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Growing Pains

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Extract

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A Hodder & Stoughton book

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SCENE ELEVEN:

A Car Full of Roses

EXT:

A Street Scene

A few days before releasing *Walk of Life* with its ill-conceived video I went into the Virgin radio station to be interviewed by Chris Evans. Just like on *TFI Friday* the mood between us was easy, relaxed. I was relieved. We'd had such fun on *TFI* but I hadn't got to speak to Chris after the show, so I wasn't sure whether this vibe between us was only in my head. We'd gone to the pub but he was surrounded by people and I couldn't get anywhere near him. Anyway, at the time I'd had a boyfriend. Chris had waved goodbye to me and I'd left the pub feeling rather deflated. Since then I'd done a little research on him and I knew he too was now single again. And I hadn't imagined it – the buzz between us was just as it had been on *TFI*. We both giggled continually, then halfway through Chris

popped the question. Not on bended knee with a ring, but like this.

'Why don't we get married and sell the photos to *Hello*, then give all the money to charity?'

I replied 'OK, let's.'

I didn't think he was being serious – but I wasn't absolutely sure he wasn't being serious either. It was December and the party season was in full swing. At the end of the show Chris asked me to his Christmas drinks. I was gutted because I had to be somewhere else that day, but I gave him my number.

A couple of days later, he called and asked me out. I had just done *Top of the Pops*, but we didn't finish until about 9.30 p.m. and by the time I got into London it was closing time. I went to meet him at his favourite pub, the Nag's Head in Belgravia. Nicki came with me. Chris and his friend Webbo were outside with their drinks, even though it was freezing. Suddenly Chris said, 'Right, let's go somewhere else!' And the four of us just left our beers on the ground and jumped into a cab. I don't know why that seemed so crazy to me, but it did. We went to a bar called Denim and had a few drinks, then went on to Stringfellow's. From the moment we met that evening we were inseparable. He had his hands down the back of my trousers all night playing with my thong, and I let him.

It was a bizarre night. Peter Stringfellow came over to talk to us, gave us champagne, then supplied the papers with a quote saying we couldn't keep our hands off one another. We watched a lot of horny ladies dance, then went on to the

den of iniquity that is Brown's. Probably most of my worst behaviour took place there, but not with Chris. He is vehemently anti-drugs, which was pretty apparent from that first night. We were good and pissed, though. Chris was wearing brogues. Don't know why, but I love a man in brogues. I told him, so he gave them to me and I walked around Brown's in his brogues all night.

I remember him leaning towards me and saying, 'I just wish you were twenty-six at least.'

And as always I was saying, 'It doesn't matter how old I am. Let's not talk about how old I am because that's just going to hijack this evening and ruin everything.'

Once he'd mentioned my age I was conscious that I had to act really old, handle my drink and try to use big words. He was clearly a genius and thirty-four at that. I really wanted to impress him. Perhaps skipping about in his brogues hadn't been such a good idea. What was I going to impress him with – being a pop star? Suddenly that didn't feel very impressive – he'd seen them all, all the actors, all the divas, all the pop tarts. It turned out that what impressed him was me just being me skipping around in his brogues, laughing, looking at him and feeling it was OK to look. He let me be me. Now I had to remember who that was.

At the end of the evening he went off with Webbo and I with Nicki, who was absolutely plastered because I'd left her chatting and drinking with Webbo all night while Chris and I bonded. I'd just put Nicki to bed when my phone rang. It was Chris.

'What are you doing?'

'I've just made beans on toast.'

'Me too.'

It was a sign.

'I had a really great night,' I said.

'It was wonderful.'

I went to bed happy for the first time in a long time.

Next morning I woke up at about ten and had already missed four calls from him. He had left a message saying, 'Why are you not up, you lazy cow? It's a beautiful day – you have to see it. Wake up and call me, because I need your address.'

So I did. An hour later he arrived at my door with an envelope. He didn't kiss me, he just smiled and handed over the envelope. I was still in my sweat pants and had black mascara all over my face and looked like shit but I didn't care. I knew he didn't. I hadn't brushed my teeth and was wafting around in my own personal cloud of vodka fumes. It was all rather sexy. Turned out he hadn't done his radio show that morning. It was the first one he'd ever missed. But not the last.

Chris left after telling me to open the envelope. So I did. What was inside blew my mind. There were some car keys and a note. 'I know you don't care about any of this and nor do I, but I had to stop you in your tracks. If you don't want it sell it and give it to charity. I think you're wonderful. Will you marry me?' I held up the key. That unmistakable rearing yellow horse dangled from the ring. I don't think I screamed,

but Nicki did. 'Oh my gawd a Ferrari!' We looked outside and there was nothing there, so we went out the front. The brilliant doorman, Abdul – a huge Nigerian guy – was clutching his stomach and laughing. There, parked outside the building, was a silver Ferrari absolutely covered in red roses. Inside and out. Chris was sitting across the road with Webbo on two Virgin bikes, laughing his head off. I didn't have clue what to do. What is the etiquette when presented with a Formula One racing car? Get in, I suppose. So I went over to the car and did just that. Believe it or not, I didn't give a shit about the car itself but I was loving the roses. I wanted Chris to see me in it. I wanted to show him that I liked it. And what I *really* wanted was to kiss him. I beckoned him over and he came to the gate and we had a quick peck between the bars. I said, 'Thank you', he said, 'You're welcome', and then he left on his bike. It was the most bizarre morning of my life.

I called my dad first because he's always been a huge car freak.

'Chris Evans, as in Chris Evans from *TFI Friday* and *Don't Forget Your Toothbrush*, has just bought me a Ferrari!'

He said, 'You mean the ginger guy?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'Why the fuck did he buy you a fucking Ferrari?'

'I don't know. I went out with him last night!'

'What were you doing, Bill? What did you do?'

Poor Dad, he sprouted a few more grey hairs that morn-

ing! The most ridiculous thing of all was that I couldn't even drive. I'd never bothered to learn. I hadn't had the time or the inclination, and anyway I was always picked up by drivers so there didn't seem to be any need. Bloody ridiculous. The engine was covered in glass. It petrified me. As beautiful as Ferraris are, they look quite aggressive. All I could think about was him. As I said, I really didn't give a fuck about the car, but I kept every single rose.

My next call was to Justine and Sara from Virgin. I rang and said, 'Oh, my God, there's a Ferrari outside my door.' They came over to join us and soon we were all loving it, jumping up and down, in a hysterical fashion. I read them the note and asked Justine what she reckoned.

She looked at me and said, 'He's the winner! He's the bloody winner!'

It was like being in a film – we were all feeding off the excitement.

Within a nano-second my managers were on the phone: 'Don't keep the car. It'll look terrible. Give the money to charity. Don't call him. You have to be careful.' Now, looking back, I think, 'You awful people – what were you thinking and why didn't you want me to call him?' But in their defence they were worried. They knew what sort of state I was in, and it was such a big gesture they feared my head would be turned. Well, it was. But by him. Not by the car. Even so, call me old-fashioned but it isn't every day you get given a Ferrari, so I decided to hell with it, I'd keep it. I wasn't going to drive it around, but I knew a man who

would. Up to that point my car-loving dad hadn't seen a great deal of upside to my so-called 'fame and fortune'.

'Good girl yourself,' said Justine.

'Quite right,' said Sara.

'Don't be bought,' said Nicki Chapman.

Don't be bought? A bit late for that, wasn't it? I was up for sale, wasn't I? Wasn't that the whole point of the crazy business I was in? Wasn't I a manufactured product destined for the consumer market? Don't be bought. . . . She was quite right, but not for the reasons she thought. Slowly things started falling into place in my addled mind. Slowly I started to see sense.

The Ferrari had to be driven into the underground car park by Alistair, who worked at the management company, because he was the only one who could drive an H-shift. At first we couldn't even get it going – we had no idea how to get the immobilizer off. We were all sitting in the car laughing. I think Alistair rang a Ferrari garage to ask them what to do.

He said, 'We're trying to start this Modena.'

'That's funny,' replied the man in the garage. 'We just sold one of those to Chris Evans.'

I couldn't believe Chris had just walked into a dealership and bought me a bloody Ferrari! It was a head fry, a hysterical, wonderful head fry. I read the note again and again and again, trying to read between the lines. Not that I needed to. It was quite clear what he wanted. My hand in marriage. Woo-hoo!

Well, he'd certainly succeeded in stopping me in my tracks. The question now was what the hell was I going to do about Rich? We'd been together for two years, and if it had been an easy thing to walk away from then I would have done so. But it wasn't. It was as compulsive as the eating and the cleaning. I was confused, to say the least. That night I went to the Royal Albert Hall for a huge charity performance. I had a stinking hangover as usual. There were press everywhere. I thought I knew what it was like to be hounded by the press, but I knew nothing. This was major league. I suddenly realized that all I'd ever been was a minnow. It wasn't a depressing realization. It was refreshing. I could stop taking myself so goddamn seriously. Being bought? I don't think so. What was the poor man really getting in return? I'd gone from being a bubbly, fun person, always wanting to have a great time, to this withdrawn creature endlessly drawing on a Marlboro Light. My eyes had lost their shine. They didn't dance any more. I was a shell. Underweight, uninspired and boring. I had no energy to do anything. I had let the anorexia steal whatever fun I could have taken out of the experience and turned it into something to fear. Three days later *Walk of Life* went in at Number 25.