It's a Kind of Magic

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Extract

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Chapter One

Leo Harper's all-time favourite karaoke number was Madonna's 'Material Girl'. Which he was currently performing with a certain amount of panache. 'Material!' he crooned.

'Go, Leo! Go, Leo!' his audience chanted.

Leo's good friends, Grant and Lard, were always very encouraging of his vocal talents. This evening, they'd been plying him with strong alcohol since six o'clock to ensure that he was in fine voice.

'Do "I'm Every Woman" next!'

Leo held up his hand in modest salute. 'Can't. Can't.'

As well as being a thirty-two-year-old white, heterosexual male – which may or may not be relevant – his only other attribute was that he was generally known as unreliable. Leo worked in the City, but other than that he wasn't entirely sure what the purpose of his job was, other than to make huge sums of money for other people while making a reasonable amount of it for himself. Grant and Lard worked with him, although they were both considerably better at whatever they did than Leo was. They had earnest discussions about bear markets and bull markets and, quite frankly, Leo didn't really understand any of it. Because they were such good friends they covered up for all manner of his shortcomings and Leo loved them for it. He loved them very much. Leo felt he'd be more suited to being a . . . well, a something else. A singer, perhaps.

Leo turned his attention back to his performance. 'Material!'

He considered himself exceptionally good at doing the high-pitched bits and waggled his imaginary breasts in the style of Madonna. 'Material!'

A look of concern crossed Grant's face and he shouted up at Leo through the cacophony, 'Mind you don't fall off the table, mate.'

Oh. And Leo was on a table. In an unspeakably trendy wine bar somewhere in the depths of the City of London. He had no idea where, as he'd been brought here totally against his will. The bar was very *Moulin Rouge*. All chandeliers, red paint and gold-leaf mirrors. But no Nicole Kidman on a swing. Leo was at a leaving do – he couldn't remember whose. Fenella. Francine. Fiona. Something like that. Anyway, Leo thought she was a lovely lass. J-Lo arse and unfeasibly short skirts. Wonderful combination. Brain the size of a planet. Bit scary. And she was leaving. As soon as she removed her tongue from the boss's throat, if Leo wasn't mistaken. If she wasn't leaving she'd probably be sacked after her behaviour tonight so it was just as well.

Leo had to leave too as he was late. Extraordinarily late. Winding himself up for a big finale, he gave 'Material Girl' all he'd got. The audience cheered – Leo loved a cheering audience – even though most of them were marginally more drunk than he was. At this time in the evening, the bar at which torture ended and entertainment began had been lowered somewhat. Easily satisfied, they howled for more. Leo bowed gracefully as he prepared to take his leave. Someone else's tonsils would have to take the place of his.

A shout went up. 'Do "I Will Survive"!'

Next to 'Material Girl', this was Leo's best number. He also did a refreshingly original interpretation of 'My Way' – somewhere between Frank Sinatra and Sid Vicious. His 'Tainted Love' wasn't half bad either – even though he usually had to say it himself. Leo shook his head in a self-deprecating way even as he basked in his own glory. 'No. No. No.'

He certainly wouldn't survive if he didn't get a move on. Besides, he didn't do requests. Elvis didn't. So neither did Leo.

'Can't. Can't. Have to go. Emma'sh birthday.' Was that his voice slurring?

Emma was Leo's girlfriend. For years. And years. On and off. More off than on. He had no idea why she put up with him. Leo wouldn't, if he were her. But then he knew that Emma didn't know why she put up with him either. He couldn't remember quite how they met but he was sure it involved him being wonderfully suave and sophisticated and sweeping Emma off her feet. She'd been the only lady in his life ever since. And he loved her, loved her, loved her. Even the 'off' periods had been very brief, therefore, not necessitating the finding of a suitable replacement. Which was nice. During the 'on' periods, however, Leo was a constant source of irritation to her. His darling Emma didn't appreciate his singing talents. Nor his tardiness.

Leo's watch was very blurred, but he knew, instinctively, that it was telling him a bad thing. The hands should be pointing very differently if it was good, he was sure. 'Shit. Shit. Late. Late.'

In his haste to depart, Leo fell head-long off the table and landed in the arms of his true and trusted friends. His limbs were feeling very lovely. 'Emma will kill me,' he gasped before floating off to oblivion on a fluffy cloud.

From faraway Leo heard his friends sigh patiently. Grant looked over his head at Lard and said, 'She might not need to.'

Chapter Two

'Emma, darling, is that Vivaldi?' My mother cocks her head towards the direction of some unseen sound system.

'Yes.' I take a sip of my champagne and try to smile at her.

'How lovely.'

'Yes.'

'Very soothing. Relaxing.'

'Yes,' I say tightly. If I grip the stem of my glass any harder it will break. Already my knuckles bear an unhealthy white pallor.

This is a fabulous restaurant. There's no denying that. A firm family favourite. Whatever the celebration – anniversaries, the announcement of a new grandchild, the traditional Christmas gathering – a table is booked at Ranolfs. Thirtieth birthdays are no exception. And this is mine.

Ranolfs has a hushed, genteel atmosphere that panders perfectly to my parents' idea of having a good time. No rowdy pubs for the Chambers clan. No chain pizza places. No *faux* Mexican cantinas. No standing in line for buffet food. My father would rather saw off his own arm than queue up for a slice of roast beef. At Ranolfs a surfeit of waiters bustle about, unobtrusively catering to their patrons' every whim. The *maître d'hôtel* – a starched and black-suited cadaver of a man – has been the same person for around a hundred years. Look back at the historical photographs on the walls and you can see that he features in all of them – in the same way

that Jack Nicholson did in *The Shining*. Oak panelling lines the walls, the like of which you'll never see in a Happy Eater. The starched white linen of each table bears an exquisite arrangement of highly-scented pastel roses. It's rather like an exclusive gentlemen's club – except that they grudgingly allow women in too. The lighting is subdued. Conversation is muted, quite probably frowned upon. Only the regular popping of expensive corks punctuates the light classical music.

Next to my mother is my father. 'I'm going to stop doing face-lifts,' he announces to no one in particular. 'The last woman I did ended up with a face like a smacked arse.' He shakes his head in bewilderment. 'Why they want to do it, I've no idea.'

My father, Charles Chambers, is 'old school' – bluff, bigoted and bombastic. He's a cosmetic surgeon of some note – if one acquires a reputation by giving eye-lifts to ageing soap stars and fading rock singers and daytime television presenters in the last desperate throes of their careers. Daddy might wonder why they all avail themselves of his services, but he doesn't mind charging them rather handsomely for the privilege.

'I'll stick to Botox.' He confirms this with a hearty swig of his champagne. 'Better just to paralyse someone's chops than cut bits out completely. You can be sued at the drop of a hat these days. There's no fun in being a surgeon any more.' Daddy, morosely, seeks succour in his alcohol.

'How lovely,' my mother says, patting her exquisitely coiffured and honey-coloured hair. She turns to me and places a hand on my arm. 'What do you think, darling?'

'Yes,' I reply automatically, not taking in the question. I glance towards the door again. This is torture. And extreme humiliation. Leo should have been here two hours ago. And he wasn't. As a consequence, my thirtieth birthday celebration dinner has been eaten in a tense silence. My unruly elfin haircut has been glammed up – though

I feel like tearing chunks of it out. I'm wearing a fairytale floaty dress. And it has all been a pointless effort.

'Emma,' my father sighs theatrically. 'Do stop looking at the door. It's not going to make him get here any quicker.'

I pull out my mobile phone. 'Maybe I'll just give him a ring.'

Mobile phones are banned in Ranolfs and there's a collective gasp around the table which would have been more suited to me having pulled down the top of my gown to expose my breasts.

'You'll do no such thing,' my father says, snatching the phone from me.

'He may have had an accident.'

'I'll make bally sure he does one of these days.'

'Daddy!'

'Face it, darling,' Mr Chambers, cosmetic surgeon to the wannabe stars continues unabashed. 'He's let you down again.'

'You don't know that.'

'I do.' My father glances conspicuously at the one empty space at the table. The myriad of cutlery lies untouched, as does the neatly folded napkin in the shape of a fan. 'He always does.'

'Charles,' my mother intervenes – as she does so often in our frequent father-daughter spats. 'It's Emma's birthday. Don't upset her.'

'I'm not upsetting her,' he protests, his voice drowning out the delicate strains of Vivaldi. 'It's the lovely Leo who's not here. *Again*.'

'Charles. Please.'

'Why can't you find a nice man?' My father sweeps his arm expansively across the table. 'A man like Dicky or Austin?'

Dicky and Austin – the nice men in question – smile in a self-satisfied and distinctly unpleasant way. Dicky and Austin are, unfortunately in my view, married to my older sisters. The sisters who toed the line and found themselves suitable husbands and settled down early to produce the required number of grandchildren. While I, instead, found Leo.

Chinless wonders – that's the best way of describing my two brothers-in-law. Austin is a farmer; a gentleman farmer, possessed of acres of rolling farmland, fat, special breed sheep and his own brand of dairy ice-cream sold in theatres throughout the country. Arabelle, my eldest sister, is deemed to have married well. Even though she has to sleep with someone who is ruddy, rotund and sports an excess of nasal hair. Her three children range from angelic to the spawn from hell.

Dicky imports antique carpets and sells them out of a quaintly over-priced shop in a pretty little town in the heart of the Cotswolds – the sort of place that is lined with similar shops but where you can't buy a fresh vegetable or a newspaper. My brother-in-law spends a lot of his time in the third world, probably being extraordinarily obnoxious to people less fortunate than himself and ripping them off with unfair prices. 'Fair Trade' is not a term Dicky is familiar with. All his carpets are probably woven by the callused hands of small children for a few rupees and aren't antique at all. But Dicky is loaded and that counts for a lot in my father's world. Dicky is moderately passable in the looks department, if you discount the burgeoning businessman's paunch, but he's crushingly boring on every other level. Unless you're interested in the intricacies of carpets, of course. My brother-in-law also has a problem with self-esteem. Far too much of it. The middle sister of the Chambers' clan is Clara and, despite having two hyper-active school-age children, she still manages to conduct a long-term affair with their gardener – Darren – whenever Dicky sets foot on another continent. And, to be honest, I can't say that I blame her.

I, however, have been dating Leo for the last five years. Dating is the right term. I never know with Leo whether he'll be around for the next week or not. It isn't that he's a womaniser or anything like that – Leo would have absolutely no idea where to start when it comes to seducing a woman. I'm never going to find him locked

in the understairs cupboard at a party with my best friend. He doesn't have it in him. Leo might well lock *himself* in the understairs cupboard at a party – but that would be as far as it went. He's clueless when it comes to women – and most other things. Utterly clueless. Which is extraordinary because he really is staggeringly good-looking and has cheekbones that most supermodels would kill for. Leo possesses an easy charm that he's completely unaware of, and that's his biggest asset. Women fall for it in droves. Why do we do that?

I – for better, for worse – am no exception. I met Leo through a mutual friend on a day out to the coast. Leo was trying to windsurf and had nearly drowned himself after getting tangled up in the sail. I swam out from the beach to rescue him. Even though he was coughing and spluttering and had seaweed strewn in his hair, within minutes, I'd fallen for him big time. Five years later it seems as if I'm still rescuing him from himself.

It was me that did all the initial running in this relationship. And me that's still doing it. Leo is physically incapable of planning ahead. That includes grocery shopping as much as relationships. The less interested Leo was in being pinned down, the more I pursued him. It's probably down to the fact that I'm the youngest and most spoiled daughter and am, therefore, used to getting everything that I want. All I've ever desired has been handed to me on a plate by my doting parents. A lovely position to be in – but not one that accustoms you to someone saying no. Even the men I've dated pre-Leo have doted on me and, subsequently, have bored me to tears. And how many modern women want a doormat as a boyfriend? With Leo it has been an entirely different matter from day one. He hasn't doted on me. He certainly hasn't bored me to tears. He was, from the start, elusive and frustrating. I saw Leo as a challenge. For the first three months of our relationship, he never once returned one of my telephone calls. He just knew that I'd continue to phone him and I often wonder what would have happened if I'd simply stopped calling.

Leo is not a natural hunter gatherer. The caveman gene has passed him by completely. There isn't a bone in his body that compels him to barbecue raw meat. He's never going to grab me by the hair and drag me into a cave, much as I may secretly have a fantasy that he might. It's an attitude that serves him in all other areas of his life. My dearly-beloved is reasonably successful in his chosen career but it couldn't be said that he pursues promotion with a vengeance. Casual, is the best way to describe Leo's approach to work – and to life and to love. Casual. *Very* casual. I can't help believing that Leo would be absolutely wonderful if only he'd apply himself to the real world.

He comes from very good stock, to use Dicky's phraseology. Nothing wrong with his pedigree and he could certainly give Awful Austin and Dreadful Dicky a run for their money. I look round the table and can see why Leo might not be keen to spend time with my delightful family. The men treat him like something of a leper because he doesn't have an opinion on politics, cricket or rugby. My sisters nag him, at every opportunity, about when he'll 'make an honest woman' of me.

Though, I have to say, his own family don't fare much better. It isn't entirely Leo's fault that none of his relatives are speaking to him at the moment. If you fall drunkenly into your grandma's grave at her funeral it tends to stretch the filial bonds to breaking point. I'm sure they will, in time, forgive him. After all, it was his beloved grandmother who taught him most of the drinking games he knows. She would have found it very amusing – God rest her soul. It's a shame the rest of his family don't. Which is unfair. Leo is Leo. They smashed the mould to smithereens after they made him. Some will say with just cause. But if you take the time to look, he has a lot of qualities. Amazing qualities. They're just hard to put your finger on.

'Leo is a nice man,' I insist. Everyone around the table avoids

looking at me. My mother pats my hand sympathetically, which makes me want to cry. Out of all of them, only I can see Leo's good points. 'He is. He's just . . . He's just very good at hiding it.'

I grip my champagne glass even more tightly while smiling sweetly at the rest of the white-lipped gathering at the table. And when he finally shows up, I'll kill him.

Chapter Three

'See you tomorrow, Leo.' Grant and Lard were leaving. Reluctantly. They were clearly worried that they were abandoning Leo to the mercy of the night. Which they were. 'Will you be okay?'

'Fine. Fine.' Leo managed a wave. 'Night, night, chaps.' His best friends in the whole wide world were going off in search of a taxi, a woman or a kebab. Leo couldn't remember which. Instead of joining them, he was crawling along the pavement on all fours. Remaining upright had proved just too difficult. Strangely, Grant and Lard seemed to be coping much better with vertical.

The pavement was very cold and hard. Leo thought that pavements should be made in a much softer material, especially for moments like these. Then he noticed what a lovely night it was – the stars, moon, sky, that sort of thing – and he wished that Emma was there. But he didn't know why. Love, probably. Love, love, love. All you need is love. In one hand, he had a bottle of champagne. In the other, his car keys. Somewhere near was his car. A lovely car that he'd christened Ethel.

But all the cars looked the same. All the bloody same.

'Ah. Looks likely.' Leo ran his hands over Ethel's curvy flanks. Very likely. 'Hello, my shpeshial girl,' he slurred.

The keyhole didn't appear to be big enough. The key was all bendy too. Leo's mind wandered to kebabs – they seemed like a nice idea, but it was late. Late, late, late. Horribly late. No sex for

a fortnight late. The key was still bendy, bendy, bendy. Leo couldn't get it to do the right thing.

'Open. Open. Open.' Leo shook the door handle in case the car was playing hard to get. 'Open, you bastard.'

A loud siren started. Beep. Beep. Beep. Too many decibels. 'Not bloody deaf,' Leo shouted and shook the handle some more. 'Come on, you bloody stubborn blue . . .'

Then it hit him. Not his car. His car was red. Yes, red. A battered VW Beetle. Unlike its owner – young and flakey – Ethel was loyal, reliable. And not blue. 'Sorry. Sorry.' Leo gave the car an apologetic pat. 'Sorry, old chap.'

He crawled a bit more. His head and his knees throbbed. 'Ah!'

Then he saw Ethel. He leaned towards her, kissing her red bonnet. She was there all the time. Waiting nicely. The key fitted smoothly into the lock, the door swung open and he climbed in. 'That's more like it.'

Now all he had to do was negotiate the pedals. Up, down. Up, down. The gears were next. Wiggle, waggle. Giggle.

'Start, start, start.' His key fell to the floor. 'Start, start, start.'

Eventually the car started. He found first gear and eased out the clutch. With a few more revs he was off jumping, jumping down the road. But not too fast. The window was open and the champagne bottle was dangling out.

'Hello, cyclist.' Leo waved the champagne in what he hoped was a friendly gesture. But he was a bit too close.

The cyclist wobbled and fell off as Ethel continued to jump along.

'Sorry. Awfully sorry.'

Leo waved the champagne apologetically and the cyclist shook his fist. But Leo had no time to stop. He could see the restaurant ahead of him.

It was a posh restaurant. Stuffy. And Emma's party was taking place inside. Hours ago. Leo was well and truly stuffed.

As he stumbled out of car and tripped over on the pavement, Leo took some deep breaths. He straightened his tie. Straightened his hair. Straightened his eyes.

Emma, he thought smugly, would never guess that he'd been drinking.