After the Fire

Also by Charlotte Rixon

The One That Got Away

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AFTER

Beth

Fourteen years after

The final tech run is over. Opening night is tomorrow. Press night is just around the corner.

And for the first time, the doubts have started to creep in.

Why on earth did she think that doing a one-woman show was a good idea?

It was a foolish thought, thrown out over lunch with her agent, who seized on it and ran further and faster with it than she could have imagined.

But of course, she knew why she'd suggested it. She'd wanted to do it because it would mean the best part of a year locked away in her little mews cottage, writing and hiding from the world.

She thought it would be cathartic. A way of getting back to *her*: the girl she once was. Who now often seems entirely swallowed up by the woman the world believes her to be.

After The Fire.

That's the name of the play. A monologue, a memoir, therapy borne out on stage, in front of strangers. Masochistic narcissism too then, really. But once she shared the script, everyone was surprisingly excited about it, and it felt good to be doing something people were energised by, and she does so like to please.

For a while, she was sure the decision had been the right one. The experience of writing it was exactly what she'd hoped it would be. A way of getting out all that she'd bottled up for so long. At one point, midway through the writing process, she realised that she was actually enjoying it.

But she knows, after three weeks of intensive rehearsals, that although she enjoyed the journey here, she won't enjoy the final destination: performing her life in front of an audience.

She doesn't enjoy playing herself. After all, she became an actress precisely so she could pretend to be other people.

Aside from anything else, it's lonely. She misses the buzz of having a cast around her. Those heady days at university, and early on in her career, when she was performing in the chorus of so many productions – not just West End ones but cheap-as-chips fringe shows too.

Somehow, they were even better. You could practically taste the hunger and ambition in those dressing rooms.

It's been three days since her fight with Nick and she's barely slept since. She can't remember feeling this exhausted. This emotionally disordered.

Last night, she had another nightmare, the worst for a long time.

Everything feels wrong. She's trying to tell herself that things are the way they should be, that in the long run this will be a good thing, bringing everything to a head so that they can move on. But it doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel right. Nothing about any of this feels right.

She's packing up her things when the theatre manager, Penny, knocks lightly on her dressing room door.

'Come in!' she calls.

'All set for tomorrow?' Penny asks. 'How are you feeling?'

Beth gives her the smile everyone loves. Gap-toothed, wide.

And this time: inauthentic.

'Good, thank you. Excited.'

'Not nervous?'

'Oh, only a little,' she laughs.

She's not being truthful. But what other answer could she possibly give? She can't burden Penny with her neuroses.

Penny nods and presents her with a bouquet, placing it down

carefully on her dressing table. Ornamental cabbages. Beautiful from a distance. Ugly up-close.

'Very striking aren't they? Someone wanted to get in early,' Penny says, raising her eyebrows. 'Or perhaps they got the date muddled up.'

'Thanks, Pen. Wow, they're… different.'

Penny grins at her. She has that look in her eyes – the one most people have now when they look at Beth. Admiration. Devotion. As though she's some delicate, rare treasure that must be protected.

It makes her uncomfortable. After she won her Olivier Award, even her mother started doing it. Even though her mother had never even heard of the Olivier Awards before then.

Nick was the only one who looked at her like she was just a normal person. The girl he's known for fourteen years.

And now he won't want to look at her at all.

But perhaps… are these flowers from him?

Beth holds her breath as she plucks out the small card that's nestled in between the cabbages. She can tell they are expensive. Someone is trying to impress her, to catch her attention and hold it – because people have been fooled into thinking her attention is valuable.

People love you more when you're successful. More people love you when you're successful, too. As though success somehow proves that you matter more than everyone else.

She hates that idea. And yet she has pursued it, relentlessly, for as long as she can remember. It's an addiction, the same as all the others. Just less honest, perhaps.

She's always claimed the moral high ground, no more so than during her fight with Nick. But now, she wonders, is she as guiltless as she likes to think she is?

She lifts the flap of the tiny envelope, pulling out the cream card inside.

The words written on it stop the breath in her throat.

> Congratulations! I'm happy you got everything you wanted out of life. Hope the show goes really well.
>
> Rosa x

She closes her eyes briefly, squeezing the card in her closed fist. Her mind is a buzz of noise, sweat immediately rising to the skin under her armpits.

A memory resurfaces. A picture she had buried so deeply that now she can't be sure if it's a memory at all, or a torment of her imagination: Rosa standing opposite her in the union building afterwards, her face white with fear, asking her with hard eyes if she had seen Anna.

It was Rosa's story too. Not just hers. Not just Nick's.

Should she have checked with Rosa before she decided to share it?

The marketing for the show is more salacious than she'd wanted. She'd fought against the description they'd used, but the producer was adamant, said they had to pull in the crowds.

> You may know Beth Millen as one of the UK's best-loved and most successful actresses, famous for her trademark smile and shape-shifting talents. But behind the scenes lies a story of resilience and a lifelong struggle to recover from a horror in her past. A horror that still haunts her to this day.
>
> *After The Fire* charts one woman's honest determination to rise from the ashes, and asks if we can ever truly move on from the things we've lost…

On one level, it was all true, of course, but the way they'd written it felt seedy. Exploitative.

'We've got to get people intrigued,' her agent had said, taking the producer's side after she'd protested. 'It's difficult to get people to turn up for what might be seen as a vanity project, without knowing there's going to be some serious payoff.'

Her agent was right. But she should have made more of a fuss. She's betrayed the others.

She looks at Rosa's card again. Tries to read between the lines. Is it a note of congratulation, or a note of disgust?

She can't be sure, but the regret swells in her stomach.

More than anything else, it is a stupid card with stupid words on it because of course she doesn't have everything she wants. She doesn't have Nick.

She doesn't even know if he'll be coming tomorrow. She sent him an invite ages ago, before they fell out, but he never responded, and she was too cowardly to bring it up.

Now, it seems obvious why he hadn't got back to her: he wanted to support her as he always has done, but he didn't understand why she would want to talk about this publicly. He didn't want to relive it all.

She grips the edge of her seat, nausea rising. Why would Rosa get in touch now, after all these years?

She should have argued more against the way they marketed the show. The way they made it sound so dramatic and sensationalised. It was misleading, inaccurate, unfair.

After all, the whole point of it was that it *wasn't* about the horror in her past. It wasn't about that incident at all.

It was about something more long-lasting.

Something more fundamental but just as devastating…

The aftermath.

BEFORE

Beth

Six weeks before

The first thing Beth Millen sees of Nick Parker is his bare bum.

The second thing is his jeans, which are round his ankles.

'What the…?' he shouts, and she slams the bathroom door shut.

'Sorry!'

She waits a few moments before knocking on the door.

It opens, and the boy pokes his head out.

Behind round, thin-rimmed glasses that are so untrendy they weirdly make him look quite cool, she notices deep brown eyes. He has the most impressive crop of hair. Thick and long enough to tuck behind his ears.

He also has possibly the friendliest face she has ever seen.

'I'm really sorry about that,' she says, mortified. 'I assumed you weren't in. I had my music on so loud I didn't hear you.'

He laughs.

'Well. That'll certainly go down as one of my more memorable introductions. Not your fault. I should've locked both doors.'

He holds out his hand. She looks at it dubiously.

'It's OK. I've washed my hands. With soap!'

She laughs, embarrassed, and shakes it.

'I guess we're sharing a bathroom then,' she says, not entirely upset by this.

The bathroom she's referring to is a slim room that sits between their two student bedrooms and is for their shared use, with one door leading in from her bedroom, and another from

his. *Jack-and-Jill* is the technical term, although this makes no sense to Beth whatsoever.

There are four people living in their top-floor flat. Four bedrooms, two bathrooms: one bathroom positioned between two bedrooms. Not quite your own en suite, but the next best thing.

'It must be a mix-up. I'm sure in all the stuff online it said that bathrooms would be shared by people of the same sex,' he says.

'It doesn't matter.'

'Yes it does! It's bad enough that we got dumped in the worst student accommodation the university has to offer. Did you know we're the only ones in this block to be in a flat of four? And because we're on the top floor, we have to share the space with all the boilers and stuff?' He glances at the wall. 'Hence the continuous weird grinding noise.'

'But at least we have a good view,' Beth says, looking over at the window.

It's not true. The view from her room is of the car park.

'I'll go and find the housing person and see what I can do,' Nick says. 'I assumed this room was staying empty. How come you're late? You've missed Freshers' Week.'

'I've been sick,' she says, her cheeks burning. 'Glandular fever.'

'Ohhhh. My mum always calls that the kissing disease.'

She purses her lips. She's tired of those jokes; it's been weeks and yes so what if she did catch it at a house party?

'Sorry,' he says, looking sheepish. 'Not implying anything.'

'I don't know for sure how I caught it actually,' she says.

'Boyfriend?'

'I don't have a boyfriend,' she replies, a little too defensively.

'Right. Well, given that we just shook hands, I hope you're no longer contagious. I'm Nick, by the way. Nick Parker.'

He grins at her.

'Beth Millen.'

She examines him more closely. Nick Parker has a smattering of freckles across his nose, which is slightly too wide for his face.

And there's a kindness to him. A warmth she finds reassuring. It's peculiar to be in a stranger's presence and feel so completely… safe.

'I take it you're better now?'

'Yes,' she says. 'Still a bit tired at the end of the day. But so much better than I was during the summer.'

'That's good,' he replies. 'Still, a shame you missed Freshers' Week.'

'I'm just grateful to be here at all. I was really poorly. I never want to feel like that again.'

She absolutely hated being sick. Eight weeks of it – her first true summer of freedom – and while her friends were out having the time of their lives, all she could manage to do was lie in bed watching rubbish television. Some days she was too exhausted to even read a book.

It was the first time in her life she'd been properly ill, and it was enough to make her utterly dread the thought of it happening again. From now on, she's going to be careful who she kisses. More than that, she's going to take care of herself.

'Anyway, sorry about the bathroom thing. I'll see if I can get moved or something,' he says. 'Although it's a bit of a pain because I've spent the last week making my room absolutely perfect.'

'Really?'

'No,' he says, his eyes twinkling. 'I'm being sarcastic. I didn't bring much, other than a few plants.' He shrugs.

'Oh,' she says. 'I didn't know what to bring or what to leave behind. So I kind of brought, well, everything.'

'Can I see?'

He steps into her bedroom.

'Well, would you look at that? It's exactly the same as mine.'

'No shit.'

'But you have a lot of posters. Jesus, is that a No Fear poster? Are they still a thing? Retro.' He puts his hands to his cheeks, in mock surprise, staring at the poster. It depicts a man on a

surfboard, cresting the most impossibly high wave, with the words: *What if your fears and dreams existed in the same place?* scrawled above him.

'Don't tell me, you surf?'

'I don't surf,' she deadpans, narrowing her eyes.

He chuckles, surveying the collage of photographs she's spent the last hour pinning meticulously in place.

She looks at the familiar faces too. She's only been here for a few hours but they already feel a lifetime away. Her fingertips tingle with excitement. Nick is the first person she's met since she arrived, and she likes him already. It bodes well for the future: a new life with new people, away from her parents, away from their martyred misery and everything that's been dragging her down.

'You have a lot of friends,' he says.

'Well, I'm a friendly girl.'

That sounded more flirty than she intended. Or did it?

'Who's that?' he says, pointing at Jonno, a boy from her year with a shaved head. The picture was taken at their school Leavers' Ball. She has her arm around him and they are both pulling faces at the camera.

'Oh, my friend Jonno. He's a bit crazy.' She pauses. 'He's gay.'

She's not sure why she added that.

He nods, flopping down onto her bed. She feels like she should be annoyed by this, but she's not. Suddenly, she's struck by the thought that she really doesn't want him to move rooms. She likes his cheeriness, his carefree manner. She even likes that he's teasing her, despite the fact they only just met.

She's not shy, but she takes time to warm up to people. Whereas this boy is glowing with warmth, practically bouncing around the room.

'You don't need to move rooms,' she says. 'I honestly don't mind sharing a bathroom with you. I have two brothers. Trust me, I've seen it all.'

He wrinkles his nose.

'So, Beth. What are you studying?'

'Theatre and Performance.'

'Fancy.'

'What are you studying?'

'Economics.'

'That must be a riot.'

He doesn't respond to that, which is fair enough.

'Have you met Rosa and Anna yet?' he asks.

Her face flushes again. Her parents left two hours ago complaining of the long drive home, her dad obsessed with missing rush hour on the M25. After they left, she found herself worrying about how her mother would cope with only her father for company on the long journey back to Sussex. Since his affair, they do everything they can to avoid being alone together.

They think she hasn't noticed this, but she has.

'I haven't had a chance,' she replies, which is a bit of a fib. 'I've been getting myself sorted. When I arrived there wasn't anyone around. What are they like?'

'Oh,' he says. 'They're cool.'

She nods.

'It's a bit shit, turning up later than everyone else,' she says, suddenly feeling if she doesn't confess her true feelings, she might burst. 'I hope it's not too late for me to join in.'

'Of course not. In fact, I think one of the girls in the flat downstairs has arranged some drinks tonight. I'm sure she'd like it if you joined.'

She smiles. She was worrying about nothing. He's right, it's all going to be fine. After all, she's already made her first friend.

This is the first day of the rest of her life. She feels the rush of excitement come flooding back. She can't believe she's finally here.

She's eighteen and she's better and she's technically an adult and she's *here*, at one of the world's top universities. And finally, she's going to be able to pursue her passion with no distractions.

Nick stands and makes his way back towards the bathroom.

'Well I'll leave you to your blu-tacking. You still have half a packet to use up,' he says. 'Nice to meet you, Beth.'

'You too,' she says. 'Will you be there tonight as well?'

He pauses. His mouth twitches, and then his fingers drum against the bathroom doorframe.

'Oh,' he says, hesitating slightly, but long enough for her to notice that he's reluctant to share his plans. 'No. I'm… I'm going to the cinema tonight, with Anna. We've been… we're...'

He doesn't finish the sentence. Her face falls before she has the chance to stop it.

'Oh,' she says. 'Right. Oh. That's… nice.'

He looks at her, his mouth twisting into a lopsided smile. Is it pity in his eyes, or something else?

'But I'll see you around surfer girl,' he says. 'Take care.'