You Drive Me Crazy

Carole Matthews

Chapter One

'Divorce?' I give the man sitting opposite me my most reassuring smile.

He looks up, a surprised expression on his face, and glances round to check that I'm not talking to anyone else. 'Me?'

I nod.

'Er . . . yes.'

'Me too.' I shrug as if it's a massive coincidence that we're both sitting in a solicitor's waiting room looking stressed.

At this point I must say that I have seen the inside of solicitors' offices far too many times in my short and otherwise uneventful life. This one is more beige than usual – the only relief provided by funky red chairs which add a splash of vibrant colour to show what a trendy firm they really are. For the prices they charge I'd fully expect to see golden thrones in here for all the clients. Still, this is only my second divorce, for which I suppose I should be truly grateful these days. I didn't even want one divorce, so, to me, having two almost tucked away under my belt seems to be bordering on careless.

I'm leafing aimlessly through a pristine copy of one of those glossy, give-away magazines that's choc-full of adverts for smart little boutiques I've never heard of and couldn't afford even if I had. The magazine is called New Style and it makes me wonder why I haven't got any these days – style, that is. Why is it that models in catalogues can stand there posing in a simple oatmeal roll-neck sweater and faded bootcut jeans and look utterly fabulous, whereas in the same ensemble I cannot?

I stop pretending to read and take in the rest of the waiting room. Tumley & Goss, solicitors to the soon-to-be-impoverished, are not known for their meticulous time-keeping when it comes to appointments and I'm sure if they could manage to work out a way of charging their clients for waiting time, then they would have done so by now.

I turn my attention back to the man opposite me. He is also pretending to read New Style magazine and is making a worse job of it than me. His knees are jiggling nervously. First time. I know these things. I, Anna Terry, am an expert in the psychological profile of the occupants of solicitors' waiting rooms. Personal injury claims are usually a doddle to pick out – especially the ones that involve those NHS-supplied grubby neck collars.

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'First time?' I venture.

'Yes,' he says, abandoning the New Style on the chair next to him. 'You?'

'Second,' I admit sheepishly. 'I feel like I'm in training for the Joan Collins award for services to marriage.'

I don't add that I've probably paid for all of these bright red chairs in the process – and a bit more. Like a couple of holidays in the Bahamas for each partner in the firm.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' he says, and he genuinely looks as if he is.

'The world is full of younger, blonder women with more comely bosoms.' There go my shoulders again, trying to shrug away the hurt.

My fellow divorcé risks a smile. And, if I were noticing these things, I'd say it was a very cute smile. 'You look very . . . nice . . . to me.'

'Nice.' I sigh over the word. 'It's not quite the same as being a wanton sex kitten, is it?'

'I suppose not.'

'Both of my husbands thought I was nice,' I go on. '"You're a nice woman, Anna," they'd say, "but . . ."'

'. . . "I'm running off with a wanton sex kitten".'

Now it's my turn to smile. 'You're very perceptive.'

Except that I don't know where my current excuse of a husband is at all. He just left. Without warning. I'd nipped out to the supermarket to get some milk, and ten minutes later when I returned, Bruno had disappeared along with most of his shirts and his best jeans. That was it. He didn't leave a note. He didn't call. And, needless to say, he didn't send any money to feed or clothe the fruit of his loins. That was over a year ago and I've been trying to track him down ever since. Me and the Child Support Agency, of course.

'My wife ran off with a butcher,' my companion says.

'I expect it was the lure of free meat.'

'She's a vegetarian.'

'Oh.' I pull a suitably sympathetic face. 'Women can be strange creatures.'

'I expect men can be too,' he remarks as his mobile phone rings.

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As he rummages for it, I study the posters proclaiming the sums that can be gained for those fortunate enough to suffer a personal injury that can be blamed on someone else's stupidity rather than their own. I could be a millionaire in moments if I fell over on a frosty pavement that the council had failed to grit, or tripped on some lumpy tarmac laid by a careless contractor. Perhaps if I take a tumble down the stairs on my way out and sustain a sprained ankle, Mr Tumley or Mr Goss might consider waiving my not insubstantial bill.

'Hello. Nick Diamond,' the man says into his phone.

Nick Diamond. Hmm. I try not to look as if I'm listening to his conversation, but of course I am.

'I'm fine,' he says, turning slightly away from me. He knows that I'm listening. 'It will all be fine. Really.' Then he lowers his voice. 'I'm fine, Mum. Really. Don't get upset. It's okay, I won't do anything silly. Yes, I know.' He lowers his voice further, but the waiting room of Tumley & Goss has superb acoustics and I have a trained ear for gossip. 'I won't say that. I'm in a public place, Mum. I'm going now. Bye. Bye. Yes. Bye.' He slides his mobile back into his pocket and with a loud tsk, he says, 'Business.'

'Oh.'

'You know how it is. Cut and thrust. This and that. International meetings.' Nick Diamond squirms in his seat. 'Pressure. Stress.'

'There's no need to explain,' I offer. 'My mum worries herself to death about me too.'

That is somewhat understating things. My mother holds me and my rather tortured love-life responsible for everything from her varicose veins to the angina she is not yet suffering from, but doubtless will one day all because of me.

My companion looks guilty. 'Are this lot any good?'

'If you mean will you have any money left at the end of it all then, no, they're not good.'

'I want to be fair about this,' he says with a shake of his head. 'I don't want to fight with Janine over money.'

'Don't you?'

He gives me a look that I'd class as self-deprecating. 'I'm not like that.'

I return an involuntary and altogether too cynical snort. 'You will be.'

'I believe you can get divorced without becoming all bitter and twisted.'

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'But that's the fun part!' I tell him. He looks at me disbelievingly. You can tell this man is naive in the ways of the world. And, particularly, in the ways of marital disentanglement.

'It isn't in my nature,' he insists. 'I too had the "you're a nice man but . . ." speech.'

My heart sighs. 'Why do nice people always get dumped?'

'It's one of life's age-old mysteries,' he says. 'Like why is the coffee crème always the last chocolate in the box to be eaten?'

I laugh. And I realise that it's a very long time since I did that. Especially in a solicitor's office.

'Any kids?' Nick Diamond asks.

'No. No. No. Oh, no. None.'

'Me neither.'

I clap my hands together. 'Great. So we're both young, free and single.'

'I guess so.' And Nick sounds suddenly sad and alone. 'I would have liked them though. Children. A boy and a girl.' He looks slightly embarrassed at his confession. 'It's everyone's ideal, isn't it – except Janine's. She's a fitness fanatic – didn't want stretchmarks.'

'Who does? Kids ruin your figure.' I clear my throat. 'So I'm told.'

'I believe the comely bosoms are the first thing to go.'

We both giggle.

'I do hope they're not too much longer,' I say with a longing glance at the clock. 'I've got an interview with a recruitment agency this afternoon.'

'Career change?'

'You could call it that. I haven't worked for years.'

'Rich husband?'

'Er . . . filthy.' Never mind that Bruno never had two pennies to rub together and left me with even less. I can hardly tell my new friend that I'm a stay-at-home mum who spends her entire life looking after two rather hyperactive children when I have just denied their very existence. What sort of a mother am I, for goodness sake? At thirty-three I already feel like a raddled old one, I can tell you. I have borne Poppy who is supposed to be ten, but over the last few years she has clearly been ageing in dog years mentally. That makes her around fifty-six, which sounds about right to me.

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Connor is not quite two. He's destined to be a man and, therefore, will never, ever grow up at all.

'A life of leisure then?'

'Every moment of it.' I wish. Why can't I come clean and tell him that I'm a single mum struggling to hold her life together? 'But it means that I don't possess one single marketable skill. To be honest, I haven't got any inclination to work either, but now I haven't got any choice.'

'What about your settlement? Surely, your husband wants to look after you?'

'The only person Bruno has ever wanted to look after is himself,' I say. 'I'm currently trying to divorce him in his absence. He's done a runner.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.' Nick Diamond looks at me kindly. 'I'm sure you'll find something.'

'Yeah.' I fake a lightness I don't feel. 'I can't think of anything worse than being stuck in some pokey office all day.' Other than looking after kids all day, I mean.

Two secretaries simultaneously crane their heads out of office doors. They're wearing beige suits with red blouses to match the décor and have obviously not been availing themselves of the tips contained within the pages of New Style magazine.

'Mrs Terry. Mr Diamond,' the secretaries trill, and hover at their respective office doors through which we gain admittance to the inner sanctums – or the money-making centres as I like to call them.

We both stand up.

'Well . . .' Nick says.

'Well . . .'

'Nice to meet you.'

'Nice to meet you, too.'

Nick hesitates before he says, 'Maybe we could . . . No, well . . . never mind.' He casts an uneasy glance at the waiting staff. 'You've probably got a mad social whirl now that you're young, free and single again.'

'Yeah, yeah.' A bit of bravado for the secretaries who do look young, free and single and not like sad sacks who spend every night in front of the telly watching old Disney videos with nothing but a glass of cheap wine and a Mars bar for company. Nick's face falls and I suddenly realise what I've said. 'Well, not that mad.'

But I've missed my chance.

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He holds out his hand and shakes mine, while the waiting secretaries start to tap their corporate feet. 'Good luck with your interview. I hope they find you a great job.'

Some hope. 'Thanks. Good luck with hanging on to your international business. And your shirt.'

We exchange a shy smile.

'Thanks,' he says. And we both take a deep breath. He seems such a nice man, I wonder how can he have deserved this? I watch him disappear into the office of his vulture – sorry, solicitor – before I too plunge headlong into the gritty and unpleasant world of divorce once more.

Chapter Two

I live in Milton Keynes, the fastest-growing city in the UK. It's a vibrant place that resembles a large slab of America set down amidst the green and gentle countryside of Buckinghamshire. I'm a bit of an anomaly here in that I arrived before it was a new city, when it was just a twinkle in a planner's eye and there was no grid system, no shopping mall and no housing estates, only fields and mud and cows.

I leave the heat of Tumley & Goss's offices – these people don't need to worry about the size of their heating bills – and emerge into the sharp, fresh air of Midsummer Boulevard. In the centre of the city, all the roads are perfectly straight, which ensures that every puff of wind is funnelled towards those unwise enough to be wearing a skirt in the middle of winter, i.e. me. Within seconds my knees are blue and frozen. I stride up the road, wrapping my coat around me, and eventually dodge into another stainless steel and glass building that typifies the architectural style here.

After the trauma of the solicitors', I'm not feeling very strong about subjecting myself to further humiliation at the hands of a recruitment agency. I've never been into one of these places before, but I feel intimidated enough by the banks of humming computers, let alone the rows of officious-looking women sitting next to them. They all have fake tans and look like they sit with their buttocks clenched all day. Also, they all look considerably smarter than I do and this is absolutely my best jacket. Not so much last season, though, as last century. When I get a super-duper status job, the first thing I'll do is rush out and buy a hideously expensive designer power suit. But from an outlet store, of course.

I give the receptionist my details, then sit down at one of the desks opposite the lovely Leone as I've been instructed.

'Hi.' She gives me a brief smile and it's clear that this is the full extent of her pleasantries. 'Name and address?'

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I can manage that without too much trouble and duly reel them off. I even follow them with my phone number, without so much as a glitch, while Leone taps away.

She deigns to lift her eyes towards me. 'Previous experience?'

Does she want to know that I can churn out nutritious meals on a meagre budget with alarming regularity, or that I'm a dab hand with a vacuum cleaner, or that I can turn a hysterical, screaming child into an angel with only the help of a packet of M&Ms? Or should I just cut to the chase and tell her exactly how many men I've slept with? I'm afraid I'm not very experienced in that department either. I don't need to take off my socks to count the number of partners I've had – it's just one for each foot and both of them husbands.

'Jobs?' she says while I'm still pondering my reply.

'Oh. None.' Not in living memory, anyway. I'm not sure that a stint as an office cleaner or a supermarket cashier over ten years ago is anything to brag about in my current situation.

She ceases her tapping, abruptly. 'So you've no experience?'

A hush descends on the whole of the recruitment agency and I get the sense of tans blanching.

'Loads of it,' I say with as much bluff as I can muster. 'Just not in the work sense of the word.'

Leone loses the little smile she'd managed to produce.

'So you haven't brought a CV.'

'No,' I say. 'But I can do one. I've got a degree in Business Studies.' I hope she doesn't ask for proof of this as I actually did an NVQ in Business Studies at my local college. But it was very interesting and I came top in my class.

'That's rather like having a car but being unable to drive,' she points out.

'Oh come on.' My patience is skating on thin ice. 'There must be one job out there that requires no skill, no brain, no specialist equipment, but you can still make loads of money.'

Leone shows me her teeth. 'There is,' she says. 'But then it would be a pimp you'd require, not a recruitment consultant.'

It's clear that I am wasting my own and Leone's valuable time, so I get up to leave.

'Thanks,' I say. 'Thanks a bunch.'

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If the government want to get single mums out of the home and working again – then they'd better do something about smug bitches like Leone. But, as we all know from the daily press, we single-parent families are the scourge of the nation, along with asylum seekers, beggars, drug addicts and the drivers of Vauxhall Corsas. I hope Leone has kids one day and they ruin her figure, and then her husband, who she still loves, leaves her to manage on benefits – that would wipe the smile off her pouty little face. And I hope that one day, when she is trying to drag herself up by her boot-straps, someone is as nasty to her as she's been to me.

But, obviously, I say none of this and start to slink out of the office instead, shame-faced and seething.

As I head to the door, she calls after me. 'Wait.'

She pulls a piece of paper out of her printer. 'There is one job . . .'

I take the piece of paper and scan it, trying very hard to look interested and not as if I'm about to cry. 'This looks okay,' I say. It doesn't really look okay, it looks beyond dire. But I am fast learning that beggars – and single mums – cannot be choosers. 'I'd definitely consider it.'

'Ah,' Leone says and takes the paper off me again. 'The thing is whether they'd consider you.'

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