Any Way You Want Me

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Extract

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One

'So, what do you do?' he said.

'I'm a . . . scriptwriter,' I said. That was my first lie.

He raised his eyebrows. 'What sort of stuff do you write?'

I tried to sound modest. 'TV dramas mostly. The odd film.' I gave a tiny shrug and dipped my head, trying to imply that this was not a big deal.

He leaned in a fraction closer, close enough for me to smell him. 'Really? Nice one.' He smelled expensive. He looked impressed. He seemed to think it *was* a big deal.

Rather a shame that it was all lies. I didn't quite know where they were coming from. It was as if someone else was speaking to him, not me. Five minutes later, and I'd been nominated for a BAFTA, had an office in Soho and was thinking of setting up my own production company. Well, I figured I might as well enjoy myself – and I was hardly going to tell him the truth. That would have sent him packing within seconds.

I wasn't lying for any sinister reason. I'd been minding my

own business, wondering if my trousers looked as tight as they felt, while I waited for Becca to come back from the bar with our drinks. Then he'd appeared beside me, sliding along the couch, one arm slung over the back of it. Jack. A pretty boy in a loud shirt. Young and cocky and definitely, oh, *transparently,* on the pull, but he'd been so charming and funny and . . . OK, then, he'd been so damn good-looking, I couldn't resist playing along with it, trying on a new persona to see how it fitted. And for ten minutes, it fitted wonderfully. I even convinced myself.

Then my phone bleeped. A message.

I glanced at it covertly. **NATHAN HUNGRY**, it said. The two words were enough to make me break off right in the middle of my Hollywood story. Nathan hungry? *Already?* Oh God.

Don't . . . don't go and LEAK now, I told myself fiercely. I could feel that familiar tingle starting at the very thought. *Please* don't start leaking here in public, not when I'm wearing my best dry-clean-only Kenzo top . . .

'Sorry,' I said to Jack. I pulled a rueful, shit-happens face. 'Gotta make a call. I'm meeting someone else for a drink and they seem to be early.' It was the most truthful thing I'd said all night.

'Oh,' he replied. He looked up at me through lashes so sooty and thick they should rightfully have been on a woman. 'Can I take your number, then?'

'Tell you what,' I said, 'I'll take yours.'

We shook hands. 'Nice talking to you, Sadie,' he smiled. His hand felt cool and firm. Long fingers. No rings.

'Nice talking to *you*, Jack,' I said. I meant it. I hadn't felt so creative for weeks.

I dialled home as soon as he'd made the return swagger to his mates, who promptly started slapping him on the back and making simian whooping noises. 'Alex, it's me,' I said. I kept my voice low; Jack had obviously made some comment or other about me as his whole posse were straining their designer shirt collars, leaning over for a good look. 'Is everything all right? He's not due a feed in ages. Are you sure he's hungry?'

'He's been bawling his head off, Sade. I've checked his nappy and that's OK, and he's not too hot or too cold or anything . . .'

'He's probably tired. Or windy. He can't be that hungry, I fed him just before I came out.' I could hear a wail down the receiver behind Alex's words. My boy. How could I have abandoned him? I felt like running out of the bar there and then in my best strappy heels, sod the stupid night out.

Before I could move, though, Becca walked into my line of vision and plonked two tall glasses on the table in front of me. The ice clinked, and my mouth felt dry.

'He's just tired,' I repeated into the phone, more forcefully this time. I couldn't take my eyes off the gin swirling languidly

through the tonic. It looked so wonderfully viscous, so wonderfully . . . *alcoholic*. 'He didn't sleep much today. Why don't you try putting him in the sling and walking him about? Please, Alex.' We'd only just got here and I was about to be magicked back to Motherhood Central before I'd even had a chance to lift my drink. Maybe it was a punishment for all those lies.

'All right,' he said. He didn't sound convinced.

'And if that doesn't work, there's some breastmilk in the fridge,' I said. I looked around to see Becca looking grossed-out, and a couple on the next table with *do-you-have-to?* faces. I turned away hurriedly. 'You'll need to sterilize a bottle, remember, and . . .'

'All right, all right,' Alex said.

The wailing started up again and I squeezed my eyes shut. This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come.

Becca grabbed the phone. 'She'll call you back in ten minutes, OK? Bye now.'

I took a thankful swig of my drink. The ice cubes rattled down to butt my lips, and tonic bubbles popped on my tongue. The alcohol sank into me deliciously. I imagined it swirling through my bloodstream in the same languid way.

'Thanks, Bec,' I said.

She was staring at me, brown eyes scrunching up into a frown. 'Sade . . . I think you're . . . I think something's happening,' she said. She gestured to my top. 'What's that?'

I glanced down to see a telltale wet patch on my chest as the milk seeped sweetly out of me. 'Oh, Christ,' I moaned, trying and failing to cover it up with my arm. 'Oh, *bollocks!*'

The cab sped through the dark city, and I leaned my hot cheek against the window.

'Don't worry,' Becca said, giving my arm a squeeze. 'We can try again next Saturday.'

'We're going to dinner with Alex's sodding boss next Saturday,' I reminded her. I grimaced. Mine and Alex's first night out together since Nathan had been born five months ago – and it wasn't going to be quite the romantic get-away I'd been hoping for. We could hardly start holding hands and snogging drunkenly over the table at his new boss's dinner party. Not unless I was planning to *completely* ruin Alex's career anyway.

'Sometime in the week, then,' she said. 'Look, it's not a big deal. Honestly. If you've gotta go, you've gotta go.'

I returned the squeeze. 'Cheers, Bec.' I sighed. 'I'm sorry – I'm sure there's nothing wrong, but—'

'I know. I know! It's all right, you don't have to say it.'

People were spilling out of bars and restaurants, loitering in clusters on the pavement, heads tipped back in laughter under the flashing neon signs. They had all the time in the world to hang around. Maybe they'd go on to a club now or over to someone's house for a smoke. They could stay out

until the first pink blush of dawn, if they fancied it, then lounge in bed all the next day, read the Sunday papers with their feet on the sofa, doze in front of the *EastEnders* omnibus. Bacon, eggs, fags, coffee, hangover. Such enviable freedom. Such a different world.

'There's Pete!' Becca said suddenly, banging on the car window and waving like a maniac. 'And Zoe!' She leaned forward. 'Could you stop here a second, please, mate?'

As the cab pulled in to the roadside, she turned to me. 'Mind if I jump out? I haven't seen them for ages,' she asked. Then she paused. 'Or – do you fancy joining us?'

I shook my head. 'Duty calls,' I said after just a tiny hesitation. 'Have a good one.'

I watched out of the window as she went. She turned and waved, her long dark hair tumbling over her pale suede jacket, and then she was gone, linking arms with Zoe, swallowed up by the crowd.

As the cab roared away towards Battersea Bridge and home, I lurched on the slippery vinyl back seat and had the sensation that I was being pulled in half. Part of me wanted to yell to the driver, Stop! I've changed my mind! Pete and the others would be going clubbing probably or to someone's house party and there would be loads of speed and E around. It had been so long, God, just SO long since I'd done anything like that, what with pregnancy and motherhood and all the zombifying tiredness . . .

NATHAN HUNGRY, I remembered. And the very thought of his frantic wailing face was enough to kill stone dead in an instant any ideas about going out clubbing. So that was that.

'Sorry,' I gabbled to Alex when I got back, and Nathan was still scarlet-faced with sobs. Alex was jiggling him around as best he could, but every jiggle just seemed to shake another cry from our son's unhappy red mouth. I reached over and took him, and his breath gasped out into my shoulder at once, in hot, tearful relief.

'Here I am, sweetheart,' I whispered, hurriedly undoing my top and letting his mouth fasten upon me. 'Mummy's home.'

My night out had vanished into the ether. Already, the feeling of being in the bar, the squishy couch beneath my legs, the smell of smoke and perfume and beer – already, it seemed like fragments of a dream I was struggling to remember. It was slipping further and further away by the second.

Nathan sucked hard and frantically for a few moments, then his body relaxed against mine in limp exhaustion, and his breathing slowed. His eyes shut dreamily and his face softened in the ecstasy of warm milk. My boy. My ever-ravenous boy. I stroked his cheek, held him tight to me.

'He just wanted you,' Alex was saying again, shrugging his shoulders in a *What was I supposed to do?* gesture. 'He went mad

when I tried the bottle. It was like I'd offended him. He just—'

'It's OK,' I said, not looking up. 'Don't worry about it.'

Like a well-oiled machine, Alex's hands moved for the remote, his beer and today's paper at my words. *Permission to relax again, sir!* He sat down and opened the newspaper with a flourish.

As I leaned back carefully on the sofa, Nathan still attached, I felt the rustle of paper in my pocket. Then I remembered. Jack's phone number. Jack! He had been nice-looking, hadn't he, with his dark lashes and laughing mouth? He'd liked me, too. Well, he'd liked the BAFTA-nominated scriptwriter, anyway. Probably would have run a mile in those expensive leather shoes of his if he'd known the truth.

I tried not to smirk too obviously at the novelty of having been chatted up. It had been a long time since anybody had given me so much as a *first* look, let alone a second one. Not that I was *wanting* second looks, you understand, I was a million miles from those out-on-the-pull days but . . . Well, you know. Nice to be noticed, wasn't it? Looked at as somebody to desire again, rather than looked straight through as one more child-bearing mothering machine behind a buggy. And it was dead flattering that somebody as good-looking as Jack had seen something else there, some last vestige of sex-kittenness inside me. Well, hopefully, anyway. Of course, maybe he had just been on the lash, and desperate.

Nathan opened his eyes and blinked, his curled pink fists resting contentedly on me. My deliciously chubby boy with his dimples and solemn blue gaze. I ran a finger down the side of his face and felt a twist of guilt at the sight of a tear still clinging to his eyelashes.

The washing machine chuntered in the background. The telly's drone was interspersed with periodic bursts of moronic-sounding canned laughter. Alex poured me a glass of red wine and flicked through the newspaper. Everything – and everyone – was in their place.

I reached out a hand to him across the chasm of sofa between us and he took my fingers, stroked them absent-mindedly as he frowned at the sports pages.

Then he looked up. 'Sorry,' he said.

'What for?'

'For wrecking your night out. For dragging you home.'

I heaved our son up to my shoulder and patted his pyjama'd back gently. He had fallen asleep and his breath sighed out, sweet and milky against my face. 'It's all right,' I said, trying to ignore the flash of resentment I'd felt. I could do it again another night, after all, couldn't I? 'Honestly. Becca was cool about it. She saw Pete and Zoe on the way back, so she went off with them instead.'

Alex looked faraway for a moment, and I knew that, like me, he was wondering which club they were all at, imagining

thudding bass-lines, amphetamine-fuelled dancing, sweat and shouting and bare flesh.

He rolled his eyes. 'It's great having kids, isn't it?'

'Oh yeah,' I agreed. 'Who needs a social life, anyway?'

'Exactly,' he said, reaching over to grab the remote and flip channels. 'Especially when *Match of the Day* is about to start.'

I put our full-bellied, slumbering son back in his cot and watched him for a couple of minutes as he lay there breathing in the half-darkness. Then I tiptoed into Molly's bedroom and tucked her duvet around her. She was cuddling her Fizz doll in her sleep, and smiling, her hair a mass of blonde fluff on the pillow.

My beautiful children. I was grateful, really, of course I was. I wouldn't have swapped them for the wildest social life in the world. It just seemed a shame that one life had to end so abruptly when another began.

I didn't mind the sacrifice of endless nights in front of the telly so much but I worried that Alex did. He'd been the uber-party animal in the pre-kids days, always getting invites for the hottest nights out, scoring the best drugs, suffering the worst Sunday come-downs. When we first started seeing each other, I had felt swept along by his energy and stamina, his passion for life, love, everything.

Those days seemed long gone. In my most miserable, sleep-tortured moments, I couldn't help wondering if he was secretly longing to escape the domestic confines of parent-

hood, and abandon us for some dark-eyed, lithe-limbed lovely in a sweaty nightclub, where life was easy and everyone was dancing.

I went downstairs again, suddenly anxious to know if this was indeed what he was feeling, but he was snoring on the sofa. Gary Lineker burbled away about Arsenal's defensive tactics in the background as I shook awake south London's one-time party king. Then we went to bed.

The thought of Jack and my aborted night out stayed buried beneath an avalanche of more pressing things until the following Monday morning. Twenty minutes or so after I'd put the first load of washing on, I remembered.

A scribbled phone number on a page torn from his diary, stuffed in my trouser pocket. I knelt in front of the washing machine and watched helplessly as the assortment of babygros and cot sheets and Angelina Ballerina vests swirled and churned with Alex's boxers and my vile nursing bras and . . . and, yes, there they were, my best black trousers.

I sighed. It wasn't as if I was going to *call* him or anything. It wasn't like I was going to . . .

'What Mummy doing?'

I put an arm around Molly's shoulders as she crouched next to me. She had pink felt-tip pen all over her cheeks. I kissed her blonde hair and she leaned into my side.

'Just thinking about life, Molls. Wondering where it's going.'

Her blue eyes were thoughtful. 'Where it going,' she repeated solemnly. 'Where it going?'

'That, my love, is the killer question,' I said. Then I stood up and grabbed her, lifting her top to blow raspberries on her creamy-white belly. 'And who's been drawing all over your face?' I asked. Her body was shaking with giggles. 'Was it Nathan?'

'Molly,' she spluttered.

'Was it . . . Doug next door?'

'Molly!'

'Was it . . . Grandma?'

'MOLLY draw on me!' she shouted. '*I* draw on me!' She was beaming with pride.

I gave her a kiss. 'Still haven't mastered the art of lying, have you, Molls?' I said. Unlike your bullshitting mother, I thought. 'Come on, let's go and clean you up. We're going to Tumble Tots in a minute.'

'Mummy, I done beautiful picture for you,' Molly announced, snuggling in to me as we went through to the front room.

'Have you? Aren't you . . .' I stopped. Aren't you lovely, I had been about to say. As I saw the felt-tip explosion in the front room, I had to bite my tongue not to launch into a round of expletives instead.

'Oh, *Molly*,' I said, putting her down abruptly. My mouth tightened. 'How many times have I told you – we draw on *paper*, don't we? Not on the sofa. And not on Nathan!'

My eyes bulged in horror at the sight of my precious boy with green streaks all over his cheeks and forehead, although he was beaming gummily under the baby gym, more concerned with pulling the rattly giraffe off its ring. I surveyed the damage wearily. One brown scribble on the sofa (thank Christ for washable covers) and some experimental pink lines on one of the cream walls. Marvellous. Truly avant-garde.

The budding artist, sensing all was not well, rushed to my side and did her best to cuddle me. 'I love you *very much*, Mummy,' she told me earnestly. Then, knowing it usually turned me to sentimental mush, she threw herself on her baby brother. 'I love you *very much*, Nathan,' she said, sneaking a look at me to see if it was working.

Nathan burst into howls as her bony elbows dug into him.

'Molly, you're squashing him. Get up!' I found myself yelling. 'Look at this mess! I can't leave you for two minutes!' My fists were clenched. 'Get off him! He doesn't like it!'

Now they were both crying. I stared helplessly at their wide red mouths and the tears that were springing out of their eyes. I snatched up a packet of baby wipes and started scrubbing the pen-marks off their faces. Oh God, now we were going to miss the start of Tumble Tots and the smug mum collective would purse up their lipsticked mouths as, once

again, we crashed the double buggy in there late, guilty apologies pouring out of me. Sod it. Sod them. Why wouldn't this green come off Nathan? He was staring at me as if he hated me for wiping his cheeks so frenziedly.

'Molly, go and find your shoes.'

'I want my wellies.'

'I said shoes, not wellies.'

'I want my *wellies*!'

'OK, fine, get your wellies, then.' Get your sodding bollocking wellies, see if I care.

There, one small boy de-greened. 'Right, let's get the buggy out,' I said. 'Here's your coat, Molly. Oh, you put your wellies on all by yourself, well done. Do you want me to put your coat on?'

'I do it.'

'OK,' I said, fingers twitching as I watched her stuffing one arm down the wrong sleeve, upside down. 'Shall I just start you off . . .?'

'*I* do it, Mummy! Let *I* do it!'

'Right, fine, you do it. Let's go.'

We were ten minutes late for Tumble Tots in the end. Not exactly a crime against humanity, although you might be forgiven for thinking so if you'd seen some of the arched eyebrows, and heard the tutting.

A couple of the other mums waved knowingly across the

hall and I smiled gratefully back. Not everyone was in the motherhood mafia, at least.

'You'd better join this group,' Debbie, the Marlboro-voiced, scarily tattooed Tumble Tots leader told me, pointing to one corner where ten or so toddlers were dementedly rampaging up and down climbing frames. 'Hello, Molly – been drawing, have we?'

I tried to smile but couldn't remember how to do it. Instead, I grabbed Nathan and followed my daughter, who was pelting towards another group of kids altogether, having seen her friend Ella whizzing down a slide.

'I go with Ella,' she was shouting.

Ella's mum, Anna, elbowed me as I went over. 'Remember, we're *pleased* we've got feisty daughters, really, Sadie,' she told me. 'We're glad we've got independent, free-spirited . . .' She caught sight of the look on my face. 'All right, we're wishing they were obedient, passive little flowers, then, I admit it.'

We watched as our obedient, passive little flowers started bouncing alarmingly high on a mini-trampoline, holding hands and singing. 'WIND the bobbin up! WIND the bobbin up! Pull, pull, clap, clap, clap.'

'Wind the mummy up, wind the mummy up,' Anna sang softly.

'Pull, pull, smack, smack, smack,' I added, with feeling.

*

I stopped off for a coffee at Anna's on the way home. I'd met Anna when we'd both been hugely pregnant with our second babies, while breathlessly chasing our first ones around at a music class in Clapham. Ella was every bit as strong-willed as my own daughter, and Anna became an ally immediately. Nathan and Theo had been born within weeks of each other, and our friendship had deepened as we'd weathered the hellish early months together through coffees and large sugary doughnuts and plenty of crying.

'Anna, do you ever wonder if there's more to life than this?' I asked. We'd left the girls to trash Anna's sitting room while we sat in the relative peace of the kitchen. Nathan squirmed on my knee, brandishing a teaspoon with an air of triumph, and I wrestled to keep hold of him with one hand, clutching my coffee cup with the other.

Anna was frowning and sniffing Theo. 'Have you just . . .?' she started asking him. Then she pulled a face. 'Do you mean, is there more to life than stinking nappies and wind the bloody bobbin up and arguing about why your daughter can't wear her new coat in the bath?'

'Yes. That's exactly what I mean.'

She looked at me as if I was mad for even asking. 'God, yes, of course I wonder. Last night, I found myself trying to work out how much money I'd be earning now if I hadn't given up my job and had kids.' She gazed down at the table, and traced a pattern in the spilled sugar with her finger. 'It

was so depressing and I felt so *guilty* for finding it so depressing that I went to bed instead.'

'Quite.' I took another slug of hot coffee. 'And it's not just the job and money stuff, it's the what's-happened-to-*me*? thing that I can't bear. The where's-my-life-gone? feeling.' I sighed and kissed Nathan's head, feeling bad for even saying the words out loud.

She was nodding. 'I know. It's like, what happened to the Anna who used to have a packed diary, gym membership, exciting sex-life, amazing career prospects? Where the hell *is* that woman? I really used to enjoy being her.' She swilled her coffee around. 'It was like she just melted away. She disappeared.'

I stared at Nathan as he patted my hand, his fingers closing around my thumb. 'Do you think our mums ever had this sort of conversation?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'No way. Not mine, anyway. My mum always says it was the happiest time of her life when me and my brother were tiny. The happiest time! Some days it feels like this is the worst thing that ever happened to me.' She bit her lip. 'Only some days. I mean, most of the time, it's great and lovely, but . . .'

There was a moment's silence. She didn't have to say the 'but'. We both knew what the 'but' was.

'You know, the stupid thing is, if I didn't have kids now, in my mid-thirties, I would be desperate for them,' I said, to

spare her having to finish the sentence we all avoided saying. 'And here I am, with them, and all I can think about is how I want to feel like . . . like a sex kitten again.'

Anna spluttered, but then stopped as she realized I wasn't joking. 'Seriously?' she asked. 'Blimey, I wish I had the energy to even consider sex these days. What's got into you? Are you mad?'

She was smiling at me but I couldn't smile back. 'Anna, the other night, I went out and I ended up pretending to be someone else, just because the thought of my own life was too boring to think about.' I grimaced. 'And also because I really enjoyed talking to this guy. You know what, it was great to be talking to a man where the conversation didn't revolve around why no one had paid the gas bill and how the mortgage was going to be a struggle this month. It was just . . . fun. And flattering.' I looked across the table at her. 'Does that make me an awful person?'

A scream of rage interrupted us then and we rushed into the sitting room to find Ella and Molly both clutching the same fairy wand and shrieking at the other one to let go, even though there was another wand, exactly the same, on the carpet next to them.

'Molly, give it back to her!'

'Ella, let her have it!' Anna and I shouted in unison.

CRACK! The wand promptly broke in half and both girls fell over and started sobbing.

'Come here, Ella, love, you're all right,' Anna said, trying to cuddle her two children at once and nearly toppling over as she lost balance. Then she looked at me, her hazel eyes serious for once. 'It doesn't make you an awful person at all. You're a mum. We all feel like that.'

You're a mum. We all feel like that. Her words kept coming back to me as I heaved the double buggy back home. Did being a parent automatically mean you couldn't be the complete package of the person you wanted to be? Why *couldn't* you be sexy as well? Why couldn't you be a high-flying career woman without the guilt? Why did you always have to give something up?

I looked down at my children and felt like weeping as I saw Molly trying to hold Nathan's hand. 'Hello, little babe,' she was saying. 'Hello, little fella.'

They were so lovely but they were so bloody exhausting. Surely there had to be some kind of middle ground, one where you didn't necessarily concede your whole life to these small tyrants who deafened you with their cries and smothered you with their love – or was that just wishful thinking?