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Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow

Written by Claudia Carroll

Published by Avon

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CLAUDIA CARROLL

*Will You Still
Love Me Tomorrow?*

A V O N

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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Finally to all the readers out there who've been kind enough to write from far and wide to say nice things about my books; in these cash-strapped times, I feel constantly humbled that anyone would shell out their hard-earned cash to buy something that I've written.

But please know it means the world to me that you're enjoying the books, and thank you.

For Frank Mackey, with love.
This is your year Frankie and don't forget it!

*Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Romania.*

Dorothy Parker,
Not So Deep as a Well (1937)

Prologue

Thoreau said that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Course he wasn't to know it, but he was actually talking about me.

Falling in love is easy, you see; any idiot can do it. It's falling out of love that's hard.

It takes courage, brinkmanship and a certain degree of recklessness, not just with your own heart, but with someone else's too. Someone else whose whole existence once meant more to you than your own ever did.

And if you've ever sat across the kitchen table from the person you're supposed to be living happily ever after with and wondered where in hell the spark went . . . well, then you'll know exactly what I'm going through right now.

I'm looking silently across the breakfast table at Dan and trying to pinpoint when exactly we first became such a disconnected couple. And I just don't get it. When did we first start swapping 'I' for 'we'? Dan and I used to be able to have unspoken conversations together. We used to finish each other's sentences. We used to finish each other's food. For God's sake, there was a time when we'd even skip breakfast altogether in favour of an extra hour, tangled up together in bed, making love in a daze of exhausted pleasure.

Now I'm wondering if I sat here dressed like Lady Gaga, singing all the words and doing all the moves from the 'Telephone' video, might he even look up from his *Times*' Sudoku puzzle? Because the sad truth is this: like wearing nappies as a baby, or the lost City of Atlantis . . . any love life we once shared is little more than a hazy memory now, as we sleep side by side, like stone figures on a tomb.

The thing about this house though, is that avoidance is generally considered to be a good thing. A sign of deep maturity and awareness. We both know that we're in a minefield and have been for the longest time; so on the very rare occasions when we find ourselves alone together, we sidestep any embarrassment by just tiptoeing carefully around each other. On the principle that if you don't acknowledge or talk about a thing then it'll just quietly go away all by itself.

Trouble is that all this living in denial is physically starting to give me heartburn and I honestly think I'll scream if I don't get to articulate what's going on inside my head. Which is that the current state of our marriage is a steady beep emerging from a heart monitor showing a clear, straight line.

We have officially flatlined.

I take a sip of tea and unconsciously stare over at Dan, my mind in whirling, agonising turmoil but he's too engrossed in the paper to even notice.

Honest to God, if you were to look at us from the outside, having a civilised breakfast, utterly comfortable in silence, you'd swear our lives were perfect. Dan and Annie, Annie and Dan. Even our names go together. We've been together for almost half of our lives, which I know makes us sound like one of those silver-haired, middle-aged couples with

porcelain veneers that you'd see in an ad for stair lifts, and yet we're not. Both of us are only twenty eight. But I can barely remember back to a time when we *weren't* a couple.

At fifteen, he was my first boyfriend, I was his first girlfriend, and now, at an age when most of our old pals from our old life in the city are just beginning to think of settling down and getting married, here's me and Dan like the Mount Rushmore of couples; utterly unchanged from the outside, even after all these years.

Dan reaches out for another slice of toast, but then his tanned, handsome face crinkles with worry as he catches my eye.

'All right, love?'

I nod back, but stay firmly focused on the Pop-Tart in front of me.

There's so much that I need to say to him and I haven't the first clue where to start.

I want to tell him that even though the day has barely started, I already know exactly how it'll pan out. It'll be virtually identical to yesterday and the day before and the day before that. I'll spend the morning working at a job that I don't particularly like for next to no money, just to get me out of this house but most importantly of all, to keep myself busy. Because busy is always good. Busy means less time to think.

And on the way there, I'll probably meet one of our neighbours, Bridie McCoy, who'll chat to me in minute detail about that most gripping and urgent of subjects – her bunions. Like she always does. Then, when I get to the local book shop where I've got a part-time job, my boss will joshingly ask me the same question that she always does, day in, day out. Now that I'm pushing thirty,

and now that Dan and I have moved from the city into his family's big country house, when exactly are we planning to start a family? And I will do what I always do: an adroit subject change by asking her whether she fancies Jaffa Cakes or HobNobs with her mug of tea this morning. Never fails me.

Then by the time I get back home, Dan's mother will have dropped in, letting herself in with her own door key like she always does. She'll comb through room after room, lecturing me on how the good table in the dining room needs to be polished daily, or else, my particular favourite, the correct way to clean out the Aga in the kitchen. And I will smile through gritted teeth and remind myself that The Moorings is really her house, not mine, so, in fairness to her, she's entitled.

Then later on in the afternoon, Lisa Ledbetter will make an appearance to the soundtrack of thunderclaps and a cacophonous minor chord being bashed out on an organ in my head. She'll charge in and do what she always does: sit at the kitchen table drinking coffee while moaning about her husband's recent redundancy. Like this was a state of events he'd brought about on purpose with the sole intention of annoying her. Lisa, by the way, is a local gal and old friend of Dan's from when they were kids growing up together. We're roughly the same age and its received wisdom around here that she and I are each other's greatest pals.

But let me dispel that notion right now and tell you that any real friendship between us is a complete and utter myth. Lisa, you see, is a funny combination of needy, vulnerable and demanding; one of those people who's fully prepared to allow everyone around her to do everything for her.

Babysitting, cooking meals for her and her kids; you name it. From time to time, she even lets Dan help out with her household bills. And has absolutely no problem doing this, either.

So I'll sit and listen and sympathise and nod my head at appropriate moments, like I always do. All while mentally steeling myself not to allow her to suck all the life and energy out of me, like she always does. If people can be divided into either drains or radiators, then Lisa is most definitely a drain. So much so that I've silently nicknamed her The Countess Dracula.

Later on Jules, Dan's flaky younger sister, will breeze in, raid the fridge and then make a little cockpit for herself around the TV, surrounded by beer, nachos and last night's leftovers. She's just dropped out of college and doesn't seem particularly bothered about finding something else to do, like, God forbid, looking for an actual job or anything. But she's all the time in the world to flake out in our living room, watching all the afternoon soaps, back to back. Exactly like a lodger, except one that doesn't pay any rent.

Don't get me wrong though, this will actually be the brightest part of my day, mainly because I like Jules. She's by far my favourite person round here. Otherwise I wouldn't have any real friends here at all, just people who don't hate me. Jules is dippy and quirky and fun to be around, like she's got too much personality for one person yet not quite enough for two.

So you get my drift. Dan's family and friends just come and go as and when it suits them.

Like weather. Or bloat.

But it's all part of the joys of small town country life, it seems. And here, in the tiny Waterford village of Stickens

(its real name, look it up if you don't believe me . . . makes me feel marginally less bad about calling it 'The Sticks'), privacy is an utterly unheard of concept. Honestly, if I as much as sneeze leaving the house one morning, by lunch-time at least three well-intentioned locals would have called to ask how my terrible bout of swine flu was.

No secrets in Stickens.

In fairness to Dan, he grew up here so he knows everyone and thrives on the humdrum, everyday minutiae of village life. He's the local vet, by the way, just like his father was before him and in turn, his father was before him too. And it's a pure vocation for Dan: he loves, loves, *loves* his job and is one of those people who can't for a split second understand why anyone would possibly want to do anything else.

But when his dad passed away over three years ago . . . well, that's when the trouble all started really. Dan inherited this crumbling old family manor house where the surgery is, which was way too big and unmanageable for his mother to live in anyway. So she and Jules moved into a smaller apartment in the village, which meant that there was nothing for us but to move from our old, happy life in Dublin and settle here, into Dan's family home. It wasn't just the right thing to do; it was the *only* thing to do.

Thing about Dan, you see, is that he's officially The Nicest Man On The Planet. Everyone says so. It takes time, trial and error to creep into his affections, but once there, you're there for life. Anyway, after his father died, naturally he was anxious to be as close as possible to his mother and sister, both of whom he continues to support financially. A bit like a one-man welfare state.

But that's Dan for you; helping others is his Kryptonite.

We'll make this work, I had said to him supportively at the time, even though it effectively meant putting my own acting career on hold, as we packed up our independence in the city and got ready to move. Sure as long as we're together, we can make anything work, I said reassuringly. And if a job comes up for me, I'll just do the long commute back and forth to Dublin.

Because our marriage comes first. Doesn't it?

But, like I said, that was well over three years ago and since then, the goalposts have shifted. Considerably. For starters, I'm finding it far, far tougher than I'd ever have thought, hauling myself up and down from Dublin every time there's a sniff of a job. So to keep myself busy, I've done just about every gig in The Sticks that comes my way. Given the odd drama workshop to kids in the local school, worked part-time at the local florist's, you name it, I've given it a whirl.

But the hard, cold fact is that I've been treading water rather than really loving what I'm doing, knowing in my heart that if it's acting work I really want, then I need to be in the city, where all the big job opportunities are. Not to mention where all my old friends are. We stay in touch, of course – we text and phone and email and Skype is my new best friend . . . but it's just not the same as seeing people all the time, is it?

I'm constantly begging/pleading/nagging my old pals to come and visit, even just for a weekend, and in fairness, most of them have done at one time or another. But the thing about The Sticks though, is that it doesn't exactly offer all that much in the way of nightlife. Apart from a couple of pubs where the average age profile is about eighty

and the main topic of conversation among the sages of the snug is still the Civil War, there's not a whole lot else on offer.

Bear in mind that you're talking about a tiny village where the main tourist attractions are a Spar newsagents and a large clock in the middle of Main Street, so, unsurprisingly, repeat visits from my Dublin buddies tend to be few and far between.

But it does my heart good though, to keep in touch with our old circle. I love hearing all my girlfriends' tales from the city, of how well they're all doing in their careers and most of all, hearing their stories direct from life at the great dating coalface. And even if their romances don't go exactly according to plan, at least they're all out there, having fun/ breaking hearts/ having their hearts broken in turn/picking themselves up and getting back in the race . . . just like you're supposed to be doing at our age.

Sometimes I'll see them all looking at me, like I'm some prematurely middle-aged housewife in a Cath Kidston apron with matching tablecloths and they'll say, 'But you're *married!* Why aren't you at home, getting fat?'

And I'll want to tell them the truth; that the whole reason I got married was to grow old *with* someone and not *because* of them. But instead, I'll smile and laugh and make a joke and say that Victorian virgin brides in arranged marriages saw more of life than I did before I walked down the aisle. Then they'll all jolly me along by reminding me that I got lucky, because I didn't just marry a great guy, I married the holy grail of men, didn't I?

And the heartbreaking thing is that it's all true – I did.

It's just that the grass is always greener on the other side of the M50 motorway, that's all.

I often think that life here is far, far easier for Dan, who's surrounded by his family, along with friends he's known since he was in nappies and has grown up with. Some people live a life that's already been planned out perfectly for them, as inescapable as a circle. And that's Dan and he's perfectly content with that. But the truth is that after three long years here, the claustrophobia is slowly starting to get to me. It's like every time I glance in the mirror I see a woman who looks like it's raining inside of her. Crushed under the weight of my own future.

Because I have deep grievances with my life here that over time, feel like they've barnacled permanently onto my skull. In spite of all my super-human efforts to fit in and to be a good wife and half-decent daughter- and sister-in-law . . . I swear to God, there are days when I physically feel like I'm being smothered. That I can't breathe. That I'm slowly being asphyxiated as surely as if someone had tied a plastic Tesco's bag over my head.

Worse still, that I'm going to go to my grave with an unlivd life still in my veins.

Even the clinking sound of Dan's coffee mug as he rests it on a saucer is almost enough to make me want to scream. There's so much I need to talk to him about and yet we're sitting here in total silence. Like an old married couple that ran out of things to say to each other years ago.

Another, tacked-on worry pops into my mind unbidden; is this what we're going to be like twenty years from now? Because as far as I can see, that's the road we're headed down. Rare enough that we even get to eat a meal together given the eighteen-hour days he's been working for as long as I can remember. Rare enough that we get time alone together at all, given that his family still consider this to be

their home and just breeze in and out whenever it suits them. Not to mention his work colleagues, who treat our house as a combination of a twenty-four-hour free canteen-cum-low-grade hotel. But to think that we're wasting this precious opportunity to talk, really talk, with him rattling away at the shagging paper and me restlessly glowering off into space . . .

Dan looks up and catches my eye again. A tiny sliver of hope; he used to know my mind nearly better than I did myself.; time was when he could read my subconscious as easily as an autocue. Maybe, just maybe, he's noticed that his wife is slowly drowning right before his eyes and will throw me some kind of lifeline. Maybe, after all my fretting and stressing, he and I are something that can be fixed after all . . .

'Annie?'

'Yes?'

Come on, Dan, come on . . . meet me halfway here . . .

'You won't forget to pick up that fungicidal cream from the chemist for the cat's ringworm today, will you?'

I do not befeckingly believe it.

Brilliant. Just brilliant.

When I don't answer, he tosses the paper aside and for a split second looks at me again; really looks at me this time, his soft, black eyes now full of concern.

'Everything OK?'

And like the moral coward that I am, I back down.

To be polite, I freeze frame a watery smile onto my face and even allow the grin to reach all the way up to my eyes.

'Everything's fine.'

But I'm lying.

Everything is so *not* fine.

WINTER

Chapter One

OK, two things you need to know about me: firstly, I'm really not the sort of person to mortgage my entire future on a whim. Secondly, if life in The Sticks has taught me anything, it's this: the lower you keep your expectations, the less likely you are to get let down. And above all, do not, repeat, *do not*, expect miracles to happen in this neck of the woods. Long and unbelievably boring conversations with Audrey, my mother-in-law, about the correct way to make a poinsettia entirely out of icing for the Christmas cake, yes, but miracles . . . no, sorry, love. 'Fraid not. Not in this neck of the woods.

So when the phone calls start coming from about eleven-thirty in the morning onwards, you'll get some idea of how utterly, unbelievably staggered I am by this bolt from a clear blue sky.

I'm up a ladder in the dusty back room of our local book shop, stacking shelves with copies of a hot, new young adult series which we're hoping will bring in some badly-needed footfall over Christmas. Because considering it's only a few weeks off, business is worryingly quiet and so far this morning I've already had the owner, Agnes Quinn, who's been around for approximately as long as the Old Testament,

explain to me that she's really very sorry but she just doesn't think there'll be a job for me here after the holidays.

Not her fault of course, she was at pains to explain, people just aren't spending cash in the same way that they used to . . . more and more people are buying books online now . . . Amazon are squeezing her out . . . rents are too high . . . recession is still having a massive knock-on effect . . . blah-di-blah . . .

I know the story only too well and sympathise accordingly. Try not to worry, I say positively, and look on the bright side. Yes, business is slack I gently tell her, but just think, it'll give you more time to work on your own book. Her round, puffy cheeks flush at this, as they always do whenever she's reminded about her as-yet-unfinished magnum opus. It's a cookbook, by the way. Agnes has spent the last three years eating her way through her granny's recipes with a view to publication.

'Anyway, I'm sure you won't miss working here, will you now, Annie, love?' she twinkles knowingly at me from where she's standing over by the till, surveying a shop floor so empty it might as well have tumbleweed rolling through it. 'Because it'll mean you'll have far more time to spend up at The Moorings with your in-laws, won't it?'

I do what I always do: smile, nod and say nothing.

Then she rips open another cardboard box that's just been delivered and sighs disappointedly, 'Oh, look at this. More books.' In much the same manner as someone who'd been expecting petunias.

Anyway, just then I feel my mobile silently vibrating in my pocket. I ignore it and quietly get back to stacking shelves. Audrey, most likely, ringing from my house to whimper down the phone at me, in her frail, reed-thin,

whispery, little-girl voice, like she does every day, even though she knows right well that I'm at work and therefore not supposed to take personal calls.

OK, three possible reasons for her ringing: a) she wants to have a go at me, in her best passive-aggressive way for still not having put up the Christmas tree yet; b) she's having one of her little 'turns' and needs me home urgently, even though I'm at work. Not that she doesn't have a daughter of her own at her permanent beck and call, who's unemployed and therefore has far more time on her hands than I do. But somehow, it's always, always me she'll call, like I'm some kind of nicotine patch for her nerves.

Or worst of all, point c). Whenever Audrey runs out of things to guilt me out about and yet feels the need to use me as a kind of emotional punch bag, she'll have a right good nose through the house when I'm not there, then pick on me for making some supposed change to The Moorings behind her back. Any minor shifting around of furniture or rearranging of china on the kitchen dresser by the way, all fall under this category and if I even attempt to deny said change, she'll usually resurrect one of her favourite old gripes. Namely the fact that I had the outright *effrontery* to strip the flowery wallpaper from our bedroom wall and paint it plain cream instead. Not a word of a lie, when I first brought her upstairs to proudly show off my handiwork in all my newly-married innocence, honest to God, the woman's intestines nearly exploded. The local GP had to be called, sedatives had to be administered and to this day, I still haven't heard the last of it.

This, by the way, would be the one, single decorative change that I've made since moving into the house; the first and the last. How could I have even thought of doing

such an insensitive thing? I'll never forget Audrey whimpering at me, laid prostrate on our sofa like Elizabeth Barrett Browning having an attack of the vapours and glaring accusingly at me with her pale, fishy eyes. No messing, all the woman was short of was a hoop skirt, a cold compress on her forehead and a jar of smelling salts. Not only had I completely destroyed the look of that whole room, she sniffled . . . but did I even appreciate that the wallpaper had been there since she first came to The Moorings as a bride?

Ohh . . . way back in the early eighteenth century, most likely.

The Moorings, I should tell you, is a vast, seven-bedroomed crumbling old mansion house; relentlessly Victorian, with huge, imposing granite walls all around it – exactly the kind of location that film scouts would kill to use on an Agatha Christie-Poirot murder mystery and decorated in a style best described as early Thatcher. Which is a crying shame, because with a bit of TLC and if I was really allowed to get my hands on the place, I know it could actually be stunning. I often compare it to Garbo in a bad dress; you can see the bone structure's there, if you could only strip away all the crap. All the house's features are intact and perfect: the coving, the brickwork, the stunning, sixteen-foot high plastered ceilings, but layered in a blanket of someone else's old-fashioned, long-faded taste. With the result that I permanently feel like I'm a guest in my own home.

From the outside though, it's so scarily impressive that the very first time Dan took me here, aged fifteen, I remember joking to him that it was half posh mansion, half the kind of place you'd go to get your passport stamped.

And he laughed and little did I think it would one day be my home.

Trouble is that ever since Dan's father died, Audrey, Queen Victoria-like, has pretty much wanted the house to remain exactly as it was when he was alive – a living mausoleum. Right down to his boots in the outside shelter which are still in exactly the same place he'd always left them. And his favourite armchair, that no one is allowed to sit in, *ever*, just where he liked it to be – in the drawing room, right by the window.

Grief does funny things to people, my Dan, Dan Junior, gently reminded me after the whole wallpaper-gate debacle, so of course I apologised ad nauseam and solemnly vowed not to do anything that might bring on a repeat performance. Nothing to do but bite my tongue and support Audrey for as long as she needed. Let's both just be patient with her, Dan said to me; together we'll help get her through this.

Course that was around the same time that he buggered off to start working eighteen-hour days and started communicating with me via Post-it notes stuck on the fridge door, telling me not to bother waiting up for him, that he wouldn't be home. And of course, Jules was in college at the time and just couldn't have been arsed doing anything.

Leaving me alone, to handle Audrey all by myself.

You try living inside a memorial with a mother-in-law who still considers it to be her home, a husband who's never around and who, when he is, barely bothers to speak to you anymore.

Go on, I dare you.

Anyway, back to the book shop, where my mobile keeps on ringing and ringing and still I keep ignoring it, wondering for the thousandth time if Audrey has any conception of

basic office etiquette – that you can't take phone calls when you're supposed to be working. But then, that's the kernel of the problem; she doesn't consider what I do to come under the banner heading of 'work'. No, in her book, being a vet like Dan is an actual hardcore, proper 'job', what I do is just arsing around. Just in case, God forbid, I got any kind of notions about myself.

By lunchtime, business is so slack that poor, worried old Agnes tells me I can finish up early for the day. In fact apart from a lost backpacker sticking his head through the door looking for directions and Mrs Henderson waddling in from across the street, not to buy, but to give out that she can't pronounce the place names in any of Stieg Larsson's books, we haven't had any other footfall the entire morning.

Mrs Henderson, by the way, is something of a crime book aficionado and she drops into the shop pretty much every day to tell us the endings of whichever thriller she's stuck into at the moment. Well, either that or to describe all the twists and red herrings, and then to tell us exactly how she saw them coming from miles off.

Anyroadup, between one thing and another, it's just coming up to one o'clock before I even get a chance to check any of the messages on my mobile.

To my astonishment, not a single one of which is from Audrey.

A Dublin number, one that hasn't flashed up on my phone, since, oooh, like the George Bush administration. One Hilary Williams. Otherwise known as . . . drum roll for dramatic effect . . . my agent.

OK, the CliffsNotes on Hilary: firstly, she wasn't exactly a fan of my decision to move to The Sticks. In fact, she's a sixty-something, bra-burning, first-generation feminist of

the Germaine Greer school and the very idea that I'd sacrifice a budding theatre career to, perish the thought, actually put my marriage first, was almost enough to have her lying down in a darkened room taking tablets and listening to dolphin music.

Secondly, her nickname is Fag Ash Hil, on account of the fact that she smokes upwards of sixty a day and climbing. She's the only person I know who actually went out and organised protest marches *against* the smoking ban, and among her clients, it's an accepted rule that you don't even think about crossing the threshold of her office without at least two packs tucked under your oxtail for her.

Hence she normally sounds deep, throaty and gravelly, a bit like a man in fact, but . . . not today. Four messages, in a voice designed to wrest people from dreams and all rising in hysteria till by the last one she sounds like she's left Earth's gravity field and is now orbiting somewhere around Pluto.

'Oh for GOD'S SAKE, ANNIE, why are you not returning any of my calls?! Can you please stop please stop role-playing Mrs James Herriot from *All Creatures Great and Small* and kindly get back to me? Like . . . NOW?'

This is delivered, by the way, like an edict from the Vatican. I listen to what she has to say, call her back toot suite . . . then hop straight into my car.

And faster than a bullet, I'm on the long, long road to Dublin.

Sticking to the speed limit, it generally takes the guts of three hours to get from The Sticks to Dublin and believe me the drive is not for the faint-hearted. It's motorway for a lot of it, but you still have to navigate a good fifty plus

miles before that on narrow, twisting, secondary roads that would nearly put the heart crossways in you. Anyway, anyway, anyway, fuelled by nothing more than adrenaline, I manage to a) drive at breakneck speed, b) not get caught by the cops and c) even beat my own personal record of getting to the city in under two-and-a-half hours flat, with my foot to the floor and my heart walloping the entire way.

I finally arrive in Dublin late in the wintry afternoon, avoiding the worst of the rush-hour traffic and miraculously managing to find a space in a handy twenty-four hour car park, right in the middle of town and conveniently close to Hilary's office. In my sticky, sweat-soaked, heart palpitation-y state I amaze myself by even remembering to pick up a few obligatory packets of Marlboro Lights for her.

'Annie, get your arse in here and sit down!' is her greeting, which might sound a bit harsh, but coming from Hil, can actually be taken as a term of endearment. I obediently do as I'm told and head inside, dutifully handing over the cigarettes as we air kiss.

It's been over three years since I set foot in this office and at least a year since we last spoke, so it's comforting to see, in spite of my being out of circulation for so long, that precious little has changed round here. Hil still has the same grey spiky hair, the same grey trouser suits, same matching grey skin tone. Same sharp tongue, same short fuse. Oh and she still chain smokes like it's food.

And another thing, with her there's never small-talk of any description. Never a hello-how-are-you-how's-your-life-been. Hil, you see, favours the Ryanair approach to her work: no frills, no extras. Time is money so it's always straight down

to business. She plonks down behind her desk, dumps a thick-looking script down in front of me, then leans forward so she can scrutinise me, up close and personal.

‘Good, good,’ she nods, taking in my appearance as thoroughly as a consultant plastic surgeon while lighting up at the same time.

‘Ehh . . . sorry, Hilary, . . . what’s good?’

‘You still look the same way you do in your CV headshot. Living the life of a countrified recluse hasn’t altered your appearance that much. Which at least is something.’

All I can gather from that comment is that she half-expected me to clamber into her office dressed in mud-soaked wellies with straw in my hair, brandishing a pitchfork and looking exactly like Felicity Kendal from *The Good Life*. And while ordinarily that mightn’t be too far off the truth (The Sticks isn’t exactly Paris during fashion week), at least, thank God, today I’m out of my normal jeans and woolly jumper and am in my best shop assistant gear: a warm woolly coat, a wraparound dress and a half-decent, non-mud-stained pair of boots.

‘No,’ she growls, still scrutinising me. ‘You still look like the same old Annie Cole. Which is good news. Which is exactly what we want.’

She’s got black and white pictures of all her clients dotted round the office walls and through the haze of smoke I manage to make my own photo out. Taken over four years ago, but apart from a few more wrinkles and a few extra pounds . . . no, I’m not really all that much different. Same dark skin, same long, dark, centre-parted, wiry hair that needs enough hairspray to put a dent in the ozone layer just to get it to lie down flat . . . same everything.

Funny, but looking at my own photo always reminds me

of how alike Dan and I are, even the way we look. We both have the identical eye colour: deep brown, which turns straight to coal black when either of us are worn out or exhausted. We could almost pass for brother and sister. Or as Jules puts it a bit more cruelly, I look like him dressed in drag.

Ouch.

‘OK, down to business,’ says Hilary, sitting forward and balancing her fag on the edge of an ashtray. ‘You’re familiar with Jack Gordon’s work, no doubt?’

‘THE Jack Gordon? Are you kidding me? Yes, yeah, of course I am, he’s completely amazing,’ I blurt out, wondering where this could possibly be headed.

Jack Gordon, by the way, would be one of the youngest and hottest theatre directors in town; so unbelievably successful that you’d almost think the legal firm of Beelzebub and Faustus had a contract on file with his name scrawled on it in suspicious looking red ink. I’m not joking, actors nearly impale themselves just to get a chance to *audition* for him, never mind work for him. But then Jack’s reputation goes before him and boy, does he have the Olivier awards hanging out of him to prove it. His productions are always cutting edge, razor sharp and invariably the talk of the chattering classes. In fact, probably the only thing that’s slowed down the guy’s progress over the years is the deep drift of bouquets and laurels that he’s had to wade through.

The theatre world’s Alexander McQueen, in short.

‘Then have a read of this,’ says Hilary, tossing a bound script over to me.

I look at the title of the play, *Wedding Belles*. By a new playwright whose name I’m not familiar with.