to you!' he said, affronted. 'I asked you a question four times!'

'I'll see you later,' Dan murmured, shifting away from her. 'Come and find me, yeah?' and he very lightly ran his hand

over her bare arm, a tiny gesture, but Laura shuddered, looked up at him fleetingly, even more sure than ever, then turned back to Paddy. As Dan moved off, he raised his glass to her, and smiled a regretful smile. Laura screamed inwardly, and turned away from him towards Paddy.

'Sorry,' she said. 'What was it?'

'Is this fob watch too much?' said Paddy, fingering the watch hanging from his waistcoat. 'I think it is. I'm not sure, but perhaps it overloads the outfit. What do you think?'

'Ladies 'n' gennlemen,' came a bored-sounding voice from the back of the room. 'Please make your way back into the Ballroom. Mr and Mrs Johnson are about to perform their first dance. Ah-thann yew, verrimuch.'

Laura looked wildly around her, as if trying to prioritise the many tasks on her mind. She glared at Paddy, who was still obviously waiting for an answer.

'Yes, it is,' said Laura wildly. 'Far too much. I totally agree. In fact, it's *hideous*,' she said crossly. 'You'd better take it off and throw it away. I'm going to the loo – see you in a minute,' she finished, and hurried away.

Dan, Dan, Dan. Dan Floyd. Even saying his name made her feel funny. She muttered it on her way to the loo, feeling sick with nerves, but totally exhilarated. Laura had got it bad. She *knew* it was bad, and she knew if any of her friends found out they'd tell her it was futile, she should get over it, but she couldn't help it. It was meant to be. She was powerless in the face of it, much as she'd tried not to be. Dan Floyd, looking like a ranger or an extra from *Oklahoma!*, calm, funny, and so sexy she couldn't imagine ever finding any other man remotely attractive. Laura wanted him, plain and simple.

She had constructed a whole imaginary life for them, based around (because of the *Oklahoma!* theme) a small house in the Wild West with a porch, a rocking chair – for Laura's granny Mary – corn growing as high as an elephant's eye in the fields, and a golden-pink sunset every night. Mary would drink gins

on the porch and dispense wise advice, and would sit there looking elegant. Dan would farm, obviously, but he would also do the sports PR job thing that he did. Perhaps by computer. Laura would – well, she hadn't thought that far. How could she do her job in the prairie? Perhaps there were some dyslexic farmhands who'd never learnt to read properly. Yes.

Her friend Hilary was in the loos when she got there, washing her hands. 'Oi,' she said. 'Hi.'

Laura jumped. 'Oh. Hi!' she said brightly. 'Hey. Great speech, wasn't it?'

'Not bad,' said Hilary, who didn't much like public displays of affection, verbal or physical. She ran her hands through her hair. 'That idiot Jason's there, did you see?'

'Yeah,' said Laura. 'He's quite nice, isn't he?'

'Well,' said Hilary, in a flat tone. 'He's OK. If you like that kind of thing.'

'He's split up from Cath,' Laura said encouragingly.

'Yeah, I know,' Hilary replied coolly. 'Hm. I might go and find him.'

'OK. See you later,' said Laura, and shut the door of the cubicle. She rested her pounding head against the cool of the white tiles. She was stressing out, and she couldn't help it. It was the first time she'd seen Dan since they'd kissed, so fair enough. But she didn't know what to do. Dan had got to her. The worst bit of all was, she didn't just fancy him something rotten. She really *liked* him, too.

She liked the way he was always first to buy a round, that the corners of his blue eyes crinkled when he laughed, the rangy, almost bowlegged way he walked, his strong hands. She liked the way he rolled his eyes with gentle amusement when Paddy said something particularly Paddy-ish. She liked him. She couldn't help it, she did. And she knew he liked her, that was the funny thing. She just knew, in the way you know. She had also come to know, in the last couple of months, that there was something going on between her and Dan. She just

didn't know what it was. But somehow, she knew tonight was the night.

Dan was a friend of Chris's from university. He'd moved about five minutes away from Laura about six months ago, round the corner from Jo and Chris towards Highbury – and she'd known of him vaguely since Jo and Chris had got together. In July, Dan had started a new job, and more often than not Laura found herself on the tube platform with him in the morning. The first couple of times it was mere coincidence. Now, at the end of summer, it was almost a routine. They would buy a coffee from the stall on the platform and sit together in the second-to-last carriage, deserted in the dusty dog days of August, and go down the Northern line together until they got to Bank. And they would read *Metro* together and chat, and it was all perfectly innocent.

'Dan? Oh yeah, we're tube buddies,' Laura would say nonchalantly, her heart thumping in her chest.

'They're transport pals,' Chris and Jo would joke at lunch on Sundays. 'Like an old married couple on the seafront at Clacton.'

'Ha, ha, ha,' Laura would mutter, and then she would blush furiously, biting her lip and shaking her hair forward over her face, burying herself in a newspaper. Not that they ever noticed – it's extraordinary what people don't notice right under their noses.

But to Laura it was obvious, straightforward. From the first time she'd recognised him on the tube platform, that sunny July day, and he had smiled at her, his face genuinely lighting up with pleasure – 'Laura!' he'd said, warmth in his voice. 'What a nice surprise. Come and sit next to me.' Through the sun and rain of August, September and October she would run down the steps to the tube platform, hoping he'd be there, not knowing what was going on between them. They had built up a whole lexicon of information. Just little things that you tell the people

you see each day. She knew when his watch was being mended, what big meeting he had that day; and he knew when Rachel, her boss, was being annoying, and asked how her grandmother had been the previous day. Out of these little things, woven over each other, grew a web of knowledge, of intimacy, and one day Laura had woken up and known, known with a clarity that was shocking, that this was *not* just another one of her crushes, or another failed relationship that she couldn't understand. She and Dan had something. And she was in love with him.

Oh, the level of denial about the whole thing *was* extraordinary, because you could explain it away in a heartbeat if you had to. 'We go to work together, because we live round the corner from each other. It's great – nice start to the day, you know.' Whereas the truth was a little more complicated. The truth was both of them had started getting to the station earlier and earlier, so they could sit on the bench together with their coffees and chat for ten minutes before they got on the tube. And that was weird. Laura knew that. Yes, she was in denial about the whole thing. She knew that, too. It had got to the stage where something had to give – and she couldn't wait.

Laura collected herself, breathed deeply, smoothed the material of her dress down, and came out of the loo to put on more lip gloss. She realised as she looked in the mirror that she was already wearing enough lip gloss to cause an oil slick – it was a nervous reflex of hers, to apply more and more when in doubt. She blotted some on the back of her hand, and strolled out of the door nonchalantly, looking for Paddy or Hilary, someone to chat to. It was strange, wasn't it, she mused, that at her best friend's wedding, knowing virtually everyone in the room, she could feel so exposed, so alone. That on such a happy day she could feel so sad. She shook her head, feeling silly. Look over there, she told herself, as Jo and Chris walked through the tables of the big ballroom, hand in hand, smiling at each other, at their friends and family. It was lovely. It was a privilege

to see. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hilary pinning Jason against a wall, yelling at him about something, her long, elegant hands waving in the air. Jason looked scared, but transfixed. Another man scared into snogging Hil, she thought. Well done, girl.

Someone handed her a glass of champagne. She accepted it gratefully and turned to see who it was.

'Sorry,' whispered Dan casually, though he didn't bend towards her. He said it softly, intimately, and clinked his glass with hers. 'I thought I'd better leave you to deal with Paddy's sartorial crisis by yourself. Where did you go?'

'Loo,' said Laura, trying to stay calm, but it came out, much to her and Dan's surprise, as a low, oddly pitched growl. He smiled. Laura smiled back, and ran her hand through her hair in a casual, groomed manner, but forgot the lipstick mark of gloss still adhering to the back of her hand. Her hair stuck to the gloss, and her hand became caught up in her hair as she flailed wildly around with her hand in the air, covered in hair.

'Arrgh,' said Laura, despair washing over her as she stood in front of Dan. Her hand was stuck. Dan took the champagne out of her other hand, put it on a table, held her wrist and slid her fingers slowly out of her hair. He smoothed it down, swiftly dropped a kiss on the crown of her head in a sweet, intimate gesture, and put his palm on the small of her back as he guided her through the room onto the terrace.

'Thanks,' whispered Laura, trying to walk upright and not cower with embarrassment. 'I should go back out, to see the first dance, look . . .'

'No problem,' said Dan calmly. 'In a minute. I just want to do this.' And he slid his hand round her waist, drew him towards her, and kissed her. No one else was watching, they were all turned towards the dance floor where Mr and Mrs Johnson were dancing. They were alone on the terrace, just the two of them.

Dan pulled her towards him, his hands pressing on her spine,

his lips gentle but firm on hers. He made a strange, sad sound in his throat, somewhere between a cry of something and a moan. Laura slid one arm around his neck and drew him further towards her. The other arm was by her side, she was still holding the champagne glass. It tilted, the champagne spilt, and neither of them noticed.

After a short while, they broke apart slowly, and said nothing. There was nothing to say, really. Laura drained the meagre contents of her glass and leant into Dan. They stood there together as the music died away and applause rippled out towards them, aware of nothing else but themselves, alone in their bubble.

'Well,' Dan said eventually. 'I didn't know *that* was going to happen tonight,' and he put his arm around her.

Laura twisted round, looked up at him. 'Oh yes you did,' she said, smiling into his eyes. 'Of course you did.'

That was Laura's second glass of champagne, and she found Paddy and Hilary on another terrace having a cigarette so she joined them. After her third glass, thirty minutes later, she was a bit tired. After her fourth, she felt better again – and she'd eaten from the buffet as well. After her fifth and sixth, she danced for an hour with Jo and Chris and their other friends. And after her seventh glass, she didn't know how it happened, but she found herself in one of the free taxis going home with Dan Floyd, and they were kissing so hard that her lips were bruised the next day. And that's when it really started, and Laura went from knowing lots of things about Dan and how she felt about him and her place in the world in general to knowing nothing. At all.

At one point during the night, she propped herself up on her elbow and leant over him, and kissed him again, and he kissed her back and they rolled over together, and Laura pulled back and said, 'So . . . what does this mean, then?' It just came out.

And Dan's face clouded over and he said, 'Oh gorgeous, let's not do this now, not when I want you so much,' and he

carried on kissing her. Something should have made Laura pull away and say, No, actually, what does this mean? Are you going to tell your girlfriend? When will you leave your girlfriend? Do you like me? Are we together? But *of course* she didn't . . .