

**45
THINGS
TO DO
BEFORE
YOU'RE
45**



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*For Danielle – my Cath, Emily and a sprinkling
of Dorit all rolled into one.*

March



1



HE KISSES my neck.

Soft, gentle brushes of his lips that send me wild. I moan. I can't help myself.

"You like that, hey?" he pauses, lifts his head up to smile at me.

It's Jamie Dornan. Which is a surprise. It's usually George Clooney. And what's more surprising is it's *The Fall*, serial killer Jamie Dornan. Not normally my vibe, but I roll with it, entranced by those ocean-blue eyes and the make-me-go-weak-at-the-knees accent.

He gets back to business, working his kisses down from my neck until he's sucking my nipple. The good, gentle sucking, not the manic, 'can I get any milk out of here?' sucking. I moan again, he looks up to smile again, his perfect-length stubble framing his perfect lips. This time, he's *Fifty Shades* Jamie, which makes more sense. I push his head back down, not wanting to lose the momentum. Finally, he makes it between my legs and I lose my shit. He knows what he's doing.

It feels good.

Amazing.

I'm about to explode fireworks.

Then, all of a sudden, there's a bang – but not the fireworks

kind. And another one. I try to ignore it, to cling on to the about-to-explode feeling.

Under the bed sheets, Jamie has disappeared.

I try to conjure him back.

More bangs, rhythmic bangs, one after the other.

I start to feel them – sharp pinches on my head, angry bees dive-bombing my face. I search for Jamie but he's well and truly gone, as has my momentum, the fireworks not even damp squibs any more. Brightness seeps through my eyelids, my head throbs – and not just from the dive-bombing bees. I go to speak but realise my tongue is a beached whale inside my mouth; my mouth which appears to be full of sand. I move my hand to cover my face, and the effort brings reality crashing in.

"What the f—?" I manage to mumble.

"MUM SWORE!" a voice shouts.

I force an eye open. Jack is standing over me; dishevelled blonde curls, mischievous blue eyes, a smear of jam on his cheek and a Nerf gun aimed at my head.

"MUM SWORE!" Felix parrots from the hallway.

"Did she now?" James walks in, annoyingly fresh-faced and sporty, his salt-and-pepper curls untamed, wearing full nausea-inducing Lycra, bulging pants and all. This is not a good sign.

"I didn't, actually!"

He places a cup of tea, a pint of water and a pack of paracetamol on the bedside table next to me. "Come on boys, take it downstairs."

The boys disappear in a flurry of Nerf bullets, shoves and stomps, my blonde-haired, feral cherubs. I try to open both eyes and sit up but decide against it when a wave of nausea hits.

“Good morning, gorgeous wife of mine,” James says. “How does forty-four feel?”

“Like the best years of my life are over and I’m drowning in the shit sand of imminent death.”

“MUM SWORE AGAIN,” Jack shouts from the landing.

James laughs. “Can you maybe control that potty mouth of yours, Grandma?”

“Can you maybe keep the little sh— children, and their testosterone battle, away from me? And don’t with the Grandma, it’s not funny.”

He strokes the hair off my face. “Sorry, no more old gags.”

“Thank you,” I mutter, the waft of my stale booze breath nearly knocking me out. “Hey, you’re supposed to be letting me lie in.”

“I have,” James says.

I glance at the clock – 8.21 a.m.

“Dude! Really?”

“I’ve got a training ride with Jim. And I figured I should leave the kids with a responsible adult – or a conscious one, at least.”

I prop myself up – with effort – and grab the water, downing half of it in big gulps, before realising little sips would’ve been the better way to go.

“Today? Really? You couldn’t have one day off being middle-aged sportsman-of-the-year and give your poor wife a lie-in?”

“Afraid not. It’s a tight schedule and actually the Ironman isn’t that far away.”

He’s taken the whole Ironman thing way more seriously than I had anticipated when he first announced it was going to be A Thing. And by seriously, I mean hundreds of hours and thousands

of pounds' worth of seriously. I also hadn't anticipated just how much he would feel the need to talk about it. All the time.

"Sorry, I did tell you," he says, patting my leg.

"Didn't."

"I did. You just don't—"

"Whatever. Fine. Go. Go and get some PBs and kudos and stupid motivational medals on your stupid app thing and leave me, in my diminished state, to fend for myself with your feral children who I pushed through my now-ruined vagina."

"I won't be long – I'll be home after lunch. And Chloe said she'll be back from Hannah's before then so she can help out."

He kisses my forehead, making a face at my aroma. "And for the record," he says, "I think your vagina is perfectly lovely and not at all ruined."

"Not that you'd bloody know," I grunt, giving him the middle finger as he leaves.

"Love you, Grandma," he shouts from the hall.

"What's with all the fucking shouting," Cath moans from under the cover next to me.

I'd forgotten she was there. James must've slept on the sofa-bed downstairs.

"MUM SWORE AGAIN." Jack pops into the doorway and shoots a Nerf bullet that hits me right in the eye.

"That wasn't me! And seriously, Jack! Enough. Downstairs now or you'll have no screen time later."

The shouting is not good for my head. In a being-hit-repeatedly-with-a-frying-pan type way. The dull ache morphs into an angry throb. I reach for the paracetamol and try to swallow them without

retching. Sipping my water, I survey the room – my sparkly dress and two pairs of Spanx discarded in the corner, the remnants of wrapping paper from the kids' presents: an anti-ageing hand cream from Jack ('because your hands look crinkly'); a pair of the naffest, blingiest, would-blind-someone-on-a-sunny-day earrings I've ever seen from Felix ('because you always tell Dad you like sparkly things'); and a tight-fitting crop top from Chloe, which we both know I will never wear, or fit into, and is purely for her to 'borrow'. James had given me a USB lead and multi-plug charger, because 'you can never find one, and this one's bright pink so we'll all know it's yours' – with the same Molton Brown bath foam he's been giving me for the past twelve years, ever since I mentioned I like it, thrown in for good measure.

Birthday cards, not that many, are propped up on various surfaces – all of them making reference to either being old or drinking, some making reference to both. In the strips of grey light coming through the curtains, it almost looks like a crime scene – it definitely feels and smells like one. My heart sinks with the depressingness of the whole thing.

I nudge Cath, who responds with a leave-me-alone grunt.

I text Emily, who's in the spare room:

Me: You awake?

Emily: Of course.

Me: Bed chat?

Thirty seconds later, she comes barrelling into the room in her Taylor Swift pyjamas, full of beans.

“Wassssup bitches!” She bounces on to the bed. Small lady, massive energy.

“What is wrong with you people?” Cath mutters, still nestled under the duvet.

“Don’t be a Grumpy Grumperson! It’s Charlie’s birthday.” Emily reminds her.

“Yesterday. It was her birthday *yesterday*.”

“So I only get an evening?” I ask. “That’s my birthday celebration allowance?”

“Yes. So shut up and go back to sleep.”

“If I have to be a conscious adult, you have to be a conscious adult with me,” I say, nudging her.

Emily joins in, poking Cath’s legs and feet. We don’t give in until Cath reluctantly emerges and props herself up. Her short hair has gone so bedhead it looks like she’s been electrocuted. Combined with the *Beetlejuice* crusty eye make-up and the scowl, she’s got proper villain vibes going on.

We laugh.

“Arseholes,” she says.

“Shhh! I can’t have the kids telling me off again.” I pass her the remnants of the water. “Here, drink this.”

“It’d better be after ten.” She takes the pint glass and sneers at its pathetic contents.

“Of course.” I discreetly turn the clock to the wall.

“Totally,” Emily says.

Cath downs the last of the water and grunts.

"Guys, forty-four. Forty-*sodding*-four." I whisper the 'sodding', not risking it, even though in my rulebook, sodding is very much not a swear word. "It's so depressing. It's all downhill from here. And by the way, that's literally what my optician said the other day, just a passing, matter-of-fact comment; 'It's all downhill from here'. I need reading glasses. Sodding reading glasses. I'm properly old. My knees and my hips will start going soon. This is how it starts – bad hangovers and reading glasses."

"And bad periods," Emily states. "Aren't you having the coil fitted soon?"

"Yeah, but that's not an age thing, that's just a being-a-woman-sucks-thing," I say.

"She's still in denial," Cath says.

I hate it when they start having these conversations about me like I'm not there.

"She doesn't want to accept she's PERIMENOPAUSAL," Emily says, dragging out the word they know I despise.

"Shut up," I say. "I told you, my sister is four years older than me and she doesn't have any symptoms, my mum said she had periods until she was well into her fifties. It's genetics, I'm fine."

"You're fine because you're burying your head in the sand about it and refusing to engage," Emily says. "Heavier periods – perimenopause. Mood swings – perimenopause. Feeling low – perimenopause."

"You did cry at that nappy advert the other day," Cath says.

"The baby was premature! What kind of heartless bitch wouldn't cry at that!" I protest.

"Feeling overwhelmed by everyday tasks—" Emily continues.

"We get the idea," I say.

"You said it was all downhill when you turned forty," Cath says.

"Yeah, but that was just in the run-up to it. Actually turning forty was quite fun – I got a big party, decent presents, a night away."

"You got to be the centre of attention," Cath says.

She exchanges a look with Emily, a little in-joke they wheel out about how I have main character syndrome.

"Exactly," I say, ignoring them. "For once. But forty-four? Forty-four sucks. No one cares."

"Um, hello?" Emily says.

"Sorry, except for you two."

"And James," Emily adds.

"Only vaguely," I huff.

I pass Emily a pillow so she can prop herself against the back of the bed. She burrows under the duvet, her feet cold against my bare legs.

"He bought me a USB lead and a multi-plug charger," I say, deadpan.

"Very practical," Cath says.

"Well, that's still better than Rick," Emily says. "For my last birthday, he went to the corner shop, got me some grandma-level rubbish card, and told me to go and buy myself something nice. But not too nice – fifty-pound limit."

She attempts a laugh, trying to be light-hearted, but her eyes give her away. The sad eyes she gets every time she talks about Rick. Cath shoots me The Look. It's a look we share often when Rick the Dick gets mentioned.

"Well, you both did better than me and my non-existent present from my non-existent husband, so consider yourselves lucky," Cath says.

There's never anything you can say in response to that.

"MUM!" Felix shouts up. "Eddie Vedder peed on the carpet!"

Emily chuckles, Cath looks horrified, I roll my eyes.

"I will never not find that funny," Emily says.

"I will never find that funny," I groan. "The toileting, I mean. The name I still like."

Eddie Vedder is our eighteen-year-old female cat (my name choice, I was an indie kid), bought in that space between moving in together and having kids, along with her now-deceased brother, Jeff Buckley (James's name choice). From the day Chloe was born, Eddie has been a pet in absentia, emerging only once the kids have all gone to bed to aggressively meow at me for reasons unknown. And to toilet all over the house. Again, for reasons unknown, but possibly a dirty protest at us having kids in the first place.

"So gross," Cath says, scrunching her nose in disgust. "Aren't you going to—"

I wave my hand, "I'll do it when we go down."

She shakes her head at me.

"I think all my turning-forty-depression was glossed over by the fun," I say, bringing the topic back to me. "But now it's hitting home. A delayed reaction. Like, what have I even done with my life? I have no career, let alone a job, even. I'm slowly withering away, surrounded by Stepford Wives dressed head-to-toe in over-priced athleisure wear."

"That's the price you pay for living in the suburbs," Cath laughs.

"It's not the suburbs!" I say, my refrain every time they joke about Tollingford being on the outskirts, even though I have pointed out many times that technically, it is still London.

"You have driveways and a park and no tube and a florist and three delicatessens – it's the suburbs," Cath says, her usual reply.

"All my friends have moved away or are too busy to do anything," I continue, choosing to ignore her.

"Or have other stuff going on," Cath says, pointedly.

"Or have other stuff going on," I sigh. It seems to be my signature move at the moment. "I just . . . this isn't how I pictured my life, you know? It was going to be fabulous. *I* was going to be fabulous. I was going to live in New York and have a big, exciting career and have fabulous friends."

"Dude!" Cath says.

"You're digging a hole here," Emily adds.

"I was going to be successful and drink cosmos on rooftops in New York."

"With your fabulous friends?" Cath asks.

"Yeah, with those bitches," I say.

"You watched too much *Sex and the City*," Emily says.

"And we were going to go to fabulous launch parties and restaurants and on fabulous exotic holidays—"

"And just walk around saying fabulous a lot?" Emily laughs.

"Well, they sound like a bunch of arseholes," Cath says. "And besides, Ems was pretty fabulous with her slut drops last night."

"Two drinks and she thinks she's Beyoncé," I say.

"Always," Cath laughs. "I love the inner Emily being set free."

"I think I pulled a muscle though," Emily says.

I grab my phone. "Pretty sure I've got footage somewhere."

"No one needs to see that, thank you."

"It was like something from *Girls Gone Wild*," Cath says.

"Or it's lesser-known spin-off, *Perimenopausal Woman Goes Wild for Four Hours for the First Time in Six Years*?" Emily laughs.

I retrieve my phone and open my camera, momentarily caught off guard by the accidental selfie mode which captures me in all my flat-haired, pale-skinned, dark-eyebagged glory. I quickly open the photos, looking for the video from last night and then see a screenshot I took a few days ago.

"Oh my god, I meant to show you this. Look," I say, opening Facebook on my phone. "Jen Holden. Emily and I went to school with her," I explain to Cath. "I had English with her – we used to write silly poems together while Mrs Matthews wasn't looking. And look at her now!"

I shove the phone in their faces and scroll through her feed – exotic beaches, perfect family, big career announcements.

"She's my age and has just published her fourth bestseller. She goes to the Maldives every year, has a gorgeous husband and angelic children and a perfect smile. There's a photo of her with Reese Witherspoon who is adapting one of her books and guess who's going to be in it?"

"John Major," Cath says.

I ignore her. "George Clooney. GEORGE BLOODY CLOONEY! That's her life! I bet she doesn't have to clean up any cat piss from the floor."

"So, you're saying that could have been you? That you want to

be a bestselling author?" Cath says. "Because if that's the case, you should maybe . . . write a book?"

"No, that's not the point," I say. "Or maybe it is the point."

"The point is, you need to stay off Facebook," Cath says, snatching the phone from me. "Facebook is for stalking ex-boyfriends and cringing at status updates you thought were funny at the time. No good can come from Facebook. The millennials have taught us that."

"What is the point?" Emily asks.

"Just that I feel . . ."

"Unfulfilled?" Emily offers, helpfully.

"Exactly." I make a flailing hand gesture to the room. "Unfulfilled. And like there's something more out there for me. Somehow. I just don't know what it is yet."

"Well then instead of moaning about it to your disappointing, un-fabulous friends, maybe you should get off your arse and actually do something about it, Charlie," Cath says.

"There's nothing I can do." I feel Cath's wrath as soon as the words leave my mouth.

"There's always something you can do," she says.

She pauses and glances down at herself. It's fleeting, but I see it.

"There's nearly always something you can do," she corrects. "And definitely in your case."

"Like what?" I ask. A stale tequila wave hits me, bile rising in my mouth. I swallow it down.

"You could get a job," Emily suggests.

"It's been so long, though. My CV will look practically prehistoric in TV terms. And with James's job, and childcare—"

"You could volunteer, or take up a hobby?" Emily says.

"Again, that would be quite hard with the—"

Cath flinches, looks pained. She stands up suddenly, grabbing her bag from one of the many piles on the floor. "I'm going to the loo." She pauses as she's nearly out of the door and turns back around. "You're bored. You're frustrated. If you were a man, you'd have an affair with a younger woman, stop drinking and take up a solo sport – that's the new midlife crisis, isn't it? None of which I'm suggesting you do, by the way. Or maybe do have an affair, I don't know. But if you're genuinely unhappy in your life and it's not just the hangxiety talking then stop making excuses and do something about it. Get a job, move out of suburbia, run a marathon, write a bestseller, or make one of those stupid lists you started before – forty things to do before you're forty. I guess forty-five things to do before you're forty-five." She takes a breath. "Wow, it does sound old when you say it out loud. I'm going to the loo."

I watch her go, stunned by the outburst. "That seemed a bit harsh."

"That's Cath's attempt at being helpful," Emily says. "She's got a lot going on at the moment, with her mum and everything. And crazy hormones. And patience has never been one of her virtues."

"What do you mean, crazy hormones?"

"She was talking about having another go at egg freezing last time I saw her. I don't know if she went ahead, you know what she can be like about that stuff – keeps it to herself."

"What?" A cloud of guilt settles on me. "She didn't tell me that! And I've been sat here whinging on about my stupid problems."

I thought she seemed a bit quiet last night."

"I tried to gently ask but she always just moves the subject on. Though I did notice she wasn't drinking."

"Jesus, does that mean we got through all those margarita pitchers between just the two of us?"

The thought of it makes my stomach churn all over again.

Cath comes back from the toilet, her face pinched and drawn.

"I've got to go," she says. "I've got a thing to do for Mum which I forgot about."

"Oh no! I thought we were going out for breakfast," I say.

"Sorry, this can't wait."

"How's your mum doing?" I ask. I feel myself doing the side-head tilt and pity eyes and correct it.

"Oh, you know . . ."

I make to stand up to give her a hug.

"Don't bother with hugs, you guys stink anyway," Cath says.

There's a commotion downstairs. More than the standard commotion. Which means trouble is coming. I consider shouting down in an attempt to parent, but decide I can't be arsed; isn't 'letting them sort things out themselves' a type of parenting? I'm pretty sure it is. Encourages independence or something . . . as long as no one gets injured.

"MUM!" Felix shouts up. Here we go. "Jack just spat cat food on me and some's gone on the carpet!"

"What the—?" Cath scrunches up her face in disgust.

She does not have children. And I can see that to someone who does not have children, this would, in fact, seem disgusting. Not that it doesn't seem disgusting to me – I'm just used to it. And my

children – the boys, anyway – seem to be the epitome of disgusting. Always.

“He dared me to eat some!” Jack shouts up.

“You see?” I say, gesturing to the beyond. “This is the kind of crap I have to put up with. This is my life. Making packed lunches, grocery shopping, meal planning, cooking, washing up, laundry, more laundry, filling in forms for school – all the forms – nagging, cleaning, finding random PE socks that everyone else is apparently incapable of looking for, putting dirty cereal bowls that have been left fifty centimetres from the dishwasher in the actual sodding dishwasher. Cleaning crap off the toilets that no one else seems to notice or care about. No rooftop bars and cosmos and holidays in the Hamptons for me. I just want—”

“I hate to interrupt your monologue,” Cath ventures. “But shouldn’t you, like, go and see to that?”

“Guessing I can’t pull a godmother card?”

“You guessed right. I’m out of here.”

“Thanks so much for coming last night, it was fun,” I say. “And sorry about the moaning this morning. Maybe you’re right, maybe it’s just the hangxiety.”

She frowns as she puts her coat on. “That’s not exactly what I said.”

“I think what you said was, ‘have an affair’,” Emily laughs. “Come on. Let’s deal with this, then get out. We need fresh air, food and coffee.”

“But most of all, you need to deal with the crap on the carpet,” Cath says. “Good luck.”

I bury my head in the duvet and let out a scream.