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You Had Me at Hello

Written by Mhairi McFarlane

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You Had Me at Hello





MHAIRI MCFARLANE

AVON

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Most of all, thank you dearest Alex - like Bon Jovi, you kept the faith.

And thank you if you bought this. I hope you laughed at least once, and at a bit that was intended to be funny.

For Jenny
Who I Found At University



PROLOGUE

'Oh bloody hell, of all the luck…'

'What?' I asked.

I batted a particularly plucky and irrepressible wasp away from my Coke can. Ben was shielding his face with his hand in that way which only renders you more conspicuous.

'Professor McDonald. You know, Egg McMuffin Head. I owed him an essay on Keats a week ago. Has he seen me?'

I looked over. Across the afternoon-sun-dappled lawn, the professor had stopped in his tracks and was doing the full pointing-finger Lord Kitchener impression, even down to mouthing the word 'YOU'.

'Er. Yes.'

Ben peered through a gap in his fingers at me.

'Maybe yes or hell yes?'

'Like a tweedy, portly, bald Scottish Scud missile has your exact coordinates and is ripping across the grass to take you out, yes.'

'Right, OK, think, think…' Ben muttered, looking up into the leaves of the tree we were sitting beneath.

'Are you going to try to climb it? Because Professor McDonald looks the type to wait for the fire crews at dusk.'

Ben's eyes cast around at the detritus of lunch, and our bags on the ground, as if they contained an answer. I didn't think an esteemed academic getting a face full of Karrimor rucksack was likely to help. His gaze came to rest on my right hand.

'Can I borrow your ring?'

'Sure. It's not magical though.' I twisted it off and handed it over.

'Stand up?'

'Eh?'

'Stand. *Up.*'

I got to my feet, brushing the grass off my jeans. Ben balanced himself on one knee and held aloft a piece of gothicky silver jewellery I'd got for four quid at the student market. I started laughing.

'Oh … *you idiot* …'

Professor McDonald reached us.

'Ben Morgan …!'

'Sorry, sir, I'm just in the middle of something rather important here.'

He turned back to me.

'I know we're twenty years old and the timing of this proposal might have been forced due to … external pressures. But, irrespective of this, you are amazing. I know I will never meet another woman I care about as much as you. This feeling just builds and builds …'

Professor McDonald folded his arms, but incredibly, he was smiling. Unbelievable. The Ben chutzpah triumphed again.

'Are you sure that feeling isn't the revenge of the sweetcorn and tinned hotdog tortilla you and Kev made last night?' I asked.

'No! My God – you've taken me over. It's my head, my heart, my gut…'

'Careful now, lad, I wouldn't go much further in the inventory,' Professor McDonald said. 'The weight of history is upon you. Think of the legacy. It's got to inspire.'

'Thanks, sir.'

'You don't need a wife, you need Imodium,' I said.

'I need *you*. What do you say? Marry me. A simple ceremony. Then you can move into my room. I've got an inflatable mattress and a stained towel you can fold up and use as a pillow. And Kev's perfecting a patatas bravas recipe where you boil the potatoes in Heinz tomato soup.'

'Lovely offer as it is, Ben. Sorry. No.'

Ben turned towards Professor McDonald.

'I'm going to need some compassionate leave.'



I get home slightly late, blown in the door by that special Manchester rain that manages to be both vertical and horizontal at the same time. I bring so much water into the house it feels as if the tide goes out and leaves me draped across the bottom of the stairs like a piece of seaweed.

It's a friendly, unassuming-looking place, I think. You could peg us as early thirty-something childless 'professionals' in a two-minute tour. Framed prints of Rhys's musical heroes. Shabby chic with a bit more of the former than the latter. And dark blue gloss paint on the skirting boards that makes my mum sniff: 'Looks a bit community centre project.'

The house smells of dinner, spicy and warm, and yet there's a definite chill in the air. I can sense Rhys is in a mood even before I set eyes on him. As I walk into the kitchen, something about the tension in his shoulders as he hovers over the stove makes it a certainty.

'Evening, love,' I say, pulling sodden hair out of my collar and unwinding my scarf. I'm shivering, but I have that weekend spring in my step. Everything's a little easier to bear on a Friday.

He grunts indistinctly, which could be a hello, but I don't query it lest I be blamed for opening hostilities.

'Did you get the tax disc?' he asks.

'Oh shit, I forgot.'

Rhys whips round, knife dangling in his hand. It was a crime of passion, your honour. He hated tardiness when it came to DVLA paperwork.

'I reminded you yesterday! It's a day out now.'

'Sorry, I'll do it tomorrow.'

'You're not the one who has to drive the car illegally.'

I'm also not the one who forgot to go last weekend, according to the reminder in his handwriting on the calendar. I don't mention this. Objection: argumentative.

'They tow them to the scrap yard, you know, even if they're parked on the pavement. Zero tolerance. Don't blame me when they crush it down to Noddy size and you've got to get buses.' I have an image of myself in a blue nightcap with a bell on the end of it.

'Tomorrow morning. Don't worry.'

He turns back and continues hacking at a pepper that may or may not have my face on it. I remember that I have a sweetener and duck out to retrieve the bottle of red from the dripping Threshers bag.

I pour two thumping glasses and say: 'Cheers, Big Ears.'

'Big Ears?'

'Noddy. Never mind. How was your day?'

'Same old.'

Rhys works in graphic design for a marketing company. He hates it. He hates talking about it even more. He quite likes lurid tales from the front line of reporting on Manchester Crown Court trials, however.

'Well today a man responded to the verdict of life sentence without parole with the immortal words: "This wrong-ass shit be whack."'

'Haha. And was it?'

'Wrong-ass? No. He did kill a bunch of people.'

'Can you put "wrong-ass shit" in the *Manchester Evening News*?'

'Only with asterisks. I definitely had to euphemise the things his family were saying as "emotional shouts and cries from the public gallery". The only word about the judge that wasn't swearing was "old".'

Chuckling, Rhys carries his glass to the front room. I follow him.

'I did some reception research about the music today,' I say, sitting down. 'Mum's been on to me fretting that *Margaret Drummond at cake club's nephew had a DJ in a baseball cap who played "lewd and cacophonous things about humps and cracks" before the flower girls' and page boys' bedtimes*.'

'Sounds *great*. Can she get his number? Maybe lose the cap though.'

'I thought we could have a live singer. There's someone at work who hired this Elvis impersonator, Macclesfield Elvis. He sounds brilliant.'

Rhys's face darkens. 'I don't want some cheesy old fat fucker in Brylcreem singing "Love Me Tender". We're getting married at Manchester Town Hall, not the Little McWedding Chapel in Vegas.'

I swallow this, even though it doesn't go down easy. *Forgive me for trying to make it fun*.

'Oh. OK. I thought it might be a laugh, you know, get everyone going. What were you thinking?'

He shrugs.

'Dunno.'

His truculence, and a pointed look, tells me I might be missing something.

'Unless … you want to play?'

He pretends to consider this.

'Yeah, 'spose we could. I'll ask the lads.'

Rhys's band. Call them sub-Oasis and he'll kill you. There are a lot of parkas and squabbles though. The thing we both know and never say is that he hoped his previous group, back in Sheffield, would take off, while this is a thirty-something hobby. I've always accepted sharing Rhys with his music. I just didn't expect to have to on my wedding day.

'You could do the first half an hour, maybe, and then the DJ can start after that.'

Rhys makes a face.

'I'm not getting everyone to rehearse and set up and then play for that long.'

'All right, longer then, but it's our wedding, not a gig.'

I feel the storm clouds brewing and rolling, a thunderclap surely on its way. I know his temper, this type of argument, like the back of my hand.

'I don't want a DJ either,' he adds.

'Why not?'

'They're always naff.'

'You want to do all the music?'

'We'll do iPod compilations, Spotify, whatever. Put them on shuffle.'

'OK.'

I should let this go, try when he's in a better mood, but I don't.

'We'll have The Beatles and Abba and stuff for the older generation on there, though? They're not going to get it if it's all fuck-you-I-won't-do-what-you-tell-me and blaring amps.'

'"Dancing Queen"? No bloody way. Even if your cousin Alan wants to mince around to it.' He purses his lips and makes a 'flapping hands at nipple level' Orville the Duck gesture that could be considered gratuitously provocative.

'Why do you have to behave as if this is such a hassle?'

'I thought you wanted to get married on our terms, in our way. We agreed.'

'Yes, our terms. Not your terms,' I say. 'I want you to have a chance to talk to our friends and family. It's a party, for everyone.'

My eyes drifted to my engagement ring. Why were we getting married, again? A few months ago, we were tipsy on ouzo digestifs in a Greek restaurant, celebrating Rhys getting a decent bonus at work. It came up as one of the big things we could spend it on. We liked the idea of a bash, agreed it was probably 'time'. There was no proposal, just Rhys topping up my glass and saying 'Fuck it, why not, eh?' and winking at me.

It felt so secure, and right, and *obvious* a decision in that steamy, noisy dining room, that night. Watching the belly dancer dragging pensioners up to gyrate alongside her, laughing till our bellies hurt. I loved Rhys, and I suppose in my agreement was an acceptance of: well, who else am I going to marry? Yes, we lived with a grumbling undercurrent of dissatisfaction. But like the toad-speckles of mouldy damp in the far corner of the bathroom, it was going to be a lot of upheaval to fix, and we never quite got round to it.

Though we'd waited long enough, I'd never really doubted we would formalise things. While Rhys still had the untamed

hair and wore the eternal student uniform of grubby band t-shirts, distressed denim and All Stars, underneath it all, I knew he wanted the piece of paper before the kids. We called both sets of parents when we got home, ostensibly to share our joy, maybe also so we couldn't go back on it when we'd sobered up. Not moonlight and sonatas but, as Rhys would say, life isn't.

Now I picture this day, supposedly the happiest day of our lives, full of compromises and swallowed irritation and Rhys being clubby and standoffish with his band mates, the way he was when I first met him, when being in his gang had been all my undeveloped heart muscle desired.

'For how long is the band going to be the third person in this relationship? Are you going to be out at rehearsals when I'm home with a screaming baby?'

Rhys pulls the wine glass from his lips.

'Where's that come from? What, I've got to be a different person, give up something I love, to be good enough for you?'

'I didn't say that. I just don't think you playing should be getting in the way of us spending time together on our wedding day.'

'Ha. We'll have *a lifetime together* afterwards.'

He says this as if it's a sentence in Strangeways, with shower bumming, six a.m. exercise drills in the yard and smuggling coded messages to people on the outside. Won't. Let. Me. Come. To. Pub …

I take a deep breath, and feel a hard, heavy weight beneath my ribcage, a pain that I could try to dissolve with wine. It has worked in the past.

'I'm not sure this wedding is a good idea.'

It's out. The nagging thought has bubbled up right through

from subconscious to conscious and has continued onwards, leaving my mouth. I'm surprised I don't want to take it back.

Rhys shrugs.

'I said to do a flit abroad. You wanted to do it here.'

'No, I mean I don't think getting married at the moment is a good idea.'

'Well, it's going to look pretty fucking weird if we call it off.'

'That's not a good enough reason to go through with it.'

Give me a reason. Maybe I'm the one sending desperate messages in code. I realise that I've come to an understanding, woken up, and Rhys isn't hearing the urgency. I've said the sort of thing we don't say. Refusal to listen isn't enough of a response.

He gives an extravagant sigh, one full of unarticulated exhaustion at the terrible trials of living with me.

'Whatever. You've been spoiling for a fight ever since you got home.'

'No I haven't!'

'And now you're going to sulk to try to force me into agreeing to some DJ who'll play rubbish for you and your divvy friends when you're pissed. Fine. Book it, do it all your way, I can't be bothered to argue.'

'*Divvy?*'

Rhys takes a slug of wine, stands up.

'I'm going to get on with dinner, then.'

'Don't you think the fact we can't agree on this might be telling us something?'

He sits again, heavily.

'Oh, Jesus, Rachel, don't try to turn this into a drama, it's been a long week. I haven't got the energy for a tantrum.'

I'm tired, too, but not from five days of work. I'm tired of

the effort of pretending. We're about to spend thousands of pounds on the pretence, in front of all of the people who know us best, and the prospect's making me horribly queasy.

The thing is, Rhys's incomprehension is reasonable. His behaviour is business as usual. *This* is business as usual. It's something in me that's snapped. A piece of my machinery has finally worn out, the way a reliable appliance can keep running and running and then, one day, it doesn't.

'It's not a good idea for us to get married, full stop,' I say. 'Because I'm not sure it's even a good idea for us to be together. We're not happy.'

Rhys looks slightly stunned. Then his face closes, a mask of defiance again.

'You're not happy?'

'No, I'm not happy. Are you?'

Rhys squeezes his eyes shut, sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

'Not at this exact moment, funnily enough.'

'In general?' I persist.

'What is happy, for the purposes of this argument? Prancing through meadows in a stoned haze and see-through blouse, picking daisies? Then no, I'm not. I love you and I thought you loved me enough to make an effort. But obviously not.'

'There is a middle ground between stoner daisies and constant bickering.'

'Grow up, Rachel.'

Rhys's stock reaction to any of my doubts has always been this: a gruff 'grow up', 'get over it'. Everyone else knows this is simply what relationships are and you have unrealistic expectations. I used to like his certainty. Now I'm not so sure.

'It's not enough,' I say.

'What are you saying? You want to move out?'

'Yes.'

'I don't believe you.'

Neither do I, after all this time. It's been quite an acceleration, from nought to splitting up in a few minutes. I've practically got hamster cheeks from the g-force. This could be why it's taken us so long to get round to tying the knot. We knew it'd bring certain fuzzy things into sharper focus.

'I'll start looking for places to rent tomorrow.'

'Is this all it's worth, after thirteen years?' he asks. 'You won't do what I want for the wedding – see ya, bye?'

'It's not really the wedding.'

'Funny how these problems hit you now, when you're not getting your own way. Don't recall this … *introspection* when I was buying the ring.'

He has a point. Have I manufactured this row to give me a reason? Are my reasons good enough? I weaken. Perhaps I'm going to wake up tomorrow and think this was all a mistake. Perhaps this dark, apocalyptic mood of terrible clarity will clear up like the rain that's still pelting down outside. Maybe we could go out for lunch tomorrow, scribble down the shared song choices on a napkin, start getting enthused again …

'OK … if this is going to work, we have to change things. Stop getting at each other all the time. See a counsellor, or something.'

He can offer me next to nothing here, and I will stay. That's how pathetic my resolve is.

Rhys frowns.

'I'm not sitting there while you tell some speccy wonk at

Relate about what a bastard I am to you. I'm not putting the wedding off. Either we do it, or forget it.'

'I'm talking about our future, whether we have one, and all you care about is what people will think if we cancel the wedding?'

'You're not the only one who can give ultimatums.'

'Is this a game?'

'If you're not sure after this long, you never will be. There's nothing to talk about.'

'Your choice,' I say, shakily.

'No, *your choice*,' he spits. 'As always. After all I've sacrificed for you …'

This sends me up into the air, the kind of anger where you levitate two feet off the ground as if you have rocket launchers on your heels.

'You have not given anything up for me! You chose to move to Manchester! You act like I have this debt to you I can never repay and it's bullshit! That band was going to split up anyway! Don't blame me because you DIDN'T MAKE IT.'

'You are such a selfish, spoilt brat,' he bellows back, getting to his feet as well, because shouting from a seated position is never as effective. 'You want what you want, and you never think about what other people have to give up to make it happen. You're doing the same with this wedding. You're the worst kind of selfish because you think you're not. And as for the band, how fucking dare you say you know how things would've turned out. If I could go back and do things differently—'

'Tell me about it!' I scream.

We both stand there, breathing heavily, a two-person Mexican standoff with words as weapons.

'Fine. Right,' Rhys says, eventually. 'I'm going back home for the weekend – I don't want to stay here and take this shit. Start looking for somewhere else to live.'

I drop back down on the sofa and sit with my hands in my lap. I listen to the sounds of him stomping around upstairs, filling an overnight bag. Tears run down my cheeks and into the neckline of my shirt, which had only just started to dry out. I hear Rhys in the kitchen and I realise he's turning the light off underneath the pan of chilli. Somehow, this tiny moment of consideration is worse than anything he could say. I put my face in my hands.

After a few more minutes, I'm startled by his voice, right next to me.

'Is there anyone else?'

I look up, bleary. 'What?'

'You heard. Is there anyone else?'

'Of course not.'

Rhys hesitates, then adds: 'I don't know why you're crying. This is what you want.'

He slams the front door so hard behind him, it sounds like a gunshot.



2

In the shock of my sudden singlehood, my best friend Caroline and our mutual friends Mindy and Ivor rally round and ask the question of the truly sympathetic: 'Do you want us all to go out and get really really drunk?'

Rhys wasn't missing in action as far as they were concerned: he'd always seen my friends as *my* friends. And he used to observe that Mindy and Ivor 'sound like a pair of *Play School* presenters'. Mindy is Indian, it's an abbreviation of Parminder. She calls 'Mindy' her white world alias. 'I can move among you entirely undetected. Apart from the being brown thing.'

As for Ivor, his dad's got a thing about Norse legends. It's been a bit of an albatross, thanks to a certain piece of classic children's animation. Ivor endured the rugby players in our halls of residence at university calling him 'the engine' and claiming he made a *pessshhhty-coom*, *pessshhhty-coom* noise at intimate moments. Those same rugby players drank each other's urine and phlegm for dares and drove Ivor upstairs to meet the girls' floor, which is how we became a mixed-sex unit of four. Our platonic company, combined with his close-shaved head,

black-rimmed glasses and love of trendy Japanese trainers led to a frequent assumption that Ivor was gay. He's since gone into computer game programming and, given there are practically no women in the profession whatsoever, he feels this misconception could see him missing out on valuable opportunities.

'It's counter-intuitive,' he always complains. 'Why should a man surrounded by women be homosexual? Hugh Hefner doesn't get this treatment. Obviously I should wear a dressing gown and slippers all day.'

Anyway, I'm not quite ready to face cocktail bar society, so I opt for a night in drinking the domestic variety, invariably more lethal.

Caroline's house in Chorlton is always the obvious choice to meet, as unlike the rest of us she's married, and has an amazing one. (I mean house, not spouse – no disrespect to Graeme. He's away on one of his frequent boys' golfing weekends.) Caroline is a very well paid accountant for a large chain of supermarkets, and a proper adult: but then, she always was. At university, she wore quilted gilets and was a member of the rowing club. When I used to express my amazement to the others that she could get up early and exercise after a hard night on the sauce, Ivor used to say, groggily: 'It's a posh thing. Norman genes. She has to go off and conquer stuff.'

He could be on to something about her ancestry. She's tall, blonde and has what I believe is called an aquiline profile. She says she looks like an ant eater; if so, it's kind of ant-eater-by-way-of-Grace-Kelly.

I have the job of slicing limes and salting the rims of the glasses on Caroline's spotlessly sleek black Corian worktop while she blasts ice, tequila and Cointreau into a slurry in a candy-

apple red KitchenAid. In between these deafening bursts, from her regal perch on the sofa, Mindy is gifting us, as usual, with the Tao of Mindy.

'The difference between thirty and thirty-one is the difference between a funeral and the grieving process.'

Caroline starts spooning out margarita mixture.

'Turning thirty is like a funeral?'

'The funeral for your youth. Lots of drink and sympathy and attention and flowers, and you see everyone you know.'

'And for a moment there we were worried the comparison was going to be tasteless,' Ivor says, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He's sitting on the floor, legs outstretched, one arm similarly outstretched, pointing a remote at something lozenge-shaped that's apparently a stereo. 'Have you really got The Eagles on here, Caroline, or is it a sick joke?'

'Thirty-one is like grieving,' Mindy continues. 'Because getting on with it is much worse, but no one expects you to complain any more.'

'Oh, we expect you to complain, Mind,' I say, carefully passing her a shallow glass that looks like a saucer on a stem.

'The fashion magazines make me feel so old and irrelevant, it's like the only thing I should bother buying is TENA Lady. Can I eat this?' Mindy removes the lime slice from the side of her glass and examines it.

She is, in general, a baffling mixture of extreme aptitude and total daftness. Mindy did a business degree and insisted throughout she was useless at it and definitely wasn't going to take on the family firm, which sold fabrics in Rusholme. Then she got a first and picked the business up for one summer, created mail order and online sales, quadrupled the turnover and grudgingly

accepted she might have a knack, and a career. Yet on holiday in California recently, when a tour guide announced, 'On a clear day, with binoculars, you can see whales from here', Mindy said, 'Oh my God, all the way to Cardigan Bay?'

'Lime? Er … not usually,' I say.

'Oh. I thought you might've infused it with something.'

I collect another glass and deliver it to Ivor, then Caroline and I carry ours to our seats.

'Cheers,' I say. 'To my broken engagement and loveless future.'

'To your future,' Caroline chides.

We raise glasses, slurp, wince a bit – the tequila is quite loud in the mix. It makes my lips numb and stomach warm.

Single. It's been so long since the word applied to me and I don't feel it yet. I'm something else, in limbo: tip-toeing round my own house, sleeping in the spare room, avoiding my ex-fiancé and his furious, seething disappointment. He's right: this is what I want, I have less reason than him to be upset.

'How's it going, you two living together?' Caroline asks, carefully, as if she can hear me think.

'We're not putting piano wire at neck level across doorways yet. We stay out of each other's way. I need to step up the house hunt. I'm finding excuses to be out every evening as it is.'

'How did your mum take it?' Mindy bites her lip.

Mindy understands that, as one of the two slated bridesmaids, she was the only other person as excited as my mum.

'Not well,' I say, with my skill for understatement.

It was awful. The phone call went in phases. The 'stop playing a practical joke' section. The 'you're having cold feet, it's natural' parry. The 'give it a few weeks, see how you feel' suggestion. Anger, denial, bargaining, and then – I hope – some sort of

acceptance. Dad came on and asked me if it was because I was worrying about the cost, as they'd cover it all if need be. It was then that I cried.

'I hope you don't mind me asking, it's just, you never said…' Mindy asks. 'What actually caused the row that made you and Rhys finish?'

'Oh…' I say. 'It was Macclesfield Elvis.'

There's a pause. Our default setting is pissing about. As the demise of my epically long relationship only happened a week previous, no one knows quite what's appropriate yet. It's like after any major tragedy: when's it OK to start forwarding the email jokes?

'You shagged Macclesfield Elvis?' Ivor says. 'How did it feel to be nailed by The King?'

'Ivor!' Mindy wails.

I laugh.

'Oooh!' Caroline suddenly exclaims, in a very un-Caroline-like way.

'Have you sat on something?' Mindy says.

'I forgot to say. Guess who I saw this week?'

I'm trying to think which famous person is meant to be my top spot. Unless it's someone I've done a story on, but I spend all day looking at people who are only ever celebrities for the wrong reasons. I doubt a sex attacker on the lam would provoke this delight.

'*Coronation Street* or Man U?' Mindy asks. These are the two main sources of famous people in the city, it's true.

'Neither,' Caroline says. 'And this is a quiz for Rachel.'

I shrug, crunching on some ice with my back teeth.

'Uh… Darren Day?'

'No.'

'Lembit Opik?'

'No.'

'My dad?'

'Why would I see your dad?'

'He could be over from Sheffield, having a clandestine affair behind my mum's back.'

'In which case I'd announce it in the form of a fun quiz?'

'OK, I give up.'

Caroline sits back with a triumphant look on her face.

'English Ben.'

I go hot and cold at the same time, like I've suddenly caught the flu. Slight nausea is right behind the temperature fluctuation. Yep, the analogy holds.

Ivor twists round to look at Caroline.

'English Ben? What kind of nickname is that? As opposed to what?'

'Is he any relation to Big Ben?' Mindy asks.

'English Ben,' Caroline repeats. 'Rachel knows who I mean.'

I feel like Alec Guinness in *Star Wars* when Luke Skywalker turns up at his cave and starts asking for Obi Wan Kenobi. *Now there's a name I've not heard in a long, long time…*

'Where was he?' I say.

'Going into Central Library.'

'How about telling old "Two Legs Ivor" who you're on about?' Ivor asks.

'I could be "Hindi Mindy",' Mindy offers, and Ivor looks like he's going to explain something to her, then changes his mind.

'He was a friend at uni, remember,' I say, covering my mouth with my glass in case my face is betraying more than I want.

'Off my course. Hence, English. Ben.'

'If he was a friend of yours, why is Caroline all … wriggly?' Mindy asks.

'Caroline always fancied him,' I say, glad this is the truth, if nothing like the whole truth, so help me God.

'Ah.' Mindy gives me an appraising look. 'You can't have fancied him then, because you and Caroline and taste in men – never the twain shall meet.'

I could kiss Mindy for this.

'True,' I agree, emphatically.

'He still looks *fine*,' Caroline says, and my stomach starts flopping around like a live crustacean heading for the pot in the Yang Sing kitchen. 'He was in a gorgeous suit and tie.'

'A *suit*, you say? This man is fascinating,' Ivor says. 'What a character. I'm compelled to know more. Oh. No, hang on – I'm not.'

'Did you and he ever …?' Mindy asks Caroline. 'I'm trying to place him …'

'God, no, I wasn't glamorous enough for him, I don't think any of us were, were we, Rach? Bit of a womaniser. But somehow nice with it.'

'Yep,' I squeak.

'Wait! I remember Ben! All like, preppy, smart and confident?' Mindy says. 'We thought he must be rich and then it was like, no, he just … washes.' She looks at Ivor, who takes the bait.

'Oh, rings a vague bell. Poser who was …' Ivor flips his collar up '… *Is it handsome in here or is it just me*?'

'He wasn't like that!' I laugh, nervously.

'You lost touch with Ben completely?' Caroline asks. 'Not Facebook friends or anything?'

Severed touch with him. Touch was torn in half, like chesting the ribbon at the end of a race.

'No. I mean, yeah. Not seen Ben since uni.'

And my seven hundred and eighty-one Google searches yielded no results.

'I've seen him at the library a few times, it's only now it's clicked and I realised why I recognised him. He must be staying in Manchester. Do you want me to say hello if I see him again, pass on your mobile number?'

'No!' I say, with a note of panic not entirely absent from my voice. I feel I have to explain this, so I add: 'It could sound as if I'm after him.'

'If you were only friends before, why would he automatically think that?' Caroline asks, not unreasonably.

'I'm single after such a long time. I don't know, it could be misinterpreted. And I'm not looking to… I don't want it to look like, here's my single friend who wants me to auction her phone number to men in the street,' I waffle.

'Well, I wasn't going to put it on a card in a phone box!' Caroline huffs.

'I know, I know, sorry.' I pat her arm. 'I am so, so out of practice at this.'

A pause, with sympathetic smiles from Mindy and Caroline.

'I'll hook you up with some hotness, when you're ready.' Mindy pats my arm.

'Woah,' Ivor says.

'What?'

'Judging from the men you *do* date, I'm trying to imagine the ones you pass over. I'm getting a message from my brain: *the server understood your request but is refusing to fulfil it*.'

'Oh, considering your rancid trollops, this is *rich*.'

'No, it was that thundering helmet Bruno who was rich, remember?'

'Aherm, he also had a nice bum.'

'So there you go,' Caroline interrupts. 'Have we cheered you up? Feeling brighter?'

'Yes. A sort of nuclear glow,' I say.

'More serious Slush Puppy?' Caroline asks.

I hold my glass up.

'Shitloads, please.'