Love Rules

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Extract

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Mark and Saul and Alice and Thea

Mark Sinclair liked to think that there was an inevitability to happy-ever-afters. He believed that they were granted to those who were good in life, to people whose thoughts were honourable, who had worthy goals, whose deeds and dealings were principled. However, at the age of thirty, Mark Sinclair understood that he would need to modify his belief, revise his dream and compromise. He intended to do this without turning into a cynic or allowing his ethics to suffer. He'd just have to let his dream of twenty years fade. It wasn't going to be easy. But there again, the dream wasn't going to come true, no matter how virtuous he was.

Mark Sinclair's dream was Alice Heggarty. But she had gone and fallen in love with someone who wasn't him. Again. Just as she had at the age of twenty-five. And at twenty-three. And before that, annually at university. And before that, with the captain of the first XV at his school. The girl Mark had loved for so long had gone and fallen in love again but this time Alice was nearly twenty-nine. Mark knew she'd have made a calculated decision that this love ought to take her into her thirties and onwards, into matrimony and children and a house in NWsomewhere. The time was right for her

own happy-ever-after. 'So dream on,' Mark told himself sternly, 'dream on.'

In the two decades he'd known Alice, Mark had always had hope because he'd always had the dream because, being a man of patience and principles, he'd taken a philosophical view on waiting. He theorized that Alice had never broken his dream because he'd never brought it out into the open. Besides, she'd been so busy, permanently falling madly in love and despairingly out of love with all those other men. At the time, Mark felt this to be a positive thing and he did not regret keeping his own feelings secret. After all, it meant that Alice had never made a decision against him, she'd never turned him down, never ditched him in favour of another, never suggested they revert to being 'just good friends'.

As lovers charged in and stormed out of her life, and as girlfriends breezed into his and left quietly, their friendship had remained unscathed. Alice was never possessive of Mark and Mark accepted her periodic disappearance into the fast eddies of new love-lust. Indeed, Mark had always found it encouraging that Alice went for a type – and that the type she went for was the antithesis of him. It meant she'd never fallen for someone like Mark; she'd always gone for men who were diametrically opposed to all that he was. Tall, loud, movie-blond beefy blokes with heartbreaker reputations or ice-beautiful arrogance Alice was convinced she could conquer and melt. Consequently, Mark could not feel jealous of the men in Alice's life though he envied them Alice. Rather, he was irked that they were delaying his personal happy-ever-after.

Very very privately, he was also relieved that invariably it was they who left her. Looking after Alice with her heart all hurt was actually even more rewarding than being in her company when she was hyper-effervescent with the distractions of love. Though it scorched Mark's soul to see her

distraught, he knew he could make her feel better. It was a job he could do brilliantly. And it augmented his hope. Because when his dream came true, he'd never leave her. Of that she could be as sure as he was.

Whereas Alice rushed headlong into love affairs, Mark merely dabbled in what he believed to be just an interim after all. Now, with Alice in love once more, yet again not with Mark, and given their respective ages, he acknowledged, sensibly, that an interim was a period between two points and that there really was no point in holding out for Alice. Because he loved her, and because he'd been privy to her teenage turmoil and twenties torment, he wanted only peace and fulfilment for her in her thirties and beyond. Even if her joy and contentment meant he'd never have her cry on his shoulder again.

Mark was happy for Alice, but he was not so altruistic not to be sad for himself. He had believed, mistakenly, that if he lived well and worked hard, if he was honourable in his thoughts and actions, his reward would be all he had dreamt of. Reluctantly, he had to accept that good behaviour and a belief in the potential of one's wishes ultimately might not win the prize. Neither Alice, nor the Man Who Will Marry Her, were at fault or to blame. And, just because he now no longer believed in happy-ever-after didn't mean the future need be misery-for-evermore.

He was going to moderate his desire without seeing compromise as a tragedy. He'd have to stop letting down gently all those lovely girls after the fourth or fifth date. He'd need to see the wider picture and take a view. There had been two or three he had liked enormously. Previously, when he'd reached the stage of thinking of them fondly, planning holidays, masturbating in their honour, browsing Liberty for trinkets of his affection, an image of Alice glancing at her watch had always sprung to mind. As if she was waiting for him. And

though the lovely girls were let down gently, all wished to remain friends. Mark, as Alice once told a girlfriend who was single, was one of life's great good guys.

Mark was a good person because for twenty years he had always believed that if you are a good boy, all your dreams come true.

* * *

Saul Mundy stumbled on his Road to Damascus at roughly the same time that Mark Sinclair stepped resignedly onto his. Saul had been with Emma for three years when he met a pretty and friendly blonde in a bar. They chatted and smiled and flirted lightly. Saul had no true desire for her, no intention of asking for her number or grabbing a furtive snog. Until that night, he had quite enjoyed the occasional, harmless, forgettable flirt because his affection for Emma and monogamy had remained unsullied. That night, however, it wasn't that he wanted the blonde, it was that he didn't want Emma.

He blanked the blonde, made hasty excuses to his friends and stumbled out in a daze onto Tottenham Court Road. The sudden clarity of the situation was ugly but he knew he mustn't look away. If he did, complacency would wheedle in soon enough and honesty would be replaced by betrayal. Saul wouldn't let that happen. He believed in doing the right thing and he was going home directly to do so. He had to, he was committed. It would be far easier to stay than split, far easier to act fine than confess, to hide than confide, but Saul's belief in his relationship had gone and the only honourable thing he could do was go too. Waiting for a taxi, he shivered and sheltered in a shop doorway, gazing at the rain-sluiced pavement. It looked polished to perfection, like a meticulously varnished floor. Actually, it was just grey concrete that was wet and grimy.

The truth was it was dull, no matter what tried to cover it. Surface details were worthless if the integrity of structure was lacking. Saul couldn't believe that the last three years of his life amounted to a comparison with London pavement.

That morning, he had left the house to go to work. Now he was returning only to leave home. Had he kissed Emma that morning? He couldn't remember. Would the offer of just good friendship be a possibility or a cowardly digression? Would she believe him when he said that he was so sorry, that he did love her and felt wretched for hurting her? That it wasn't her, it was him? Would she believe him that he truly felt she deserved more than he could give? That he didn't mean to sound exactly like all those articles in the women's mags she pored over in her long bubble baths and that he browsed through when he'd forgotten to buy an *Evening Standard*? He doubted it.

He had the taxi drop him off on Upper Street and he walked, reluctant but resigned, towards the house, to Emma blissfully unaware, sitting beside the home-fire she'd kept burning.

'I don't burn for you any more,' Saul whispered, eyes closed, forehead resting against the door frame, 'and I should. It's a prerequisite. I can't compromise.' He couldn't even summon a spark of it from the deepest recess of his soul. His heart might be warm for her, and would continue to be, but he was absolutely sure that it wasn't enough. He wished there was a kinder way of being so seemingly cruel. But to use a cool head to decipher his heart would give the cleanest cut, though he knew that all Emma would read written all over his face was Heartless. Saul put his key in the front door for the last time.

* * *

A decade before Mark and Saul had their epiphanies, Thea Luckmore had hers when Joshua Brown ditched her at Alice Heggarty's eighteenth birthday party. It was irrelevant that he proceeded to snog Rachel Hutton in the kitchen. It didn't matter that Alice, incensed, had poured Woodpecker cider over his head and told him he was a wanker who should fucking fuck off. It wasn't even that Joshua no longer wanted her, it was that Thea was still in love with him. She didn't ask Alice how she could win him back, instead she asked her what she should do with all the feelings of love.

Alice suggested getting off with Joshua's mate to piss him off.

'But I don't feel anything for him,' Thea had qualified.

'Exactly, it'll be easy,' Alice had encouraged.

'Alice,' Thea balked, 'I can't kiss someone I don't feel something for.'

Though Joshua Brown's friend would have done anything for a snog off Thea, Thea decided then and there that unless she experienced a shudder of desire for someone, unless she could detect potential, unless her heart swelled approvingly, she'd be keeping her kisses. Warmth or revenge were not enough. She realized that it was the love she had for Joshua that was the point. Despite the fact that he was a cad. She'd read enough Austen to know that love was a good thing and, whether it made one feel wonderful or wretched, it was her ultimate requirement for a fulfilled life.

It was the dyed-dark drama student who captured Thea's heart during her second year at Manchester University. Though she was never quite sure whether he was proclaiming his innermost feelings or reciting his lines, she adored him and was glad to lavish love on him. They smoked dope. They had his-and-hers unkempt pony-tails. They made vast vats of ratatouille. They found deep and meaningful tenets in Joy Division. They rejoiced in the intensity of their world of Us.

They went InterRailing together during the summer vacation and slept on beaches, watched sunsets and professed to truly understand e. e. cummings. He fell out of love with Thea just before her finals a year later, citing that love was life's torment and proclaiming the wring of his feelings was a headfuck.

'Did he actually say "headfuck", Thea?' Alice asked, not sure whether it was interference on the Cambridge–Manchester phone line or Thea's sobbing.

'Yes,' Thea said, 'but he also said that his love for me was so all consuming—'

'– that it threatened to devour him?' Alice interrupted. 'Life is love's torment or vice versa?'

'Yes!' Thea gasped, comforted that Alice had obviously been in such a situation herself, no doubt with that third year from Trinity with the double-barrelled surname.

'Did he say something about only the winds of time could determine where his seed would fall and take root?' Alice asked.

Thea paused. 'Yes,' she said, hesitant.

Alice continued gently. 'Do you remember that God-awful theatre-thing, that art-performance-bollocks you dragged me to when I visited just before Christmas?'

'Yes,' Thea wavered.

'He was performing his friend's prose poem?' Thea didn't reply. 'You were gazing at him too adoringly to actually hear any of it, weren't you?'

Thea's broken heart clanked heavily against a sudden twist of mortification in her stomach. She was speechless.

'Thea,' Alice continued quietly but firmly, 'I promise you, you'll find love again. And I promise you one day you'll laugh about this one. We both will. We'll laugh until we pee our pants. Trust me.'

Alice always kept her promises and she was the one person Thea always trusted. Alice, it turned out, was quite right. Memories of Headfuck Boy continue to provide them with

much mirth and they can still quote his friend's prose poem verbatim. Headfuck Boy did not cause Thea any lasting damage, nor did he in any way alter her belief in the virtue and value of falling head over heels in love. Thea Luckmore was not one to compromise.

* * *

Alice had her epiphany over a bowl of soup, ten years later – just a few months after Mark and Saul had theirs. She left her office near Tower Bridge, grabbing new issues of magazines just arrived from the printers. Though she'd never intended to take public transport anyway, the whip of November chill that accosted her outside further justified the taxi.

'Chiltern Street, please,' she told the cabbie, 'the Paddington Street end. You know, off Baker Street.'

'And do you tell your granny how to suck eggs?' the cabbie teased her. Alice looked confused. 'It's my job, love,' he continued jovially, 'the Knowledge? Short cuts? Crafty backdoubles? Bus lanes? I do know Chiltern Street – amazingly enough.'

'Sorry,' Alice said meekly, 'I didn't mean to.'

She thought how Bill absolutely detested her habit of giving directions if she wasn't driving. In their early days, he had gently teased her, even indulged her. A year on, it now irritated him supremely. 'Which way do you want to go then?' he'd give a henpecked sigh before they'd set off. And if Alice's route proved circuitous, or with a proliferation of speed bumps, or beset by roadworks or vengeful traffic lights, he'd let his stony silence yell his disapproval and annoyance.

'I'm not a control freak,' Alice said out loud, not intentionally to the cab driver but not out of context either. 'It's not an obsession, it's just a trait of my character.' She gazed out of the window, about to ask him why he was going along

the Embankment rather than via Farringdon at this time of day. But she bit her lip. Was it a loathsome quirk of her personality? Should it be something she should resolve to change? She could feel her tears smarting and prickling. She'd kept them in check all morning and her throat ached from the effort. 'Here!' she unintentionally barked at the taxi driver who swerved and shunted to a standstill in response.

'Can you tell Thea I'm here,' she said to the receptionist in Thea's building.

Thea's 'there there' was precisely what Alice had come halfway across London in her lunch hour to hear. The sound of it triggered the tears. 'There there,' said Thea again, and Alice cried all the more. 'Let's get some soup in you,' Thea soothed, guiding Alice to Marylebone High Street.

Alice sipped obediently. 'I'm going to sound like Headfuck Boy,' she admitted, after a few spoonfuls, 'but if I don't end it now, it's going to consume me. And I'll end up all spat out. Again. I'm just so tired.' Though Thea knew her friend's face by rote, objectively she noted a sallowness to the complexion, a flatness to the eyes, cheekbones now too sharp to be handsome, a thinness attributable to stress rather than vanity. 'I'm nearly thirty,' Alice concluded in a forlorn whisper. 'When am I going to learn?'

'You're not fretting about *that*, are you?' Thea asked, due to turn thirty a month before Alice.

'Look at this,' Alice said, showing Thea the new copy of *Lush* magazine. 'It's the "Alice Heggarty This is Your Life" issue.'

Thea read the cover lines out loud. '*More Shoes Than Selfridges*.' She looked at Alice. 'But I've never known you to buy a pair and not wear them out. '*A Chef in the Kitchen, A Whore in the Bedroom*.' Thea patted the cover of the magazine: 'Why, that's a skill others envy you.'

'Look!' Alice declared. '*Falling For Mr Wrong*.' She jabbed

her finger at the magazine. '*Passion Drove Me Insane*,' she proclaimed, '*Lovelorn or Lustaholic*. For fuck's sake, I'm meant to be the publisher – not the inspiration for every sodding article.' She sighed and continued in a quieter voice, '*Lush* is directed at the early-twenties market, Thea. I'm basically thirty and *still* slave to all these insecurities and issues.'

'Bill,' Thea said darkly, buttering a doorstep of bread and dunking it, watching the satisfying ooze of butter slither off the bread and dissolve into the soup.

Alice covered her face with her hands. 'If I say it out loud, it has to be real,' she said, 'if I look you in the eye, I can't hide from the truth.' She laid her hands in her lap and regarded Thea. 'He's Mr Wrong,' she whispered, 'it's as simple as that. I'm exhausted. I'm a lovelorn lustaholic and passion is driving me insane.'

'Gentle sympathy or hard advice?' Thea asked.

'You're my best friend, I need you to tell me what I need to know,' Alice said, 'even if it's not what I want to hear.'

Thea regarded Alice levelly. She tipped her head to one side. 'You're right,' she shrugged, 'Bill is Mr Wrong.' Momentarily, Alice felt like springing to Bill's defence only Thea jumped in first. 'In Bill's defence,' she said, 'he's a gorgeous and charming man. With a great car. Physically, you make a beautiful couple. But your relationship is ugly.' She'd witnessed enough blazing rows, spiked sarcasm, hostile silences and relentless bickering to speak with authority.

'It's been such hard work,' said Alice, stirring her soup as though it was a cup of well-sugared tea, 'constantly trying to safeguard his love and lust for me. Even though, sometimes when I get it, I don't actually want it,' Alice confided. 'I hate feeling so pathetically insecure, when actually I don't think I really like him anyway.'

'He is what he is,' said Thea fairly, 'gorgeous and aloof and rich and a sod.'

'It seems we're always playing some horrid power game – either I'm the one who's pissed him off or else I'm in a manipulative sulk with him.' Alice paused. 'We just ricochet from his stony silences to my flouncy strops. It's exhausting.'

'The renowned playboy,' Thea told her, 'he was captivated by your feistiness but to be honest, he'd be better suited with a bimbo or a mousy-wifey.'

'Could change?' Alice said meekly and with some ambiguity.

'You or him?' Thea asked pointedly. 'Don't you dare go compromising. And what would you change *him* into? And don't say a frog.'

But Alice was off on a tangent, gazing into the middle distance, reinventing Bill. Or, rather, creating an entirely different man simply clad in Bill's likeness. 'Someone calm. Someone who adores me and I'll never doubt it. Someone who won't mind the way I'm a back-seat driver. Someone who makes me feel safe, someone who won't cause me panic when I find their mobile phone is switched off. Someone who won't play games. Or play around. Someone who won't flirt in front of me. Or when I'm not around.'

Or with your friends, Thea thought to herself remembering more than one occasion when Bill had paid her a little too much attention. They scraped their soup bowls with their spoons and then used the last of the bread to swab them dry.

'I would have finished it months ago,' Alice said, dropping her voice to a whisper, 'but in some ways it was easy to become addicted to the fabulous passionate making-up sex which always concludes our rows. But you know what? We rarely have sex unless it's concluding an argument. And we've never, ever, made love.'

Thea snorted. 'I haven't had sex, made love, shagged, fornicated, humped or mated for eleven months!'

'You and your daft standards.' Alice laughed a little. 'I'm

surprised you don't just take yourself to a nunnery and be done with it.'

'Christ,' said Thea, who was actually an atheist, 'I love sex. I'm dying for a fuck. I'm just not so desperate as to lower my standards.'

'Do they actually have to proclaim their romantic intentions, their degree of wholesome love before you'll permit entry?' Alice teased.

'Piss off!' Thea joshed. 'You've missed my point. *They* can feel all they like, they can compose poems and do the bended-knee routine. But if *I* don't burn for them, if *I* don't feel that spark – no chance.'

They ordered tea for two and cake to share.

'You're in love with love,' Alice said, dividing the gateau with her fork and offering Thea the choice of portions, 'while I lust for lust.'

'Sounds like a magazine article, if ever there was one,' Thea said, choosing the end of the wedge, rather than the point.

Alice glanced down at the cover of *Lush* and gave a little snort. '*From Heartbreak to Happy-Ever-After – 7 Steps to Take You There*.' She paused. 'Perhaps I ought to practise what I publish.'

The girls skimmed through the relevant article. Neither of them thought that Number 1 *Time for a New You – Go for a Funky New Hairdo!!* was the answer. Nor was Number 2 *Flirt with Your Best Mate's Brother!!* a remotely feasible idea. Thea's older brother was a densely bearded academic who rather unnerved both girls. Numbers 3 and 4 dealt predictably with *Take Time and Make Time for Me Time!!!!* and *Rebound Repercussions – A Quick Shag is Not a Long-Term Fix!!!*

'Number 5 is interesting, though,' Thea remarked, '*It's Not* Who *You Love It's* How *You Love!!!*'

'I detest exclamation marks,' Alice said. 'I'll have to have a word with editorial.'

'*Change What's on Your Wish List!!!*' Thea read out Number 6. 'Perhaps there is some sense in rejigging your requirements, Alice?'

'What about you?' Alice retorted. 'Why do I have to do all this personality-dissection, inner-feeling workshopping?'

'Because I'm happy being celibate while true love eludes me.'

'You must have the Rolls Royce of vibrators,' Alice murmured.

'Well, you'd know,' Thea countered brightly, 'you bought it me.'

'Got it free,' Alice stuck her tongue out.

'Should've kept it for yourself then,' Thea gurned back.

'Number 7,' Alice returned to the article, '*Blink!!! He Might be Standing There, Staring You in the Face!!!!*'

'The postman!' Thea gasped with mock eagerness.

'That guy from the ad agency we use,' said Alice, with genuine enthusiasm. Thea regarded Alice sternly, but Alice licked her lips and winked. And then, like a mist descending, anxiety dulled her eyes and turned her mouth downwards. It was just a magazine article anyway, with too many exclamation marks and a target market half a decade younger than them. 'I'll finish it with Bill tonight,' Alice said, quietly but decisively, 'I bet he won't even care.'

'I think he does care about you,' Thea said, 'but I think you're doing the right thing. I'd better go, I have a client in five minutes and I mustn't have cold hands.'

'Will you be around later?' Alice said, her face fragile and her voice wavering. 'In case I need you?'

'Of course,' Thea shrugged, as if it was the daftest question to even think of asking your closest friend.

* * *

So it turned out that Mark Sinclair was right. He was so right that, for some time, he would quietly wonder if something

must be wrong. Alice Heggarty *was* to be married, just as he predicted, by the time she was thirty. Actually, she would turn thirty-one on honeymoon because her meticulous attention to detail and aversion to compromise meant the wedding was shunted to accommodate seamstress, florist, venue and cake-maker. Though, normally, she liked to have her birthday planned to perfection too, she didn't actually know where she would be when she turned thirty-one. That was up to the groom and she had relinquished some responsibility to him in return for assurances of untold luxury. After all, she was not so secretly dreaming of the Caribbean.

All that Mark had wrong was her choice of groom. Alice wasn't going to marry Bill. In all other respects, though, Mark had been absolutely right. It turned out that if you are good, you can indeed earn yourself a happy-ever-after. Obviously, Mark Sinclair must have been very very good. Because Alice Heggarty was going to marry him.