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Opening Extract from...

The Ex Factor

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Prologue

Marnie

'Will all passengers please fasten their seat belts; the captain has now started our descent…'

She ignored the announcement for as long as possible. After all, when you were running away—when you had nowhere else to go—there was no hurry to arrive. Only when the air hostess came to tell her off did she grudgingly belt up, and take out her headphones and open her window blind. From above, London was grey. Like something shrivelled, shivering in the January air. She wasn't sure why she was coming back. Not home—she didn't know exactly where home was right now.

The plane banked lower through freezing winter fog. Around her people began to gather their possessions, crumple up their rubbish, stretch their legs and arms. Looking forward to a new city. Buckingham Palace. The Tower of London. Madame Tussauds.

Not her. She was terrified. But if her mother had taught her anything, it was this: *always get your game face on*. And so she put on her huge sunglasses, despite the gloom, and brushed in-flight food from her carefully put-together outfit, reapplied red lipstick. Was the cape-coat too much? The dress too bright? No time to change now. She took out her phone and composed a tweet. Hitting the tarmac! Can't wait to see you all, London! xx.

She had a moment to think of what she'd left, and feel the tears push at her eyes for the tenth time that journey. *Game face*. She pasted on a smile. The tannoy dinged, and the grey ground came into sight. She was back.

Chapter 1
Interrupted Routines

Helen

How many texts do you get in an average day? How many emails, Facebook alerts, tweets? Most get instantly forgotten—your friend obsessing about their weight or if their boss spotted them on Facebook (ironically), that marketing newsletter you keep meaning to unsubscribe from, a celebrity's breakfast on Instagram. But sometimes you get a message that's more than this.

This message might not say anything special. At first you might even ignore it, roll over and go back to sleep, slip your phone into your bag, forget about it. But although you won't know it at the time, the message is the start of something that means that your life will never be the same again.

Of course, at least 99.99999 per cent of them are total rubbish, but still. You can never quite be sure.

* * *

Helen was woken by the buzz of her phone, shooting upright in bed, groping on the bedside table among the TV remote, the control for the windows blinds, the tissues, the hand cream, and the framed photo of her cat—her flat was somewhere between NASA launch control and the Pinterest board of a forty-something spinster. She blinked at the phone. Read the message again. Emitted a small 'huh' to the empty space beside her in the bed, then checked the time: 7.45 a.m. Only a person of deep selfishness would text a freelancer at 7.45 a.m.

The message stayed on the screen, burned behind her eyes. Her first thought was: *She's back. Hello, Marnie, goodbye non-interrupted sleep.* Her second thought was: *Bloody hell! She's back!* A flicker of something came and went in her stomach—excitement. Nerves. Something else that she couldn't quite identify. Then she sat up and started Googling bars, restaurants, and detox treatments.

* * *

There's a saying that if knowing someone doesn't change you as a person, then they're not a true friend, just an acquaintance. Helen would have added to this. If knowing someone didn't permanently make you feel like you were about to get on a roller coaster—excited, terrified, and with the slight possibility of serious injury—*then* they weren't a true friend.

She got up on the dot of 8 a.m.—no need to vary the Routine yet—and commenced her morning. It was a Tuesday, so she washed her hair, flossed her teeth, and shaved her legs. She rubbed in a deep conditioning mask, setting her alarm for exactly four minutes, then spent that time looking into the mirror at her flushed face and chanting, 'I am successful. I am happy. I am fine on my own.'

She wasn't convinced by the affirmations—she didn't feel all that successful or happy. But she was most definitely on her own.

She cleaned out the shower and sprayed shine mist, then gave the sink a quick rinse and gathered up the towels and sheets for the wash, as she did every week. Then she made coffee in her cafetière, gleaming beside the sink where she'd washed it last night, and boiled an egg for exactly five minutes, putting the toast in at the three-minute mark. During all this time she didn't glance at her phone once.

Discipline. That was the key.

At 8.46 a.m., Helen judged it was a good time to text back. Hi! Great news. Shall I round up a fun posse? As her finger hovered over the send button, she debated asking where Marnie was staying, then didn't. She probably had something sorted, a squat or a house-sitting job or a boyfriend she'd already picked up in Victoria Coach Station.

The answering text came straight back, which meant Marnie had just arrived, and wasn't sure what she was doing. Yeah! 2nite if poss? Would love to c u all xx.

Helen opened up the Facebook Messenger group she used every day to chat with Rosa and Ani. Guess what! M's back.

She imagined them picking the message up: Rosa at her desk in the newspaper office, Ani on her way to court maybe. Both dressed smartly, with lanyards and coffee and bright work faces. Ani came straight back. Whaaaat? Out of the blue like that? Any word on where she's been all this time?

Dunno. I guess we'll find out. Dinner tonight?

Tonight tonight? As in later on this same day?

Oh come on. Live a little. You can get out at eight surely?

Ani's reply came back. I'm meant to go round to my parents. Crafting ornamental flowers for my cousin's engagement party while answering 10,000 questions about when it's going to be my turn.

Helen typed: Wouldn't you rather come for a lovely dinner instead of that?

Ani: I would literally rather staple my eyes shut instead of that. So—count me in, I guess. What about you, Rosa?

Rosa answered. Am typing from under my desk, guys. Again. Have started keeping tissues down here.

In Rosa's open-plan office, under her desk was one of the few places she could hide to cry. Which was what you needed to do a lot when you'd just split up with your husband, and said former husband worked on the other side of the room.

Would a drink cheer you up? Helen quickly typed. Totally understand if not.

Why not, said Rosa. Career and marriage in tatters, might as well work on social life. Newly single Rosa was prone to such pronouncements. G2G. Need to redo make-up before David comes past.

Take care, sweets, said Helen. Remember you're amazing and we love you and you don't need him.

G2G too, I'm due in court, Ani typed. Acrimonious divorce hearing. At least David didn't sleep with your sister, Rosa.

Probably only because I don't have a sister.

Helen signed off with expressions of sympathy and good luck. Miraculously, she'd managed to gather up all four of

them on a weekday night, in London, in January, with just a few hours' notice. That seemed enough of an achievement for one day, but work called.

She clicked on her inbox, taking a deep breath. She loved working from home, couldn't imagine going back to an office, but you had to have rules. Getting dressed was one, even if it was in pyjamas. Another was not letting what she did affect her life—but this was easier said than done.

Her first email said: I think my husband has been meeting someone from your site. Can you give me his details? It's disgusting. I don't know how you can work on something like this.

Helen's heart squeezed. Finding out that the man you loved was seeing someone else, kissing them, holding them, sending flirty messages: it wasn't that she couldn't imagine it. She could, and only too well. But this was her job. She typed out the standard response. We're sorry but we can't give out information about our members. We'd suggest you talk to your husband—it could just be curiosity, or a cry for help. Maybe you can spice things up a bit?

She took another deep breath and added the rest. She hated to, but her boss insisted. PS—you can always sign up with us yourself!

Helen pressed send. Some days, most days, she hated what she did, hated herself for doing it. It certainly wasn't what she'd expected when she'd applied for the in-hindsight-too-good-to-be-true homeworking job two years ago, but by the time she'd found out it was already too late. And here she was, stuck. She glanced at the masthead of the website she ran. *Bit on the Side. The UK's top dating site for people in relationships.*

Another day at the office. Everything was the same as usual, except that Marnie was back.

* * *

Ani.

Ani put her phone away as she approached court. Her client was waiting on the steps, smoking into the breeze. Ani tried not to wince as he leaned in to kiss her. She preferred a nice brisk handshake or better still, no physical contact at all. 'Mark, hi. How are you feeling?'

'Can't wait to get it over, like, so I never have to see that bitch again.'

'Well, you will have to see her if Taylor and Ashley end up living with you.' (Which they were asking for. Which she'd advised against.) She kept on her smile.

'Sure, sure. I mean—I just wanna make sure I get my rights, you know? They're my kids too.'

Ani told herself it was not her job to pass judgement. It wasn't her fault if Mark's ex-wife started crying the minute they went into court, or if Mark tried to look down the blouse of their barrister, Louise, or if the opposing barrister was twenty minutes late, causing them all to sit in awkward silence, the judge leafing through the docket with increasing irritation and saying things like 'What is PlayStation?' or 'Mr Smith allowed his daughter to watch *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* for four hours? What is a Kardashian?'

Eventually, Louise started to say, 'Sir, perhaps we should…' and just then someone swept in in a flurry of expensive wool coat.

'So sorry, sir. We had to suspend a hearing, my client fainted.'

Yeah right, thought Ani, who was wise to such tricks.

The barrister would be cramming as many cases as possible into the day, trying to bump up his income. She looked up and her irritation grew exponentially. He was about thirty-five, tanned even though it was January, and his green eyes stared out from under expensively cut black hair. Handsome, and entirely aware of it.

'All right, Mr Robins, proceed,' said the judge, mollified. Ani looked at her papers—Adam Robins. He cast her a glance as he glided into his seat, as if to say he could wipe the floor with them without even trying.

And he was right. Louise was good but Adam Robins annihilated her, listing all Mark's transgressions—shagging Denise's sister under the Christmas tree, blowing the kids' present money on *Call of Duty 4*, telling Denise he'd get her a gift subscription to Weight Watchers because 'that's what you really need, love'.

Mark occasionally protested: 'I never!', 'Well, she always said she were fat!', or 'It weren't full sex, just oral', but Ani was surprised when, at the end of it, he still got part-time access to the kids. He trailed out muttering in an unconvincing manner about men's rights. 'This is a disgrace, I'll be getting onto Fathers for Justice.'

'They disbanded,' she said crisply, as they stood on the court steps. 'Well, Mark, it wasn't what you wanted, but it's the best result possible, really.'

Undaunted, he said, 'S'pose. Listen, you busy Saturday?'

She misunderstood at first. 'I don't work weekends, and anyway…'

'Nah, I meant you and me. Curry, pint. You know some good places for a curry I bet. What's it short for, by the way? Ani's not an Indian name?'

She stared at him for a minute, speechless. A voice cut

in. 'Anisha. Sorry, Ms Singh, I mean. I just wanted to say: no hard feelings?'

It was the bloody barrister, Adam Robins, sweeping his dark hair off his face. Mark shook his outstretched hand, seemingly unperturbed by the character assassination Robins had just carried out on him in court. Ani glared at him. How dare he be so handsome and so confident. 'Mr Robins, is it? Maybe you could try not to be late in future? My time is valuable too, you know.'

Adam Robins blinked. His eyes were the exact shade of green Fruit Pastilles. 'I'm sure it is—I know your hourly rates, after all.'

Mark's eyes widened. 'You're saying she…'

'For *law*.' Ani turned her back on the barrister. To Mark she said briskly, 'I'm leaving now. I have other clients.'

'Can I get your email then? Personal, like.'

'Sure. It's ani@notinamillonyearspal.com. Do contact me for the next divorce you will almost inevitably have.'

As she stomped off, she heard Adam Robins make a small noise that could have been a laugh, and Mark asking, 'Is that all lower case, you reckon?' It was unprofessional, but she didn't care. And that was why she was, at thirty-two, more single than a single LP—no B-side—and why when she saw her parents at the weekend she'd have to once again tell them that, no, she wasn't seeing anyone, and no, she still didn't want them to find her a nice boy, thanks all the same. Because how could you believe in love when you spent all day sweeping up the smashed remnants of it?

At least she had dinner tonight to take her mind off things. After all, if there was one person who was more terminally single than Ani, then that was Marnie.