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Thanks for Nothing, Nick Maxwell

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Chapter One

Last year I was happy, hurtling through my life in a dizzying tornado of hot dates, sexy outfits and dirty dancing: in fl ashly cars and happening hot-spots with slick lipstick and must-have hair, lights bright on my highlights. I was surrounded by gorgeous men who wanted me to let them do anything for me. I was fabulous, flirty, sensuous, sexy and seductive. I was at the top of my game. I was at the top of everybody's game.

Then it all stopped.

My life ended at precisely the same moment as a new life began.

It was a really hot Friday night in July, one of those nights when you just can't get cool, even with nothing on and all the windows open. Look, there I am, in the living room of my little fl at. No, look on the floor. See me? On the rug in front of the sofa. Those are my feet on the edge of the coffee table. My hands are on the floor above my head, so you can see my elbows sticking out. The rest of me is underneath Nick Maxwell, from Personnel.

Can you make me out now? I know, not much of me is showing but you'll see more of me later. For now, I just want you to look at my face; look at the expression. Hold it, right there, freeze. Now, just look at that. Look at my eyes, just little slits. In fact, they're actually closed, I think, aren't they? And my mouth, smiling but not too broadly, lips slightly parted, pale pink and beautifully glossed. I have good lips. Anyway, what do you make of it? What does that expression bring into your mind? Looking at that face, I think, Bliss. It's a blissful face, isn't it? And like most bliss, it was, back then, deeply rooted in ignorance.

Oh, here we go. Looks like Nick's activity is drawing to a close. You can tell because I've put my hands on his back. If we could see Nick's handsome face, I'm sure it would show an expression of deep and serious concentration. The rest of him is pretty good to look at too, don't you think? Even though he's quite shiny now, with all that exertion, it's quite manly, and downright sexy. Oh yes, Nick Maxwell was the office catch, and I damn well knew it, lying there.

OK, it's all over now. Let's leave them a moment, in the name of dignity. There are few things less graceful than rising from the floor after a passionate sexual encounter. I'll take this opportunity, as the lovers disengage, to tell you a bit about myself.

My name is Rachel Covington. I am twenty-five and single, although what you're seeing are the events of a year ago, when I have just turned twenty-four. I think I look pretty hot, most of the time. I've got short blond hair, with these gorgeous gold and copper highlights, and I'm quite slim, with long legs. Good lips, as I've said. My nose is not so good but I've been told it's quite cute and buttony. I suppose my dream is one day to be married and settled down, but not right then, not at that moment, on that hot July night when tall, sweaty Nick Maxwell was picking his way through our abandoned clothes towards the shower room, wearing nothing but his socks.

I work at Horizon Holidays, in the Telesales department. Selling holidays, in case you didn't work that out. 'Good afternoon, Horizon Holidays. My name is Rachel, how may I help you?' It's not rocket science but then I'm not a rocket scientist.

Oh God, look at Nick coming out of the shower room now. Doesn't he look like an aftershave advert? Running his fingers through his damp hair, staring off pensively into the middle distance, not a hair on his caramel chest. Those baby-blue eyes – you could die in them. Oh, look, look, he's dropped to the floor to do some press-ups right there in front of me. And one-handed, no less. Biceps like Brad Pitt's buttocks. Dazzling.

Anyway, I quite like selling cruises and all-inclusives and short breaks to people. I get to leaf through the brochure every working day, which is lovely. Horizon don't stint on the paper like some places do, and I think it makes a real difference.

'A million copies of that brochure are printed,' Jean the supervisor says, 'and two-thirds of them are taken to someone's home. Hundreds of thousands of people look at that brochure, but only 1.79 per cent of those people are actually interested enough to pick up the phone. Only 32 per cent of that 1.79 per cent who phone in actually book a holiday. So you cannot afford to let even one of those get away! Read your brochure, learn the alternatives, offer something else and make a sale.' The first time she said that to me was during my training course when I was seventeen. To me then, she seemed like a kind of President or Prime Minister, eloquent and powerful on a podium, with bright red hair in spite of pushing fifty, a permanent smoker's cough and a selection of really tight T-shirts and miniskirts that she always wore with black tights, winter and summer. There were certificates around the walls proclaiming Jean's achievements – 'Most Sales in a Week', 'Most Sales in a Month', 'Cruise Sales Record', 'Long-haul Flight Record', 'All-time Yearly Sales Record'. Apparently, no one has beaten that one, even now. People have tried. There was a performance chart, listing everyone's names and showing how many sales they were making each month; Jean's name was always at the top, holding the record, even though she doesn't sell any more, she stopped eight years ago when they made her

supervisor. But the record she set eight years ago hadn't been beaten then, when I started here, and has still not been beaten now. Eight years ago, can you believe it? She must have been an amazing sight, flicking those brochure pages like her fingers were on fire, thumping out names and addresses on that keyboard, firing out every possible add-on you could ever think of, like an outside cabin so it had a window, a sea-view hotel room, all-inclusive when the client had rung up for half-board. When she was training us (I started at the same time as two other girls, Chrissie and Val) she took a couple of calls in the sales room, just to demonstrate what she meant by add-ons. I didn't think it was possible to persuade someone to pay for something they may not have really wanted when they called in, but she did it.

'You're not forcing them to do anything they don't want to do,' she said, after convincing a woman who had rung up to book a three-night city break in Prague for her and her husband's fortieth wedding anniversary to book a fortnight in the Dominican Republic instead. 'Oh yes,' she'd said into her mouthpiece, nodding to us as she closed down the Prague page on her computer, 'Prague is lovely, really sweet and suburban. The ideal anniversary destination – for the fifteen-yearers. But you're in another class, aren't you? These crystal anniversarians think they know what it takes to keep a marriage going, but they haven't got a flaming clue, have they? They don't know what it's like to be old together. That takes fortitude, determination. And patience. My God, the patience that you need to last forty years. There's a reason why you get rubies and they get a set of wine glasses! Ruby. A real, valuable gem, not some cheap crystal copy. Now, does that say Prague to you? Because I don't think it does. I think for two steadfast, long-standing lovers, for better and worse, you deserve a real chance to relax and be romantic again. I think we're talking Caribbean.' She had turned to us and winked as she'd opened up the Dominican Republic page. 'If they didn't really want it, they wouldn't book it.' That was her maxim. I had never seen anything like it. I still haven't.

I'll show you my office later. Make sure you have a look at the performance tables. They're over by Jean's desk, pinned up on the wall. You'll see that my name is always in the top three, week in, week out. Everything Jean showed me, everything she said, everything she taught, I have used, and honed and perfected. I am the one who has come the closest to beating Jean's eight-year-old sales record. I missed it by thirty-two sales. Just thirty-two. Oh come on, that's not many, you know, not for a whole year, not when we're talking about more than three thousand sales. Oh yes, I'm the only other person, in the history of Horizon Holidays, to go over three thousand in a year. That's how I know I'm going to beat that record of hers one day. She must have been over forty when she set it, and I'm only twenty-four, so I've got years and years ahead of me to get better and better and better. Sometimes, when she's writing up the stats at the end of the day and she totals up my sales for the year so far, I see her looking worried. She doesn't realize I see it and it's only there for a flicker, but I've seen it and I know I'm going to be the one.

Well, all seems to be dignified perfection again, if you want to look now. Don't you think Nick's shirt is fantastic on me? I look like a Bond girl in that, I really do. When he was taking it off earlier, I made a mental note of where it landed, so I could grab it and look all sexy and Bond-girly in it. Just as well you weren't watching at that moment as there was nothing attractive about my frantic nude scramble over the back of the sofa. Anyway, it was worth it, and he'll notice in a minute. Hang on, he's going to say something.

'You are so sexy, Rachel,' he says, gazing at me. I know I look fabulous in a messy, just-had-sex-on-the-floor way, and I smile and lick my lips seductively. 'Glad you came out with me now?'

I don't answer straight away. Of course I am glad I went out with him, who wouldn't be? Look at him, he looks like a cross between Enrique Iglesias and Hugh Jackman, with no shirt on. Crikey, it's hot in here. But you can't be too eager, can you? You've got to play the game. After all, Nick Maxwell was the major catch in the office, lusted after by all, including Jean the supervisor and her assistant, Graham. But if there was anyone not lusting after Nick Maxwell, you can bet your life they were lusting after Rachel Covington. We were perfect for each other.

I have worked at Horizon for about six and a half years. Nick has been there for two months. In my six and a half years here, I have easily been the best looking person in telesales, if not in the building. I'm not being big-headed, it's just the way it is. But then Nick arrived, and I knew I had met my match. As soon as I first laid eyes on him I knew that we would be together. Chrissie knew that we would be together. Val and Jean knew that we would be together. Martin and Mike, best friends and inseparable to the extent that you never saw one without the other, so no one was ever really sure which one was Martin and which one was Mike, knew that we would be together.

'Oh my God, Rachel, you have got to see this new guy who's just started in personnel,' Chrissie had said. 'He's the sexiest thing I have ever seen in a suit. Including Richard Gere in *Pretty Woman*. I bet he'd fancy you.'

I had shrugged. I was pretty wary of Chrissie's taste in talent. Her standards were decidedly lower than mine, but she was always trying to set me up with someone. Mum says she lives vicariously through me, which means that because she's quite – well, let's say she's a 'large' girl – it's pretty unlikely that she's ever going to get a bloke of her own, so she tries to get them all to go out with me instead. It's like almost really dating. Quite sad really.

Anyway, I had been down this road before and I wasn't going down it again. She was always, 'Oh you must come and meet my really sexy cousin/neighbour/milkman. Just wait till you see him – he's so totally gorgeous, you'll be perfect together.' Enter some lanky blond freak, grinning enthusiastically in Tesco's jeans. Yeah, right.

She hustled over to me then, her tangerine tunic growing larger and brighter as she got nearer. I had to slit my eyes a little. 'Just see him, all right?' she persisted, actually taking my arm. 'Just take one look at him.'

You'll see.' And then she put her other hand on her chest and rolled her eyes dreamily skywards with a sigh.

'All right!' I raised my arms in a gesture of defeat, but really just to get her to take her doughy hand off my skin. 'I get the message. I'll take a look, but I'm not going out with him, OK?'

Well, she'd been right, of course. But you can't blame me for being a bit wary.

It's eerily quiet in there, isn't it? Just the sound of Nick blowing out gusts of air and sucking more in over his teeth as he completes his second set of fifty sit-ups. These are the kind of sit-ups you do with the bottom half of your body raised above your head, so you're actually sitting up uphill. Not quite the same when you've balanced your legs against a cream faux-leather beanbag.

This bit's quite dull, really, just fifty more sit-ups, followed by fifty more push-ups. We can skip over this to the end. There's a moment just as Nick is coming to the end of his fiftieth push-up. He's two-handed this time, but he's taking both hands off the floor at the apex of each push and clapping them together once, then twice, then three times. I'm on the sofa, smiling, eyes glued to his torso. But then suddenly there's a change, an almost imperceptible flicker as the expression on my face alters for a tiny moment. Did you see it? Let's go back. There. Just for an instant I've glanced away, looked down, frowned, apparently remembering something, thinking about the significance of what it might be, and it's a big something,

it's huge, but then Nick manages to clap four times and I've forgotten immediately what I was trying to remember, I'm clapping along with him, laughing, the memory, the danger, all forgotten in the joy and exuberance of the moment.