He loves me...
He loves me not...
He loves me...



Six Days

DANI ATKINS

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SATURDAY

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1

The bedroom door still creaked when it opened. Dad had never fixed it, and I kind of liked that. He stood in the opening now, a stranger in a suit I'd never seen before.

For a long moment neither of us spoke. He was the first to break the silence. 'You look beautiful, Gemma.' His voice was gruff and oddly husky. 'If only your mum was here to see this.'

I turned in a rustle of tulle and sequinned lace to face the man I'd loved my whole life and half of his. Dad was practically unrecognisable in the charcoal-grey morning suit. The haircut he'd had the day before was so short it looked as though he might be planning on enlisting after the ceremony. And the habitual salt-and-pepper stubble had been banished by a razor so sharp I could see where the blade, in an unsteady hand, had nicked him. The two small cuts were the only splash of colour in his uncommonly pale face.

'Oh, Dad,' I said, trying to summon up the strength I'd set aside for this moment. Because I'd always known those words were going to be spoken today. The only thing I hadn't been sure of was whether *he'd* be the one to say them, or me.

He held out his work-roughened hands and I placed mine in them and suddenly I was eight years old again, falling off my bicycle; or twelve, when my pet rabbit died; or fourteen, when the boy I liked asked someone else to the school dance. Dad had been there for all those moments – but as

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part of a team. I could see how difficult it was for him now, to face this big milestone in my life without Mum beside him.

'You look just like her,' he said softly. It was a refrain I'd heard countless times before. Teenage me would probably have rolled the green eyes we shared and vowed to dye my hair a different shade from its natural auburn. But the me I'd become since losing Mum three years ago snatched eagerly at every similarity, as if it were a strand of a fast-unravelling rope.

I turned to the mirror and slid my hand into the crook of his arm, the way I would do in less than an hour when he walked me down the aisle. And for the first time I could truly see it. I *did* look like the woman in the silver-framed photograph in the lounge. True, our wedding dresses were totally different, and her hair had been styled in an elaborate up-do, while mine was left to curl softly in beachy waves down my back. But the expression on her face as she looked at the man standing beside her was one I recognised from a hundred Facebook posts. It was the one I wore when I looked at Finn.

With excellent timing, the door of my old bedroom flew open and the whirlwind that was Hannah Peterson stood in the frame, my wedding bouquet in her hands. Her eyes darted between Dad and me. 'No one had better be crying in here,' she warned, only half joking. 'I've only been gone five minutes.' After twenty-five years as my closest friend, Hannah had practically attained sibling privileges and would think nothing of taking either Dad or me to task if she thought it necessary. 'Remember our agreement: no tears until after everyone has said "I do", okay?'

'How does that poor husband of yours put up with you?' Dad teased, passing an arm around my chief bridesmaid's shoulders and giving her a fatherly squeeze.

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‘Noise-cancelling headphones, mainly,’ she shot back with a wicked grin. ‘The bridesmaids’ car is waiting downstairs, and the driver says yours is just a few minutes behind,’ she said, slipping back into her role of unofficial wedding planner. I swear if she’d found a place to squirrel away a clipboard in the folds of her magenta taffeta dress, she’d have happily carried one all day.

‘Where’s Milly?’ I asked, looking beyond my friend for her adorable little girl. My goddaughter would be four in a few months, almost the same age her mother had been when our friendship had begun. I simply couldn’t imagine having anyone but Milly as my flower girl.

‘At the moment she’s busy tormenting your cat,’ she said, turning to my dad with an apologetic ‘Sorry’. ‘Then she’ll probably move on to destroying the fake posy I gave her. She’s not getting her hands on the real one until the moment the church doors open.’

I flashed my friend a grin. ‘You really do think of everything, don’t you?’

‘I just want today to be perfect for you, that’s all,’ she said, sounding choked and for a moment very un-Hannah-like.

A squeal that could have come from either her offspring or the cat travelled up the stairs, and Hannah spun on an elegant satin shoe and turned to go.

‘I’ll see you both at the church doors,’ she said, blowing a kiss our way and disappearing from the bedroom in a cloud of perfume.

A few minutes later, the front door closed with a reverberating shudder and the house heaved a quiet sigh of relief as it finally fell into silence. The hairdressers, the beautician and the florists were all long gone; so too were family and friends, who would be comfortably settled in the flower-bedecked pews of the church by now.

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Everything and everyone were exactly where they were supposed to be. So why did I have this niggling feeling of unease? It had been there since my phone's alarm had woken me early that morning. Still half asleep, I'd lain blinking up at the ceiling, trying to work out where I was. Unthinkingly, I'd reached out for Finn, but the unoccupied half of my old double bed was cold and empty. Was this how Dad felt every single morning? It was a heartbreaking thought to begin what is traditionally billed as the 'happiest day of your life'.

I swung out of bed and finally found my smile as I looked at the ivory lace dress I'd be wearing later that day when I married the man I loved.

Unable to resist the temptation, I reached for my phone, pulling it towards me by its charger wire, as though reeling in a fish. Was it too early to send Finn a 'good morning' message? Was that considered as unlucky as seeing him, or was modern technology beyond the reach of old wives' superstitions? I decided a quick WhatsApp was worth the risk.

> Good morning, Mr D. Happy wedding day! Can't wait to see you later. xxx

I spent five whole minutes with the phone cradled in the palm of my hand, waiting for him to reply, before eventually setting it aside with a small feeling of disappointment. Finn was probably already in the shower or still out on his morning run. *Or hung-over*, suggested a troublesome voice in my head. I tuned it out because I really didn't want to revisit that particular dispute.

'You do realise *no one* has a stag do on the night before their actual wedding any more? They have it *weeks* before the big day, so they have time to recover.'

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‘There wasn’t time to fit it in,’ Finn had replied, winding his arms around my waist and drawing me against him. ‘I’ve been working flat out to make my deadline before the honeymoon.’ He’d bent down and kissed me then in the way that always made my knees forget how to hold me up. ‘You may not know this, but I’m about to get married,’ he’d whispered into the curve of my neck.

‘So I heard. She’s a lucky girl.’

Finn shook his head, his eyes fixed on my face. ‘No. *I’m* the lucky one.’

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Dad was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs I’d slid down, skipped down, even fallen down on occasion over the past thirty-three years. There was a proud smile fixed firmly on his face that threatened to take me down far more effectively than the staircase ever could. Through the open front door behind him I caught a glimpse of a gleaming silver Bentley decorated with ribbon streamers, waiting at the kerb.

‘Before we go…’ began Dad, so nervous his Adam’s apple was bobbing up and down as if it were looking to escape. He cleared his throat, which settled it slightly. ‘I have something I want to give you,’ he said, fumbling awkwardly in the pocket of his suit jacket. ‘It’s from your mum and me.’

I could already feel the prickling threat of tears as I reached for the small velvet jeweller’s box. The beautician’s carefully applied bridal make-up, complete with ‘tsunami-proof’ mascara, was suddenly in jeopardy.

I took the box and held it in my trembling hands for a long moment before springing open the lid. The chain of the necklace was silver and delicate, but it was the pendant hanging from it that came close to undoing me.

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‘It’s Mum’s stone, the one from her engagement ring,’ I breathed, recognising it instantly from a kaleidoscope of memories.

‘She would have wanted you to have it,’ Dad said, his voice suddenly gravelly and scratchy. ‘I thought if we had it made into a necklace, it would feel as though she was still with us today.’

I turned to the hallway mirror and lifted the hair from my neck to fasten the chain. The pear-shaped diamond dropped like a falling star and settled on my bare skin, just above the curve of my cleavage. I felt the weight of it close to my heart as I hugged my father tightly. ‘I love it. I really do. But Mum was *always* going to be here today, even without this. Wild horses couldn’t keep her away.’

Dad held my hand tightly in his as he led me down the crazy-paved pathway to the car, climbing in carefully behind me and settling himself on the small section of seat my dress wasn’t occupying. It felt as though we were being swallowed by suds of tulle, but it was only a thirty-minute drive to the church.

‘Nervous?’ Dad asked. It was the same question he’d put to me when he’d dropped me off for my first day at school, and then again, thirteen years later, at university.

This time the answer was an easy ‘No’.

‘Just excited for this next chapter of my life to begin,’ I said, leaning across the ocean of ivory fabric to kiss his cheek.

‘That’s my girl,’ he said, his voice laden with love and pride.

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Having a big white wedding had never been high on my wish list. But life has a funny way of changing your plans. You meet someone you love, you lose someone you love, and suddenly you’re trying on meringue dresses

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and booking a church and a venue. This wedding was very much a homage to Mum, for this had been *her* dream for me.

'She would have loved you,' I remember telling Finn. We'd left the cities and towns behind and were now streaking through the villages and hamlets towards my childhood home for his first meeting with my dad.

Finn had taken one hand from the steering wheel and warmly squeezed mine. 'If she was anything like you, I'd have loved her too. But it's your dad I'm more worried about. I have a mental image of him patrolling the hallway tonight in case I stray out of the guest bedroom.'

I'd laughed, although in reality he might not have been too far off the mark. 'Well, you know what dads are like.'

'Not so much,' said Finn.

If I'd had just one superpower, it would have been to rewind time and take back my unthinking comment.

'I'm so sorry, Finn. I—'

'It's okay,' he said, cutting me off and changing the subject, the way he always did whenever his parents were mentioned. 'So, do you think *one* bottle of Scotch will be enough to charm him or should I have gone for a case?'

'Dad's going to love you,' I'd said. 'Everyone does when they first meet you.'

Finn's eyes were on the road, but there was no mistaking the wry twist of his mouth.

'*You* didn't.'

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