

**Copyrighted Material**

# Prologue

1999

Some moments in life are nothing like you expect they will be.

Seeing the Mona Lisa. (Way smaller than the knock-off poster sold in Dartford Market of her smoking a massive spliff.) The first day of your first period. (Not magical and followed by the realisation that you're locked into a thirty-year contract once a month.) Running away from home. (You quite like having regular food and access to a familiar toilet.)

But occasionally a significant thing happens that is different from whatever you imagined because it is so much more. And while it may be as rare as the sighting of a Great Comet, sometimes that moment is a First, illuminated with such brightness in recollection that the memory of it burns for an entire lifetime.

I wanted my first kiss to be like Angela Chase kissing Jordan Catalano from *My So-Called Life*, all chapped lips and goofy smiles in the school boiler room, but I think

Copyrighted Material

deep down I believed it would be a bit crap. My friends had all experienced terrible first kisses – toothy, submerged in dribble, and almost always shared with someone who just happened to be there and willing. At sixteen, time was running out for me.

It almost happened with Skateboard Steve. I'd had a crush on him ever since I'd seen him in a Nirvana T-shirt, mooching around the town centre with a dog chain around his neck and a skateboard in one hand. We were both at the school disco in the local community centre to mark the end of term. The DJ, also the owner of the local hardware store, Hard Nutz, was trying to jolly along a bunch of sullen teenagers who had peeled off into segregated groups of boys and girls pasted to the walls.

A bunch of us were trying to escape the bad pop music, sitting outside by some scrubby grass and a Pin Bin. Squinting through thick eyeliner, we attempted to look subversive and cool with our bottles of Coke and 7Up mixed with whatever we'd managed to steal from our parents' drinks cabinets.

As Backstreet Boys' 'I Want It That Way' began playing, Steve started leaning in. *It's happening!* I thought. *Finally!* But then he stopped, went the colour of a lettuce and vomited melon liqueur all over his jeans.

As a fairly unremarkable-looking Indian girl in a predominantly white suburban town, I hadn't expected an opportunity for a first kiss to come around again quite so soon. My parents were stricter than those of my English classmates and I wasn't usually the type of girl boys

## *In Case of Emergency*

fawned over. Brown women back then weren't even seen as desirable; the Dartford W. H. Smith had yet to stock the *Kama Sutra* and dodgy online Indian auntie porn wasn't yet a thing.

But then, my best friends and I went on our first holiday sans parents, to Cornwall. And there, someone had finally seen me for who I was.

It was like something from a movie, but better. Because in a movie, there'd be someone cheesy like Shania Twain playing as our lips came together, but in real life, it was Smashing Pumpkins' 'Today.' Possibly the most perfect song, for a perfect kiss.

Everything felt like it was beginning. Everything felt like it was ending – just like that point before a river meets the sea. The taste of him on my lips, the feeling of knowing someone in a way I had never known anyone before, the sense of freedom and power over my own body, the softness of it all, carried through to a wave of emotion that felt like it would burst right out of me.

'Shall I go get us some drinks?' I asked, extricating myself from underneath the old, scratchy blankets that smelled slightly of dog. He placed another kiss on my lips in silent affirmation and picked up his guitar. I pulled on my jacket as scattered notes trailed behind me like confetti.

The sharp air jolted me out of that warm place. Overhead, the sky had transformed from a piercing blue to an expanse of black shot through with diamonds. I looked up at the stars as they shone, ancient and powerful, as if to

Copyrighted Material

remind me that the world is beautiful. Even for an unremarkable Indian girl.

I picked out two semi-cold cans of beer from the booze bucket by my friends, all clustered and wrapped in a tangle around the bonfire, whistling and cheering as I returned. I loved them and knew I could count on them for anything.

'Dicks,' I mouthed at them, unable to stop a smile so wide, it threatened to glue the corners of my lips to my ears permanently. Walking back to the shed, I sang along to the lyrics booming out.

But as I reached for the handle, the sound of the guitar stopped. I heard two voices. One belonged to the beautiful boy I had just kissed. The other belonged to a person I had sat next to at lunch for the best part of three years, exchanged letters with almost daily at the school gates, who had stayed at my house countless times, eaten my mother's food and sat with me on my sofa as we debated which one of the Hanson brothers we'd shag, marry or kill. I paused to hear what nice things she might be saying about me. But as I listened, I realised that what she was saying wasn't nice at all.

I was unable to believe this was happening. The euphoria I'd felt turned to ash in my mouth. Imagine: the worst things you think about yourself, being said by someone you thought would always love and protect you.

We all have expectations of those big moments in life. First kisses, first loves. We even have expectations of the less nice moments, like heartbreak. I always thought my first proper heartbreak would be the result of a great love,

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

and I'd play The Cure and Air Supply so loud my mum would bang on the door and then make me a ham and cheese toastie to cheer me up.

But I never expected in a million years that my first heartbreak would follow so soon after my first kiss. Or that the first person to break my heart wouldn't be a boy, but one of my best friends.

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# 1

2019

‘You saw the Chelsea match, yeah?’ said David from Commercial Partnerships. I inwardly groaned. My male colleagues started talking excitedly about players and penalties and how ‘they were robbed, mate’. One of the more kindly ones – and it was usually one of the dads who had a daughter – took a look at me and asked: ‘Do you watch football, Bel?’

I shook my head and the rueful expression on his face confirmed what he thought he knew: *girl, not interested in football*. Which, if he’d ever met my older sister Devi or my niece Karen, he would know was an outdated stereotype.

Instead, I fiddled with the cable connecting my laptop to the main screen of the boardroom we had all gathered in for our quarterly directors’ meeting. As head of New Creative, I was expected to give the first presentation. As was always the case when I was the only woman in a room, I was made to default to the role of mummy, only stopping

Copyrighted Material



short of burping them. It was expected that I'd oversee all the extra stuff, from double-checking the assistant had made enough coffee to making sure the tech had been set up. I hated doing it but had learned the hard way that if I didn't, no one would, and I'd be the one left without coffee.

A full-bodied hush rippled through the room, which meant our CEO Crispin had arrived. I took my pre-assigned seat near the top of the table, which had real front-of-the-bus vibes, but at least I wasn't seated anywhere near Tristan. Like me, he was one of the youngest directors in the advertising agency. Unlike me, he was a man whose unique brand of arrogance had no doubt been fermented at private school, matured as he stepped from one plum opportunity to the next with minimal effort, and distilled into the person I knew today. That is, a bozo who wielded his good looks for evil ends and, if rumours were true, had a penchant for charming new female interns then ghosting them to the brink of madness.

I focused instead on Crispin, who was as always neat and beautifully dressed. He was vocal about maintaining his lean figure with daily cardio and strict food rules. At client lunches he would only eat white fish or vegetarian food. Cheese, he said, was the Devil's smegma, and he'd stopped eating bread in 1998. This meticulousness did not, however, extend to alcohol and other substances. His age was rumoured to be anywhere between sixty and seventy-five, indeterminate because of light brushstrokes of Botox and fillers.

**Copyrighted Material**

## *In Case of Emergency*

There was one highlight to being in this meeting. Although he wasn't in town often, when he was, Crispin favoured me, and not in a creepy way. His ex-wife was Indian, and although she turned out to be 'a Satanic bitch viper who stole half his money', he doted on their daughter Tamara. I think I reminded him of her even though we looked nothing alike – she was tall and looked like an Instagram model with latte-coloured skin, while I was short, a rich shade of walnut with bodily proportions that would have been fashionable in an ancient Hindu text circa 400 BC. Sturdy forearms, robust breasts, a melon bottom all condensed in slightly too small a space. But perhaps it was also because he didn't scare me, and I didn't simper around him, that I had won favour. Just as he treated me like a proxy daughter, I treated him like a proxy father and my lighthearted nagging was always in his best interests.

'Good to see you all, gang,' he said, standing at the head of the table. 'Much to discuss. Is it too early for whisky?' It was 9.30 a.m. The men puffed out their chests like pigeons swaggering on the cornices of Trafalgar Square and murmurs of 'it's five o'clock somewhere', 'whisky breakfast' and 'never too early', filled the air. But their expressions said otherwise. Most of them were entering their forties or fifties and simply wanted to make it through the day and get home in time to put their kids to bed.

'No, Crispin, we're not having whisky,' I said. 'Most of us haven't even had a coffee yet.' He looked at me and then at his assistant Jane, who also shook her head. 'Oh, boo,' he replied. 'Fine, we'll wait until lunch. Fun sponge.'

**Copyrighted Material**

I could sense the relief rippling through the room and some of the directors gave me a grateful smile, looking at me properly for the first time that day. I'd been a director for two years, and still some of them seemed surprised when I turned up to a meeting. At 36, I wasn't that much younger than some of them, but because I looked younger, I had to constantly reinforce that I wasn't some fresh-faced newbie who'd been hired to fill a seat. There was often a momentary delay as they registered how I was dressed and spoke, during which they had to reconfigure their mental Rolodex of reference points for people who looked like me: corner shop owner's daughter, demure, frigid onion-chopper, garlic-masher, terrorist's wife.

'I'll get us started, shall I?' I said and stood up confidently, inside feeling as if any moment, the woven cream carpet would give way to molten lava. Crispin smiled in silent approval. There was no sign of the hurricane clamped behind his teeth that would very soon begin the sequence of events that up-ended everything.

\*

We were over halfway through the morning. Aside from the fact that this was one of the most important meetings of the year – a quarterly update on each department – time with Crispin was limited because he was mostly based in Monaco. It was the ultimate cliché, but he had vast sums of disposable income and took every opportunity to sunbathe, eat lobster and drink champagne for as long as he

Copyrighted Material

## *In Case of Emergency*

was able. Leopard, our agency, was one of many in his portfolio of businesses, but as he had built the agency from the ground up himself, he took more of an interest in what we did. And he liked to get involved.

Unlike other big bosses who sat in an open-plan office with their employees in an attempt to convince their teams they were 'just one of the gang' (while the actual gang liberated company stationery and toilet paper because they didn't get bonuses or six-figure salaries), Crispin had no interest in dissolving the hierarchy. As much as I knew I had a seat at the boardroom table because I had earned it, there was a part of me that never felt fully in my own skin here, always misty-eyed with regret for the dream I had relinquished of working at a small, independent agency to make money and a name for myself.

Working at a smaller company might have been less toxic for the soul, but I also knew that I liked £4 hipster coffees and not having to worry about paying my bills, or what I spent on nights out. Maybe playing a part and wearing a cape dress that made me look like a flying squirrel – even though the shop assistant had assured me I'd feel powerful in it – weren't the worst things in the world.

Along with everyone else, I needed to overegg my successes and spin failures into candyfloss, sweetened with promises of how we'd do better. This meeting would determine our budget for next year. We had brief, high-pressure windows to impress Crispin. Those who didn't invariably found their department restructured. Tristan,

**Copyrighted Material**

Head of New Media, was in the middle of his presentation and people were discreetly checking their phones as the clock inched towards lunch. Crispin cut him off midway, which was never a good sign.

‘This is great, Tristan, but I have a question for you – what the fuck happened with Lightning? That’s your area, right?’

Tristan’s face froze. ‘Lightning?’ I’d never seen him rattled before. I liked it.

‘Yes,’ said Crispin. ‘The Oseni fuck-up.’

Everyone put their phones down, sensing that at any moment things could explode. By now Tristan had rearranged his face into a mask of self-assurance.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it was an easy mistake to make, and I’d say that it was a team failure, not just New Media’s.’ It wasn’t an easy mistake to make, and worse, I had the feeling that some of us were about to be fed to the furnace of Crispin’s wrath.

‘Yes,’ said Crispin, ‘but it also cost us a lot of money. I don’t care whether it was a hard or an easy mistake to make: how the fuck did this happen?’

The Oseni Fuck-Up, as it was referred to, was related to a campaign that we’d put together for Lightning, an emerging, cutting-edge sports brand, who wanted a prominent Black personality to lead it. The client was spending a lot of money and wanted the Premier League footballer Edward Oseni, who’d just won the BBC’s Sports Personality of the Year Award but was known as much for his philanthropy as for his sporting skill. In one of the early

Copyrighted Material

## *In Case of Emergency*

meetings, we'd had a big discussion about maybe instead going for someone like the up-and-coming rapper Eric O, whose star was on the rise and who had already been seen wearing their clothes. Eventually, Lightning went for Oseni, though, and on the day of the meeting to celebrate the partnership, our social media manager had sent his intern to fill in for him and take notes because he was off on annual leave.

Maybe the intern was hungover from the night before or maybe, like most people in the company, he was some little snotnose who got the gig because of nepotism and didn't actually care about being there. But whatever the reason, when he put out tweets about the campaign, he used a picture of Eric O, but captioned it with Edward Oseni's name. And because that team had zero Black people in it, no one noticed for about six hours. The ensuing outrage from media outlets and influencers was tremendous. Memes were created and Lightning pulled the campaign.

Crispin looked pointedly at Tristan, who quickly said: 'I mean, yes, there are definitely people in my team accountable, but we all help out across each other's campaigns. I'm surprised Bel of all people didn't catch it sooner, to be honest.'

I started in my chair at the sound of my name. The rest of the earthworms around the table were blind to the undercurrent of what was really happening here. New Creative and New Media worked quite closely together, so they assumed I was being dragged into it because of my

Copyrighted Material

role. But I knew Tristan wasn't that stupid. I'd heard him making 'jokes' about diversity hires.

And now it seemed it wasn't enough that the company trotted me out whenever they needed to show a flash of diversity; apparently I was meant by default to be the race monitor *just because I wasn't white?*

I looked at Tristan poisonously. 'Why should *I* of all people have caught it?'

He shrugged and smiled. 'Because I know how much you care about D&I.'

D&I: Diversity and Inclusion. Everyone knew that it was the hot topic of discussion at industry events, with actual change being far off because the only people who took it seriously were those most impacted by it but with the least power. And the people who ran companies, sat on boards and chose leadership teams, continued to hide behind the 'best person for the job' rationale, and it remained a mystery or perhaps sheer coincidence how the 'best' people just happened to look and behave exactly like them.

Catching a hint of suppressed fury in the air, Crispin said: 'Well, look, let's move on. We'll discuss it later, Tristan. Dan, you're next . . .'

As Dan, Head of Research, launched into his presentation, I sat in my chair feeling incandescent with fury. I needed an outlet before I exploded. But who to text? Certainly not Devi – she'd probably be packing my niece's school lunch or running around after her husband. And my friend Katrina wouldn't get it because while she talked about being half Greek *a lot*, if she'd been at that boardroom

Copyrighted Material

## *In Case of Emergency*

table she'd have been as clueless as the rest. I needed someone who understood.

I scrolled through my phone and on impulse texted Ranvir, a colleague who wasn't as senior as me. I'd worked with her a few times. She and I always said we 'must go for drinks' and never did, but we had a camaraderie when we saw each other in meetings and moaned about the lack of Black and brown people in the business. I was saved in her phone as Becky and she was saved in mine as Barry, for a joke.

**The diversity in this company is RIDIC – you won't believe the racist piece of shit I just had to deal with.**



She wasn't online, so I put my phone back down and looked up, wondering why everyone had gone quiet. I looked at the main screen. There was my message to 'Barry', for everyone to see, in stark black and white. I had completely forgotten that my laptop, which was synced to my phone, was still plugged in.

\*

Even the freshly baked jammy doughnut, flecked with sugar crystals that sparkled in the midday sun, couldn't soothe the knot of nerves building in my stomach. My assistant Maggie, who had placed it wordlessly on my desk as if sensing the anxiety radiating through the glass doors of my office, was one of my few sources of joy at Leopard. Immaculately

**Copyrighted Material**



dressed and British Ghanaian, she reflected the unshakable confidence of Gen Y in the straight set of her shoulders and the way she never, ever seemed flustered.

In contrast, I sat hunched at my desk, cape dress bunched around me like a depressed Bond villain, replaying the scene over and over again. Crispin saying, 'We'll talk about this later,' in a clipped tone devoid of warmth. Tristan hadn't smirked for once but actually looked . . . shocked. I guess no one likes being called racist, not even him.

I knew how lucky I was to have my own office, with an assistant who didn't spend all her time on TikTok. And offices with windows in Marylebone – the expensive patch behind Oxford Circus, with stucco-faced terraces of Georgian buildings – were even rarer, even if mine did overlook the local STD clinic tucked away in a dripping, damp archway of Victorian brick, like something from a Dickens novel. But the burning question now was: had I jeopardised my career?

I picked up the doughnut just as my phone buzzed in my hand, which resulted in a rogue squirt of jam onto my dress. I dabbed at it with water and realised the second-worst thing about white cape dresses: even if you could pull them off, you could definitely *only* pull them off when they were pristine.

Rather than the text I'd expected from my friend Katrina with her ETA for lunch, it was just an Instagram notification. Two swipes took me to a photo of my sister Devi with my sixteen-year-old niece. It seemed Karen had just got into the under-18s county football team. Devi beamed out from under a black beanie hat, her glossy curly hair

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

and beautiful heart-shaped face pressed proudly to her daughter's.

For a moment I envied Devi's life back in the suburbs, where most of her daily challenges seemed to centre around the supermarket shop and Karen's A-level choices. I debated whether to text congratulations, but when I saw that the last WhatsApp from her had been sent two weeks ago, and realised she'd chosen to share this news on Instagram rather than telling me directly, I popped my phone in my bag. It wasn't out of spite, more that I didn't know if a text from me would mean anything to her, and she was likely already celebrating with Karen and Mum and Dad anyway.

Besides, hopefully Katrina was waiting for me at the restaurant, and I needed to talk to someone about what had just happened. Even if she wouldn't properly understand, it was better than nothing. Despite the warmth of the day, I draped a black scarf over the jam stain and headed out.

\*

Dirty Joe's Pizza was possibly the worst choice for a stress-free lunch, given that it was no-reservations, they were always packed and got testy if your guest hadn't shown up within five minutes.

But it was Katrina's favourite, and it was her turn to choose where we ate. We had known each other for about a year, after meeting each other at a military fitness class in the park. She had thrown up behind a tree after a round of burpees and I'd handed her a tissue, which she

Copyrighted Material

accepted gratefully while the instructor yelled, 'Puke is for the weak! Get back in, no excuses!' By chance, I then bumped into her a few weeks later at an industry awards ceremony. We both burst into laughter at the memory of the instructor – neither of us had gone back since – and she told me she worked as a publicist. Our offices were only a ten-minute walk apart and we fell into an easy friendship.

She always had invites to great parties that she let me tag along to, and she was usually available at a minute's notice. She was also always late. And now, it appeared, wasn't answering her phone. The waiter had already approached me twice in fifteen minutes.

'We really need the table,' he said on his third pass.

'Travis,' I snapped, looking at his name tag, 'I am having the mother of days. *Please* cut me some slack.'

Travis pushed his oversized Prada glasses onto the bridge of his nose and pointed at the queue. One man in his thirties was tapping at his watch as if he was about to miss an event of utmost importance as opposed to ordering a Semi Hard and Hot nine-inch Pepperoni. I looked at my phone again. No response from Katrina to my last three **Where are you!!!** messages. Travis coughed.

'For fuck's sake,' I muttered under my breath. 'You know what? Release the table. I'll just go eat a falafel wrap while hunched on a bench that hopefully isn't spattered with pigeon poop.'

'Sounds wonderful!' He beamed fleetingly at me then

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

turned the full wattage of his charm onto the next couple in line, ushering them to my now-vacated table as if welcoming the Queen into the royal box.

\*

June in London can be a trying time. It lulls you into open-toed sandals and possibly even shedding that extra cardigan you carry around with you just because it's England. On the other hand, it can descend into days of unending rain, that fogs up the windows, slides damp little fingers down the small of the back, pulls wisps of hair into frizzy curls.

Although it was humid, the temporary reprieve from rain meant that the streets were filled with people wanting to be anywhere but their stagnant, temperature-controlled offices. I was dying to escape the sad fate of the desk lunch and being interrupted with *Ooh, sorry, are you eating?* just as your food is inches away from your mouth. I stormed past a group of men who'd loosened their ties while laughing about something or other as they queued for burritos, a woman heading purposefully towards Oliver Bonas with a returns bag in her hand, a bunch of students in flannel shirts and oversized glasses arranging themselves over a bench.

I was worried about Crispin and Tristan, I was upset at Katrina who still hadn't texted. I was hangry because I still hadn't eaten. There *had* to be someone else I could call.

I scrolled on my phone while walking, flipping the

Copyrighted Material

scarf over my shoulder angrily as it loosened and came half-undone. With my head still brimming with a thousand different thoughts, the scarf yet again unravelled and I yanked it once more.

All of this meant that I didn't notice the open trapdoor leading to a pub cellar, yawning like a mouth directly in my path. I didn't notice the hazard cones placed around it, warning pedestrians to beware. I stepped past these with the confidence of a person whose feet would automatically encounter paving stones, but was quickly forced to adjust to the reality of empty space and a ten-foot drop.

The brain is a highly sophisticated organ, with over 120 billion neurons, and inside it, information can travel at speeds of up to 268 miles per hour. But still, when faced with certain situations, there is only one word in the universal language that adequately conveys the complexity of what is happening.

'Arrrrggggggggggggghhhhhhhh!

Time stretched into infinity as I hit my head and dark unconsciousness smothered out the light.

## 2

The last time I'd experienced unconsciousness was as a teenager. I'd been submerged in a bath so hot it felt as if it was cooking the outer edges of my toes. Unable to withstand any more lobstering, I pulled the plug and quickly stood up. The sudden transition from heat to cold made me faint, and the next thing I knew, I was lying face-down, bum exposed to the elements, attempting to breathe through the vanishing Matey bubbles while water gurgled down the plug hole.

Emerging from that place – the black cosmos that the brain keeps like a storage locker adjacent to your consciousness – was even more disconcerting as an adult. The lack of input between my last memory of being on the sunny streets of Marylebone and my current reality of lying on a hospital bed, was jarring. And it was definitely not a dream, because dreams were not accompanied by smells. Specifically, an olfactory bouquet of overcooked mashed potato and bleach. Thin blue curtains had been pulled shut either side to afford some shred of privacy from the five other beds in the room.

Copyrighted Material

I tried to get up, but there was a shooting pain in my head. I touched the side of my skull to find that there was a bandage wound around it. Panic flashed through me. *What if I'd broken my brain?!* I lifted the blanket draped across me and looked down to see that I was still wearing the cape dress, but if I thought it looked bad with a solitary jam stain on it before, there were no words for what it looked like now, covered in crud.

'Hello?' I said with a croak.

'She's awake, nurse!' a voice yelled from the other side of the curtain. I gingerly reached over to pull it back and saw a twenty-something South Asian woman with extremely dilated pupils smiling at me from the next bed.

'Salma,' she said.

'Bel,' I replied, lying back on the pillow, exhausted by that small movement.

'What are you in for?' she asked.

'I have no idea,' I said. 'I think I fell down a hole.' A hole? That sounded like something a cartoon character would say.

'Weird. Is that why your dress looks like that?'

Thankfully, at that exact moment, a doctor came in carrying a clipboard, and yanked the curtain back to its closed position. 'I'm Doctor Dave,' she said, sitting on the edge of the bed. 'And you are . . . Beryl Kumar, is that correct?'

'BERYL?!' I heard a squawk from the other side of the curtain.

'Ms Malik, please stop that or we'll have to get you

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

moved. I don't want to have to say it again,' Doctor Dave said firmly. Despite her businesslike tone, I knew what was coming.

'Beryl?' she said, looking at me with a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth, trying to fight it like the pull of a magnet.

'It's Sanskrit,' I said tightly, as I'd had to explain pretty much my entire life, to people who wondered why I had the same name as an old lady who lived in the Wirral and liked to eat Hobnobs. 'It's the name of a gemstone – one that my dad gave to my mum when they met, and it was all he could afford.'

'Ah. Well, it's an unusual name,' she said.

'Yes,' I said. 'And so is Doctor Dave, wouldn't you say?'

'Fair enough,' she said good-naturedly. 'Although it's actually Davé – my husband is Indian. His surname, you see. I just say Dave because it's easier. Also, I like to see the looks on people's faces when they expect someone who looks like Phil Mitchell, and they get, well, me.'

'Call me Bel,' I said, hoping that this wouldn't be an opportunity for the other person to tell me how much they liked Indian food or how they'd once holidayed on the trains there and wasn't it amazing? My parents hadn't thought it was important for Devi or me to visit India when we were younger, and it was often disconcerting to have a place I knew little about being described to me in such fanatic detail by someone who meant well, but whose ancestors had probably ruled over mine within the last hundred years.

**Copyrighted Material**



My head was aching; my entire body felt as if it was filled with rust and fur. I wanted to get this over with and go home.

‘Okay, Bel, so what do you remember?’

I remembered that brief, terrifying moment of falling down into the cellar, and the next thing I knew I was here, I told her. ‘Nothing else?’ she asked. I shook my head and immediately regretted the movement as a crackle of what felt like lightning shot across my temple.

Dr Dave nodded. ‘Let me tell you what happened, then. Firstly, you’re an extremely lucky woman,’ she said. ‘It might not feel like that now, but you fell feet-first into a pub cellar, a distance of ten feet, and somehow you have no broken bones. You did hit your head, however, and there was some external bleeding hence the bandage, but we’ve run some scans and there isn’t any internal bleeding or damage to the skull.’

She talked about concussion, things to look out for, how to monitor the bleeding. She told me not to text and walk at the same time, and that I wouldn’t believe how many accidents were caused by people not paying attention. When she was done, she looked expectantly at me. While I was relieved that I hadn’t snapped my neck, I was still hungry, my clothes were filthy and my head hurt. I just wanted to go home.

‘At any rate,’ she said, eventually realising that protestations about me learning the error of my ways were not going to happen, ‘you’re free to go home. We’ve notified your emergency contact who should be arriving any moment.’

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

‘Wait, how did you know who to contact?’

‘Your work pass was round your neck. We contacted them, and they notified your loved one. I’ve got rounds to do, but I’ll check in with you before you’re discharged.’ She gave me a quick smile and walked off purposefully towards another section of the ward.

My bag had been placed on the bedside table with my pass poking out of it. I needed to let Maggie know what had happened and find out who she’d called. I fished about for my phone only to see that the screen was smashed to bits. It definitely wouldn’t have been Mum or Devi I’d named, but maybe my last flatmate, Roger? I hoped not – we hadn’t parted on the best of terms due to his tendency to microwave fish and broccoli at the same time.

I heard the gentle scrape of a curtain hook. ‘Yes, Salma?’ I said, still staring up at the ceiling.

‘Want to know what I’m in here for?’ she said, with the mad look in her eyes of a seagull staking out a cone of chips.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘I hope you don’t mind, but I’m really tired so I’m going to . . .’ I pulled the curtain back again. Closing my eyes, I breathed deep. All I needed was a few moments of peace and quiet to figure out what to do next.

‘Hello, Bel,’ a deep voice said.

My eyes flew open. I saw the figure at the foot of my bed and realised there was no statute of limitations on how many times a day you can say *argh*.

<sup>\*</sup>  
**Copyrighted Material**

Shortly after my thirtieth birthday back in 2013, I went through a crisis of sorts.

As much as I considered myself to be an independent free-thinker, determined not to follow the path of my older sister Devi who'd married her university sweetheart, Nikhil, and had settled five minutes away from our parents in Kent, I wasn't immune to the world story of *What A Woman Should Have Achieved By 30*. 'World stories' was my term for certain narratives spun over and over again until they become self-fulfilling and inescapable because the joists of them are nailed down into books, TV shows and films. They become part of the small talk you engage in with taxi drivers or at the supermarket ('I don't think I've seen a sadder sight than a woman buying herself flowers') and of interactions at weddings and family gatherings. ('When is it going to be your turn?')

I'm not saying men aren't pressured around marriage and kids, but as I explained to my friend Anthony, who was wiggling out after his fiancée broke up with him, we aren't on an even playing field. While men may be judged more harshly if they don't attain economic success, the same is true for a woman around domestic success no matter how much she has achieved in her career. We weren't even allowed to have our own mortgages or credit cards until the 1970s, I told him. (And possibly shouldn't have said any of this so soon after the breakup that the Save the Date announcement was still stuck to his fridge.)

World stories might make cute rom-coms but they are

Copyrighted Material

## *In Case of Emergency*

not conducive to aiding life decisions. Think about the number of people who settled for an ill-suited partner because turning thirty and being single is a frightening prospect, a superhighway to dying alone.

After I hit thirty, try as I might, I couldn't shake the feeling that I should be building something more permanent in my personal life.

Work was fine but it was hardly dazzling. I focused that wild excess of energy into my love life and tried online dating. This was in the pre-dating-apps era when you had to use a laptop to go onto Match.com and pray that a serial killer didn't lurk behind the GSOH and 'likes to travel'.

A few mediocre dates later, I met Gregor Jamieson in a large, airy pub in the banking district, an area I hated because the atmosphere was soulless and everyone dressed like sad storm clouds. Although his deep voice and Scottish accent conveyed strength of character and confidence, I could tell he was nervous from the way he tugged at his sleeves and the pearling of sweat above his upper lip. I don't think he was intimidated, I simply think I was better-looking than he thought I'd be, and could see him nervously calculating whether he was as good-looking as I expected him to be. I didn't get The Flutter, that initial snap and fizz of hormones and chemistry that, for me, was less about soulmate potential and more about whether I'd be comfortable being naked in front of him and seeing/touching his penis. It didn't help that he kept on blinking.

Was it a nervous tic? Drugs? Frantic Morse Code via his

**Copyrighted Material**

eyelids to a friend sitting behind me that he needed help? He kept talking in a monologue. How his family lived in a small town near Edinburgh. He'd been living in Finchley for the past five years but was moving out because he was convinced his flatmate was growing cannabis in a cupboard. How he just wanted to meet someone normal so they could eat takeaway while watching TV and was that too much to ask? Then my patience snapped and I said: 'WHY ARE YOU BLINKING?' He looked stunned, then laughed and said he was wearing contact lenses, which were uncomfortable because he usually wore glasses but was trying to impress me. That made me laugh, I felt mildly flattered at the effort he'd made, and suddenly that first-date awkwardness vanished in a whoosh.

One date turned into two, then three, which led to that comfortable, easy moment on the sofa where it was just the two of us being restful in each other's company. Fetching a glass of water for the other, unbidden. Homemade dinners slowly forming a collection of favourite meals used as a balm of kindness and care when the other was having a bad day. The sex was not the best and my mind would drift off at times, wondering, *What time does Homebase open? And, Did I send that email to HR or is it in drafts?* But the intimacy of finding home within another person was wonderful. I felt less alone, not just because I was in a couple, but because there was someone who cared about me, made me feel safe, into whom I could pour my worries and needs and find words of comfort or the physicality of an embrace throughout it all. When my mother asked me

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

how dating was going, I felt good because I had an answer. After a year of this, friends at dinner parties started asking us if we'd thought about marriage, and while I hadn't, the idea took root within Gregor and soon that was all we talked about.

I wallpapered over my reluctance by distracting him with meeting my parents, Devi and Nikhil. Mum cooked, Dad gave him the grand tour of his workshop in the garage, and everyone was polite and friendly. I had expected at least one embarrassing childhood story but instead, they asked Gregor questions about his family and mostly talked about work. Although Devi was occupied with Karen who was about to start secondary school, she didn't tease or make a single joke. In a way, the restrained pleasantness was worse. I asked them what they thought of him and the feedback was 'nice'.

His parents were a different story. His mother, Celia, was a ball of nervous energy and announced she'd ordered Indian takeaway for dinner as soon as we arrived. Despite my feminist credentials, I was shocked to find myself judging her. Not for the takeaway thing – I'd encountered a few people who assumed I was unable to contend with a roast potato despite being born and brought up in Britain. But the whole ordering food from outside thing. In Indian homes, my mother's generation would never serve food from outside rather than making it themselves, unless it was for a large gathering. And certainly not for a prospective daughter-in-law.

But also, most Indian takeaway tasted like a joke

Copyrighted Material

perpetrated by brown folks upon unsuspecting white folk. It tasted nothing like the food we made at home. Once, Gregor and I had gone to the Balti Bazaar near Finchley station, where the food somehow managed to taste of everything and nothing. We'd been dating for long enough that I could be honest about why I didn't like eating Indian food out, citing many reasons, from the fact that the most popular dishes were actually British Raj introductions, such as chicken tikka masala and jalfrezi, to my doubts that it was actually cooked by Indians. But Gregor's white man confidence got the better of him. He started chatting to the waiter, who a) revealed he was actually Bangladeshi, and b) confirmed that his mother would throw a shoe at him if he offered her the food they were serving us.

Two years into our relationship, Gregor grew impatient with my inability to give him a firm answer about settling down. After many heated debates we agreed to buy a place together in Tooting. Due to a combination of a then mid-level salary and my ability to piss it away down the pub on a Friday night, as well as on holidays I couldn't afford, I had no money to contribute to the deposit.

Whenever I wavered and thought about calling it off, I remembered when he'd washed my hair while I was ill. How he'd bring me breakfast in bed every Sunday. That he uncomplainingly listened to my rants about being underappreciated at work. I pretended so well, not just to Gregor but to myself, that this was the right decision, the responsible move, the first step to settling down with the sensible lawyer, that when it came to the

Copyrighted Material

## *In Case of Emergency*

day of exchanging contracts, my body pulled the emergency handbrake.

Minutes away from the estate agent's office, I found myself throwing up in the bushes by Tooting Bec station. I knew I wasn't pregnant. This was my body making a final attempt to talk to my mind, which had previously blocked out all such attempts to communicate doubt, from racing heartbeats to churning guts.

I hailed a taxi and went back to my flat, hiding under the covers, crying. After many calls and texts from Gregor, I finally faced him a couple of days later and told him how I was feeling. He was furious and said he never wanted to see me again. *You've broken my heart.* I could have handled it differently. But I guess I wanted the idea of a partner more than I actually wanted him.

He removed me from his life with meticulous precision, from cancelling our joint gym membership to notifying people whose weddings we'd jointly RSVP-ed to. But in all of it, I'd forgotten about the brief conversation we'd had while still tying parts of our lives together. A couple of months before we'd broken up, I had started a new job, moving to Leopard. I spent most of my time at Gregor's house as, unlike me, he no longer had flatmates, his furniture was far more comfortable and he had more space. Sitting on his West Elm bed filling out paperwork for my new employees, I'd turned to him, frowning. 'They've asked for a person to call in case of emergency. Should I put my mum? Isn't that what people are supposed to do?'

He'd looked up from the case file he was reading and

Copyrighted Material



said: 'You don't really see your parents that much, do you? And if there was an emergency, how quickly would they be able to come up from Kent? Just put me down.'

I'd looked conflicted but he rubbed my knee and said affectionately: 'Don't worry, B, I'm not going anywhere.'

The memory had slid away, like ice cream through a grate, and I'd completely forgotten to update my record because of all the hurt and guilt that followed soon after.

\*

'Did you actually just say "argh", after I've come all this way?' Gregor said.

'Yes, but only because I haven't seen you in forever.'

'Four years,' he said primly, as if it was my fault we hadn't spoken, not him saying: '*Never, ever, ever call me again.*'

'Um . . . thank you for coming. I don't mean that sarcastically, I promise.' I felt myself tripping over my words.

Wasn't it tragic that the minute a relationship ended, the territory of your body and mind and theirs were no longer places either of you had permission to enter?

I had no idea where Gregor's borders had shifted to, and he had little idea of mine. What could we still joke about? The awkwardness of navigating that space was made worse by both of us speaking at the same time.

'I'm sorry—'

'Are you ok—'

I was about to say 'you look well' but that would have been a lie. While his voice sounded the same – like

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

a soothing whisky commercial – he looked like he'd aged in dog years. Then the penny dropped: I'd bet he was now a father.

In addition to the old guilt, fresh remorse arose at the thought of dragging him away from work and family. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I completely forgot that you were on file as my emergency contact.'

'Don't worry.' He sighed. 'When they called, I thought it might be something serious, but also that you weren't likely to have called your family. So . . . here we are.'

'You have kids?'

'Yes,' he said, looking surprised at the question, then concerned as to what about his appearance had given it away. 'My fiancée Emma and I have twins. We're expecting a third.'

'Congratulations,' I said, never knowing what to say to people whose children I felt indifferent about. I took in his worn appearance, marked the disintegration of his sex appeal, and felt sorry for him.

The awkwardness returned, a heavy silence that curled between the beep of monitors and the murmuring of nurses in the distance. Gregor cleared his throat and fiddled with his glasses. 'Well, you seem okay, shall I go?'

'Yeah, sorry – I didn't mean to hold you up. I'm sure you've got to get back to work. I'll be fine, honest.' I tried to smile brightly and make the words seem convincing, but there was a limit to the number of times you could say *I'm fine* when inside you were crumbling into loneliness, so far from fine that your throat closed up. I didn't

Copyrighted Material

want Gregor there, but I also knew that when he left, there would be no one.

‘Hey,’ he said gently, sitting on the furthest edge of the bed, ‘maybe you should call your parents? Or at least Devi?’

‘No. They’ll just fuss and then I’ll be concerned about their concern. It’s just . . . I can’t.’ The emotional weight of what had happened was starting to grow heavier as it met the physical after-effects that made me feel so reduced and visceral.

As I finally sought release in crying, Gregor shuttled his hand back and forth in micro movements across the bed, uncertain of whether to come closer. An arm shot out from Salma’s side of the curtain and handed me a tissue, which I gratefully took. Why did men never know how to comfort women when they cried? They were mostly busy trying to manage their own discomfort, either because it reminded them of their own crying mothers or because they felt some deeply programmed need to fix whatever was wrong, but couldn’t.

‘They might like to know something serious has happened to you,’ Gregor said, once the crying had diminished a little in volume. ‘This is a big deal.’

‘This isn’t a big deal,’ I said sharply, blowing my nose for what I hoped was the final time. ‘I’m fine, I’ve been discharged.’

He creased his brow, irritated. Maybe he’d come here expecting some kind of atonement from me. ‘I could’ve done without having to come here,’ he said, ‘because now

Copyrighted Material

*In Case of Emergency*

I've got to work late, and I might miss bath time with Oliver and Stevie.'

I stared at him. While I felt bad and embarrassed that he'd been called to the hospital, I remembered why I had broken up with him. He liked to save up his moments of self-sacrifice, hoard them like a greedy little dragon, then drip-feed them passive-aggressively over the ensuing days and weeks.

'I don't plan on falling into a cellar again anytime soon, I promise,' I said tightly.

He picked up his coat and hesitated. 'We're not going to talk about it then? Any of it?'

'Do you want to?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Maybe this isn't the right time or place.'

'If this were a film, Gregor, I'd say: "What do you want me to say?" And you'd say . . .' I paused, waiting for him to speak.

He stared at me. 'This isn't a game, Bel.'

'And you'd say?' I prompted, still hoping we could leave things on a pleasant note rather than cutting ourselves on jagged pieces of old arguments.

He let out an irritated grunt. 'And I'd say, "I want you to say sorry." And that you made a mistake by breaking up with me. And not because I want us to get back together – my life with Emma and the kids is great. But because I want to know that it hurt you too. And that your life has never been the same.'

Finding kindness and common ground after a

Copyrighted Material

break-up was hard because you both knew where the grenades were kept. But I was taken aback by the meanness of this. It had been four years, and he still wanted to punish me.

'I can't say that because it isn't true.'

'But you didn't ask for what was true. You asked me what I wanted you to say.'

'And that would make you feel better?'

'No. Or maybe, yes.'

'Why are you here, Gregor?'

'I feel sorry for you. And because you don't have anyone else.'

'How would you know that?'

He shrugged, and at that small movement I knew he had Googled me or looked at my social media to see what was happening in my life.

'I do have people,' I said, 'and I don't need your pity. I already said I was sorry. So if what you're looking for here is suffering and remorse, honestly, you can go fuck yourself.'

He pressed his lips together. 'I didn't mean it like that . . .' I closed my eyes, and when I heard a rustle of movement, I opened them and he was gone. I let out a big sigh of relief.

'Bloody hell,' Salma said, her voice floating through the thin curtain. 'I thought that dickhead would never leave.'