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Ex-Girlfriends United

Matt Dunn

Chapter 1

When Dan rings on the doorbell, my first thought as I buzz him in is that my video entry-phone picture needs adjusting, because he's as white as a sheet, which for someone who spends as long on the sunbed at Tan-Fastic on the high street as he does is rather worrying. He's my best friend, and something of a minor celebrity here in Brighton, thanks mainly to Where There's a Will, the daytime antiques programme he presents on the TV.

'What's up with you?' I say, as he slams the door shut behind him. 'Crowd of girls after more than an autograph chasing you down the street?' Unlike most normal people, success didn't go to Dan's head, but to his groin – something he's been only too happy to exploit occasionally. In fact, he woke up the day after he first appeared on television and thought 'fuck me, I'm famous' – and then decided to adopt that as his mission statement.

'Chance would be a fine thing.' Dan pushes past me, and walks into the front room, where I've been shredding some old bank statements from when Jane and I were together. 'What on earth are you doing?'

'Shredding. You can't be too careful nowadays, what with this "identity theft" lark.'

'There are people that desperate?' Dan looks at me pityingly. 'Anyone who steals your identity should be made to keep it. That'd teach them.'

'Nice to see you too, Dan. And to what do I owe this "pleasure"?'

'I need a drink.'

'And the off-licence was shut, was it? Or did the guy behind the counter catch you flirting with his wife? Again.'

Dan ignores me, walks into my kitchen, and heads straight for the fridge. 'You seem to be out of beer,' he says, poking around in the vegetable drawer at the ¬bottom, which, and evidently to Dan's surprise, actually contains some vegetables.

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'I don't drink beer any more. Remember?' I pat my stomach, which according to him, used to be on Wikipedia under the definition of 'beer belly'.

Dan shakes his head. 'What's happened to you, Ed? It's not so long ago that you used to think a Terry's Chocolate Orange counted as one of your five portions of fruit and veg a day, and now ...'

'There's some organic grape juice, if you'd like. Or I think we've got a bottle of sherry left over from last Christmas somewhere, if you'd prefer.'

'Sherry?' Dan makes a face. 'Do I look like an old woman to you?'

Normally, my answer to that question would be 'yes', but given his apparent mood this evening, he might just burst into tears, or punch me in the face. Or both.

Dan walks through into the front room, where he collapses on the sofa and stares blankly at the television, so I bring the carton in from the kitchen and pour us both a glass of juice. But when he downs his in one, helps himself to a refill, and does the same again without saying a word, I start to get a little concerned.

'What's up?' I say, perching on the edge of the chair opposite.

Dan picks up the remote control and starts to flick uninterestedly through the channels. 'Sam's not here, is she?'

Sam is my girlfriend. She's a personal trainer, and often works in the evening.

'Nope. She's got a late client. That's late as in after work, and not late as in dead, I mean.'

Dan grins mirthlessly. 'I wouldn't be too sure, remembering how knackered you used to look when she first started putting you through your paces.'

'As a client, you mean?'

'Nope. As a boyfriend.'

'Very funny, Dan. You were saying?'

'Oh, right.' Dan sits up, and shifts uncomfortably in his seat, before picking the carton up again and ¬emptying the remainder of the contents into his glass. 'It's just that I, er ... Are you sure you haven't got ¬anything stronger?'

I nod towards his grape juice. 'We could put some yeast in that.'

Dan frowns. 'Some yeast?'

'Yup. And some sugar. And then, if we wait for it to ferment ...'

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'Ha bloody ha, Edward.'

'And anyway.' I nod towards the television, where Dan seems to have settled on some episode of The Bill, which as far as I can make out, seems to be full of ex-EastEnders actors, which I wonder whether they see as a step up or a step down. 'Stop trying to avoid the issue.'

'Sorry.' Dan clicks the TV off, then puts his glass back down on the coffee table, and stares at it for a few seconds. 'I just, er, I mean, well ...'

'What?'

He folds his arms. 'You're going to make me say it, aren't you?'

'Well, that's normally how people find out something from someone else. Unless you'd like me to fetch you a pen and paper, so you can write it down?'

For a moment, it looks like Dan is actually wondering whether that might be the easier option. 'Okay,' he says eventually, before taking a deep breath. 'It's just that, well, I seem to be having a little, you know, ¬problem. Where women are concerned.'

I don't quite know what to say. Normally, the only problem Dan has with women is which one to sleep with. 'What sort of problem?'

'An embarrassing one.'

Ah. How on earth do you console a friend with that kind of problem? 'That's ...' I search for the right word, although if he's talking about what I think he's talking about, then I'm not sure there is one. 'Terrible.'

'I know! And it's never happened to me be—'

At the sound of the doorbell, Dan suddenly stops talking, and leaps up off the sofa as if he's been electrocuted. I look at him strangely, then get up myself to buzz Sam in, and by the time she breezes into the lounge, he's standing in the far corner of the room.

'Hello, trouble,' she says, walking over to where he's pretending to be interested in my collection of paperbacks on the bookshelf, before planting a kiss on his cheek. She's dressed in her trademark tight tracksuit, and is perspiring slightly from her jog home, meaning Dan is torn between pulling away from her slight sweatiness, and staying where he is to peer down her top. As usual, he chooses the latter option and then, again as usual, glances guiltily across at me to check whether I've noticed. 'What brings you round here this evening?'

When Dan doesn't answer, Sam turns to me. 'Edward?'

'He, er ...'

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'I came round to borrow this,' says Dan, selecting a book at random from the shelf.

'A book?' says Sam. 'Have you finally learned to read, then?'

Dan ignores her dig. 'Just fancied a bit of bedtime reading.'

'Which might come in handy at the moment,' I say, before realizing that that's perhaps a little cruel, given Dan's recent admission.

'The Da Vinci Code?' says Sam, peering at the title. 'I didn't know there was anyone left in the world who hadn't already read that. And didn't we all go and see the film together?'

'That's right,' says Dan.

'And didn't you tell us, in a loud voice halfway through, that it was rubbish, and then get up and leave?'

'Er ... That's right too.'

'With some girl you'd met outside in the queue,' I add.

'Much to the annoyance of her boyfriend,' says Sam.

'Might have done,' says Dan, guiltily. 'I can't remember.'

'So why the book?'

'I, um ...' Dan looks helplessly across at me.

'Well ... You've been wondering – ever since that night – just how it turned out, so you wanted to ¬borrow the book to see how it ended. Isn't that right?'

There's the customary few seconds as Dan's not-so-speedy brain processes this particular piece of ¬informa¬tion, before he finally realizes it's actually not a bad excuse.

'Exactly.'

Sam frowns. 'Instead of just renting the film on DVD?'

'Yup.' He nods. 'Although now I think about it, your DVD idea is better.'

'Or,' I suggest, looking at my watch, 'we could go out for a quick beer instead, and I could tell you what happens. Save you having to read it. Or rent it, for that matter.'

Dan flicks quickly through a few of the chapters. 'That might be better. It does have rather a lot of pages, after all.'

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'With a lot of big words,' teases Sam.

I nod towards the door. 'So, would you prefer to go out and talk about it?'

'Yes,' says Dan, glancing furtively across at Sam. 'Please.'

Sam eyes us both suspiciously, and then just shrugs. 'Don't mind me,' she says, half-unzipping her tracksuit top. 'I've got to go and take a shower anyway.'

'Great.' I pick up my wallet from the coffee table and slip it into my pocket. 'Well, come on then, Dan. I'll buy you a beer, and you can tell me ... I mean, I'll tell you all about it.'

'All about what?' says Dan, momentarily confused.

'The Da Vinci Code, dummy.'

Dan looks at the book in his hand as if it's the first time he's seen it, before putting it back on the shelf. 'Oh, right. Of course. Well, you have a nice shower, Sam,' he says, peering along the corridor towards the bathroom door, which is clearly visible from the sofa. 'Or alternatively, we can stay here, Ed. If you'd prefer. I could get some beers in, and ...'

I grab him by the arm and steer him towards the front door, stopping to kiss Sam on the way, feeling a little guilty that she's come round for one of our rare week-nights together and I'm abandoning her. But, equally, I don't feel I can quite tell her why – not until Dan's gone, at least – although it's a conversation I know she'll enjoy. Dan never tires of boasting about his sexual prowess in front of her – or anyone, for that matter – so the more ammunition she has to get back at him, the better.

'I won't be late.'

She takes one look at Dan's miserable expression and makes the 'yeah, right' face. 'Don't worry. I'm pretty tired, and I've got to be up early in the morning, so I'll probably just go straight to bed afterwards.'

For a moment, given the prospect of an early night with Sam, I'm more tempted to stay in, but I can't ¬abandon Dan in his hour of need, especially when he's looking so fed up. And more importantly, because he was there for me a while back when Jane, my girlfriend of ten years, suddenly dumped me with the words It's not me, it's you, and headed off to Tibet to 'find herself'.

Back then, it was Dan who helped me through the worst of it, got me to sort myself out, lose some weight, smarten myself up, and eventually find myself again. And it was while I was finding myself that I found Sam.

'Where shall we go?' Dan says, as I shut the door behind me, and we walk out into the warm evening.

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I shrug. ‘If only we knew somewhere nearby ...’

Two minutes later, we’re outside the Admiral Jim, our local, a regular watering hole as well as just around the corner from our respective flats. As Dan and I walk in through the swing doors, Wendy, the manageress, nods to me from the other end of the bar. She’s about eight months pregnant, which she and boyfriend Andy are extremely chuffed about, and looks like she’s eaten a beach ball.

‘So,’ I say, once Dan’s safely installed on a stool at the bar with a bottle of his favourite designer lager in his hand, ‘back to your little, ahem, problem. Unless you’d rather talk about The Da Vinci Code?’

Dan looks at me miserably. ‘To be honest, yes.’

‘Come on. The quicker you get it over and done with ...’ Oops. If that is, in fact Dan’s, er, difficulty, then that’s perhaps not the most sensitive thing to say. ‘A problem shared, and all that.’

‘Well ... It’s women,’ says Dan, picking at the foil around the neck of his beer bottle, before pouring the contents slowly into his glass and taking a couple of sips. ‘I just can’t seem to, you know ...’

‘No wonder you didn’t want to discuss this in front of Sam.’ I cut him off, as much to spare my blushes as his, and put on my best concerned voice. ‘How long has this been happening? Or not happening, as the case may be?’ I say, wondering whether I’ve got my initial diagnosis wrong. ‘I mean, maybe you’re under a lot of stress at the moment. And, apparently, stress can make the body behave in all sorts of different ways. Or misbehave.’ I stop talking, conscious that I’m gabbling on – although that’s probably because I seem to be more embarrassed about this than Dan is.

He stares at me for a second or two before realization dawns. ‘Not anything like that. God no.’ He takes a huge gulp of beer. ‘If that was the case, I’d have slit my wrists long before coming to talk to you about it.’

‘Oh. Right. Thanks. I think. So what exactly is the matter?’

‘Like I’ve been trying to tell you. I can’t seem to get ...’ He takes another mouthful of beer before con¬tinuing. ‘I mean, no one will go out with me any more.’

‘What?’ I can’t help but smile, relieved that it’s ¬nothing more serious – or too personal, to be honest. ‘The great Dan Davis? TV’s Dan Davis, in fact, can’t get a date?’

He shushes me anxiously, looking around to check that Wendy’s out of earshot, as she’s not his biggest fan. Although thinking about it, I’d struggle to name a woman who knows Dan who is, given his reputation. ‘All right. Don’t rub it in. I’m going through a sexual crisis here.’

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'Sorry.' I try to adopt a more sympathetic tone, but to be honest, I'm a little miffed at missing a night in with Sam for, well, this. 'How long is it now?'

Dan narrows his eyes. 'What's that got to do with it?'

'No, Dan. Not that. This celibacy of yours.'

'Huh?'

'How long since you've, you know, scored?' I say, putting it into language he can understand.

'I don't know. About three weeks.' Dan looks at his watch – the Omega Seamaster that he treated himself to after seeing one in a Bond film, then tried to take back when he found out there wasn't really a secret magnet in the case that you could use to unzip women's dresses – then leans across towards me. 'Three weeks, two days, and seven hours, to be precise,' he says, lowering his voice.

I let out a short laugh. 'Is that all? That's hardly a ¬crisis. Jesus, Dan – you had me worried. I thought it was something serious.'

'It is serious,' insists Dan. 'Three weeks is a long time for me. In fact, it's three weeks longer than, well, just take my word for it.'

'Yes, but for any normal person, three weeks is hardly ...'

Dan holds a hand up. 'Let me stop you there. Remember, women are my thing. Just like yours is ...' He frowns. 'Remind me what you're good at, again?'

'Piss off.'

'And I seem to have lost it,' he continues, sitting up on his stool so he can inspect his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. 'Though God knows how.'

'You might just be going through a slump. It happens to us all.'

Dan looks at me as if I've just made the most ¬ridiculous of suggestions. 'Not to me, it doesn't.'

'Well, Brighton's a small town. Isn't it possible that perhaps you've gone out with most of the women here? And so you've forgotten that you've already dated the ones you're asking out, who of course are going to turn you down.'

Dan perks up a little as he considers this, but his face quickly darkens again. 'Nah. I think I'd remember. And besides, if I've already dumped them, then surely they'd leap at the chance to go out with me again?'

'Hold on a sec.' I stand up, and move my stool back a bit, before sitting back down.

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Dan looks at me strangely. 'What are you doing?'

'Just making room for your ego.'

'Very funny.'

I take a sip of my wine. 'Well, maybe you're just having an unlucky run. A bad spell.'

Dan sighs. 'Edward, a bad spell for me is having to spend two consecutive nights on my own. Three weeks?' He closes his eyes and shakes his head slowly. 'This hasn't happened since I was fourteen.'

I nearly spit my drink out in shock. 'Fourteen? I ¬didn't lose my virginity until I was ... Well, that's not important. So, do you want to tell me exactly what happens?'

Dan looks around to check no one's nearby, but lowers his voice anyway. 'Well, it starts off all normal. We make eye contact, they come over, we get chatting, maybe I buy them a drink, more often than not they buy me one ...'

'It's tough being you, isn't it?'

He ignores me. '... and then they give me their number. So far, all pretty straightforward.'

'So what's the problem?'

'It's just ...' Dan waits as an older couple walk past us and sit down in the corner. 'Well, I do the standard leave-it-a-day-and-then-call-them, and ... Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Nope. Whatever I suggest – a coffee, dinner, or just sex – they're suddenly not interested. You know what it's like.'

I do, actually. Or at least did – until I met Sam. 'Uh-huh.'

'I mean, it happened again yesterday morning. Met this girl – Nicola, I think it was – at the gym, called to ask her out this evening, turned out she was washing her hair.'

'Well, that happens. I mean, women do wash their hair. Apart from those dreadlocked crusties with all the dogs who live under the pier. And Britney Spears when she went a bit mental recently. But then that's because she'd shaved hers all off.'

'Not every night. Which is what Nicola pretty much implied.'

'Well, maybe you're leaving it too long. I mean, I'd call them as soon as possible.'

'Which is why you've only had sex with two ¬different women in the past ten years.'

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'That's not fair. True, but not fair.'

Dan sighs, and stares into his glass. 'I can't work it out. They're all over me when we meet. And then the next day ... It's like I've done something. And I haven't even had the chance.'

'Are you sure you're not misreading them? I mean, maybe they're just pretending to be interested.'

Dan's mouth drops open, as if I've just made the most stupid suggestion in the history of the world. 'Misread¬ing them? I'm not some woman-dyslexic like you. And besides, if they weren't interested, they wouldn't give me their phone numbers in the first place, would they?'

'I suppose not.' I take another mouthful of wine, and savour it thoughtfully, while trying to ignore my craving for a packet of crisps. 'Although maybe they're just doing that to be polite?'

'Polite?' Dan snaps. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Why is that ridiculous?'

'Edward, when a woman's being polite, she doesn't give you her real number.'

'She doesn't?'

'No,' says Dan, as if he's explaining something to a five-year-old. 'She gives you a made-up one. That way, you still walk away with a number, and it's not until you try and call it the next day that you realize what she's done. That's polite. This? Well, it's just downright rude. I mean, I just don't understand it.'

And nor do I. Where women are concerned, if Dan doesn't understand what's going on, then I'm hardly likely to be able to throw any light on the subject.

We sit and sip our drinks, Dan sulking quietly, and me following the 'when you don't have anything to say, don't say anything' rule, until a couple of attractive girls walk in and sit down at a table near the bar. Normally, Dan would be salivating like a dog in heat, but this evening, he hardly gives them a glance.

I nudge him. 'Aren't you going to, you know ...' – I nod towards their table, where the girls, having ¬evidently recognized Dan, are whispering loudly to each other, while pointing at him in an unsubtle way – 'give one of them a go?'

Dan just rolls his eyes. 'What's the point?'

'They look pretty interested.'

Dan sighs. 'Edward, weren't you listening earlier? They all look interested. The "looking interested" part isn't the problem. It's afterwards.'

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'Come on. I'll be your wingman.'

He shakes his head slowly. 'You've been watching your Top Gun DVD again, haven't you? Besides, I always fly solo.'

'And flying won't be the only solo activity you be doing unless you keep trying. Remember what you told me when Jane dumped me?'

Dan frowns. 'Er ... That you'd brought it on ¬yourself, you fat bastard? What's that got to do with ¬anything?'

'No. "Get straight back in the saddle", or something like that.'

'I said that? Doesn't sound like me.'

'At least go over and talk to them.'

'What for?'

'Well, for one thing, I might be able to tell you whether you're doing anything wrong. Something that might be sending out some subconscious messages.'

Dan scowls at me. 'I'm sending out a subconscious one to you now. Can you guess what it is? I'll give you a clue. Two words. And the first one begins with an "F".'

'Come on. It might be ...'

'If you say the word "fun", I'm going to punch you in the bollocks. Hard.'

'I was going to say "useful".'

'Nah.' Dan gulps down the rest of his beer, then waves over towards where Wendy's sitting at the other end of the bar reading a copy of What Baby?, and points at our empty glasses. She waves back, indicates the half-full bottle of water she's been swigging from, and turns back to her magazine. 'Forget it. I've had enough rejection for one day.'

At a loss for anything encouraging to say, I decide to change the subject, and Dan's talk of rejection gives me the perfect opportunity. 'Maybe you just need to start to think a bit more positively.'

'Think positively?' repeats Dan, as negatively as ¬possible.

'I mean, look on the bright side. At least you can concentrate on your big audition this weekend.' Dan's up for a part in ITV 5's most popular daytime soap opera, set coincidentally here in Brighton, all about the lives and loves of the residents of a particular cul-de-sac. It's sort of a Brookside-on-sea, or Seaside, if you will, and called, imaginatively, Close Encounters.

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'Yeah,' says Dan, glumly. 'I suppose. But I can't say I'm really in the right frame of mind for it.'

'But it's acting, Dan. Not presenting any more. What you've always wanted.'

'I know. But I'm having a bit of a crisis of con¬fidence. And that's not exactly what you want when you're going for such a big part ...'

'A big part?' interrupts Wendy, from behind the bar. 'You can't be referring to your ...'

'Dan's up for a role in Close Encounters,' I say quickly. With the mood Dan's in, one of their normal verbal sparring matches could turn nasty quite quickly.

'Close Encounters?' says Wendy. 'That crappy ITV 5 thing?'

'Do you watch it?' says Dan, bracing himself for one of Wendy's usual digs.

'I love it,' she says, refilling my wine glass. 'Dan, I never thought I'd say this about you, but I'm actually impressed.'

Normally, Dan would be basking in the compliment, particularly given who it has come from, but this evening, there's not even the slightest flicker of smugness on his face.

'Yes, well, I haven't got it yet,' he says, picking up the bottle of beer that Wendy's just placed in front of him and taking a large swig.

'What's the role?'

Dan shrugs. 'Some love-them-and-leave-them type.'

Wendy winks at me, then puts her hand on Dan's arm. 'Well, you'll be just perfect.'

I'm just settling up for our drinks – as usual, Dan's come out without his wallet – when the two girls who've been sitting nearby get up and walk over towards us. As Dan stares fixedly at his beer bottle, the shorter and prettier of the two taps him on the shoulder.

'Excuse me,' says the girl. 'But you're him, aren't you?'

'Who?' says Dan uninterestedly.

'You know? That Dan Davis. From the telly?'

With what seems like the greatest of effort, Dan swivels his head around, and looks her up and down slowly. His eyes linger briefly on her breasts, before he turns regretfully back to his beer.

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'No,' he says. 'No, I'm not.'

And from the way he's sitting, slumped miserably on his stool, I have to agree with him.

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