

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, showing her mouth open and eating a strawberry held on a silver fork. She has red lipstick on. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a dining table with glasses and a bowl of strawberries.

JOSIE LLOYD & EMILYN REES

come again

Four friends.
One wedding.
Not the perfect match...

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About the Book

Friends. You can't live with them - and you can't live without them.

Or so Matt is discovering. His best mate is getting married, leaving him high and dry. No flat-mate - and no girlfriend.

Then he remembers Helen (H to her friends). H has no life outside her brilliant career - and all her best friend Amy wants to talk about is her wedding. Which suits Stringer, because catering the wedding is his first real chance to prove himself. The last thing he needs is to fall for one of the bride's friends, Susie, particularly because she's sworn off men while she sorts out her life ...

Friendship, commitment, work, lust and loyalty all come under the spotlight as Matt, H, Stringer and Susie hurtle towards the big day.

About the Authors

Josie Lloyd and Emlyn Rees each had novels of their own published before teaming up to write bestsellers together. Their work has been translated into twenty-six languages. They are married and live in London with their three daughters.

Also by Josie Lloyd and Emlyn Rees

The Boy Next Door

Come Together

Love Lives

The Seven Year Itch

The Three Day Rule

We Are Family

Come Again

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees



arrow books

To our Shidduch-maker and the Wunderkind
(Vivienne Schuster and Jonny Geller), with our love
and thanks.

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Part I

H

Sunday, 13.15

Don't have any friends. That's the simple solution. Or, if you do have friends, change them every six months or so. Rip up those Filofax pages, wipe the memory on your electronic organizer, burn your address book and start afresh. Otherwise, things just get complex.

Because if, say, you land up becoming best friends with someone, there will come a day (like today) when you find that you've been up since nine a.m., with a hangover, on a Sunday, in the rain, carting boxes of their stuff, in your car, across town.

And despite the fact that the last time you helped them move, they swore blind it would be their permanent address for ever and ever, you find yourself sweating at the top of yet another flight of stairs going all Talking Heads and thinking, how did I get here? This is not my beautiful home.

But this is my beautiful best friend. Not that I ever tell Amy she's anything but a ropy old tart. She's got Jack to pay her all the compliments she needs these days. It's my job to keep her feet on the ground, which is pretty tough considering she's so happy all the time. Like now.

'This is above and beyond,' I grumble, wedging my chin on top of the pile of papers on the box.

'Quit your whingeing,' she tuts, smiling over her shoulder at me as Jack fiddles with the lock in front of her.

'Hurry up, Jack,' I beg, shifting my knee under the heavy box whilst trying to balance on the stairs.

‘We’re in!’ he shouts, finally pushing the front door open to his and Amy’s new flat. Amy squeals and claps her hands.

‘It’s so exciting,’ she squeaks, as I feel the bottom of the damp fruit box buckling in my hands.

‘Hang on, hang on.’ Jack takes Amy’s holdall from her and chucks it through the open door, adding to me, ‘Tradition’, as he picks her up in a fireman’s lift and carries her over the threshold.

‘Bit premature, aren’t you?’ I say, staggering up the few remaining stairs into the flat. ‘You’re supposed to be married when you do that.’

But Jack doesn’t hear me, since he’s too busy waltzing up their new hall with Amy laughing and protesting, bent double over his shoulder.

‘Where shall I put this?’ I ask, just as the box collapses and a jumble of papers and books tumble on to the floor.

‘Anywhere will do. Feel free to mess the place up,’ says Jack, putting Amy down.

‘Cheeky,’ I mutter, chucking a book at him as Amy comes over to me and crouches down. I start gathering everything together, piling up the magazines and I’m just reaching for the last one when I realize that it’s *Bride*.

‘Hello, hello?’ I say, raising my eyebrows at Amy. She takes it off me and holds it against her chest.

‘Someone gave it to me at work,’ she blushes, but I know her too well. She’s lying.

She puts *Bride* face down on the pile, then hastily stands and brushes her palms on the front of her old jeans. She knows and I know that she’s been rumbled.

For the past few months, she’s been bitching to me about how overblown the wedding industry is and how she doesn’t want to be just another conveyer-belt, commercially ripped-off bride and I’ve been totally with her. I’ve admired, colluded with and encouraged her healthy, low-key, no-fuss attitude to her and Jack’s wedding. But three weeks to go

and here she is reading bridal magazines, signing up for the whole shebang.

‘Let’s have a look, then,’ I say, following her into the living-room.

‘It’s going to be fantastic,’ Jack sighs, looking round the empty space. ‘Plenty of light for me to work in . . . We’ll have shelves over there in the alcove, a window seat there . . .’

‘You’re not actually suggesting that you’re going to do some DIY yourself, are you?’ I tease.

‘You’ll see,’ he says, giving me a sideways glance. ‘Come on, let’s get everything else.’

‘You’re a slave-driver, Jack Rossiter,’ I groan, as he puts his arm round me and leads me to the door. I drag my arms like a baboon, already feeling that they’ve been stretched to knuckle-scraping proportions by all this carrying.

‘The sooner we’re finished, the sooner we can go to the pub,’ he grins matter-of-factly.

But it takes ages to unload all Amy’s kitchen stuff from my car and there’s a hired van which is jam-packed full of Jack’s belongings. Including some very dodgy canvases.

Amy is in the kitchen, unloading, when I bring up the final painting.

‘Isn’t this one a bit . . . yellow?’ I ask, looking at it.

‘Oddly enough, it’s called “Study in yellow”, but I wouldn’t expect you TV executive types to appreciate the finer qualities of such things,’ mocks Jack, taking it.

I cling on to it to have a closer look. I’ve never been the greatest fan of Jack’s work, siding with Amy in her disapproval of his predilection for painting nudes – and beautiful nudes at that. But this is different.

‘I don’t know. I quite like it,’ I muse.

‘My Dad didn’t think so. He paid for it, but he said it was too bright for his office and gave it back.’

‘I think it’s perfect for an office. I’d love it in mine. Yellow’s supposed to be relaxing.’

‘Have it, then,’ says Jack, suddenly.

‘I can’t . . . I . . .’

‘No, honestly. Take it, H. One of these days I might go stellar and become so famous, it’ll be worth a fortune.’

‘Are you sure?’

Amy smiles, walks over to Jack and puts her arms around his waist.

‘It’s the least we can do to say thank you,’ she says, cocking her head so that it rests against Jack’s chest.

Freeze!

We? She’s been living with Jack for, what, four hours and nineteen minutes and she’s acting like those shiny couples in a building-society advert. But then Jack puts his arm around her and, as they both smile at me, I realize he’s in on it too. And all of a sudden, I feel all unsettled and like I’m a huge impostor in their space.

‘Now then . . . Pub?’ asks Jack, breaking away.

‘Not for me,’ I mumble.

‘Come on, H,’ says Amy. ‘We’ve got to have a drink to celebrate.’

‘No, no,’ I hold up my hand and duck for the door. ‘I’ll leave you to mark your territory – pee on all the walls, shag in every room, or whatever it is you want to do . . .’

‘Study in yellow’ isn’t relaxing. As soon as I hang it in my office the next morning, I feel stressed. I’m thinking of putting up ‘wanted’ posters for my lost sense of humour.

I never thought I’d be one of those people who got stressed. I thought stress happened to people who spent their lives trading millions in the City, or performing life-threatening operations. I.e. important people. Older people. Not people producing possibly the worst (and, yes, that does include *Miami Vice*) TV shows ever seen on our screens. I.e. me.

I never used to be like this. I used to saunter in to the office (usually late), flick through a couple of programme

ideas, phone all my mates and bugger off to the pub at six o'clock. Roughly a 70:30 play-to-work ratio. Ideal.

But today is typical of the regime I've become used to. I was in at the crack of dawn, I've spent half the morning firing off grumpy emails and I haven't even had time to go to the loo.

To make matters worse, Brat, my barely pubescent assistant, has been next to useless all morning. I'm trying to be patient, but earlier I had to send him away for the fifth time to correct the running order of tomorrow's *Sibling Rivalry* show (the one in which Alan, a milkman from Sheffield, accuses his sister Jean, a housewife from Grimsby, of helping aliens to abduct his child) and Brat looked as if he was going to cry. Just now I asked Olive, the receptionist, if Brat (his real name is Ben, but Brat seems to have stuck) is OK and she said that he thinks I'm scary.

Me? Scary? I thought I was a pussycat.

It's lunch-time when Amy calls to thank me for my help yesterday, before confiding that after I left last night she did indeed shag Jack in every room.

'Too much information, thank you very much,' I grimace.

'I love it. Living with Jack's going to be brilliant,' she gushes.

'Glad to hear it. You're going to be doing it for a very long time.'

'You make it sound like a prison sentence.'

'Hmm. Well, you wait. You'll be crawling the walls in no time. He might be behaving now, but give it two weeks and I bet he'll be buying green toilet paper and other such male atrocities.'

'H, you're a cynical old bag.'

'Experienced. Not cynical,' I correct.

'Yes, well, you and the others can warn me all about the horrors of men on my hen weekend. There'll be plenty of time for all that. It's all sorted, isn't it?' She laughs to

herself. 'What am I saying? Of course it is. I'm talking to the most organized person on the planet.'

'That's me,' I say chirpily, feeling a pang of guilt. 'I'll email you.'

I put down the phone feeling utterly shabby. I know I'm being ungracious, but I had no idea when Amy asked me to be her chief bridesmaid that it'd be this much hassle. I thought all I had to do was hold a bunch of flowers on the day, make sure I didn't tread on her train and then snog someone unsuitable. How wrong I was. Launching Amy into her life of wedded bliss is turning out to be more expensive and time-consuming than putting on the Olympics.

The big problem with the hen weekend (not hen *night*, note, not hen afternoon, or hen lunch, but whole flipping hen weekend) is that Amy is not content to go down the pub like a normal human being, which would be a piece of cake to organize.

No, no, no. Far from it. If Amy had her way, she'd quite happily commandeer all her random mates on an entire week's holiday. She even suggested ten days in Ibiza, 'just for old time's sake'.

What old times she's talking about, I have no idea. We've certainly never been to Ibiza and she's gone with Jack on her recent holidays, so why she's making such a big deal about leaving 'girlie' life is totally beyond me. She's not some winsome nineteenth-century heroine (much as she's making out she is) being dragged off to the World Of Men. She's already there. If she was being dragged off to the World Of Leather, never to return, then I might understand what the fuss was about. But there you go.

I call Brat into my office and once I've given him some letters to type and tried to make amends for the bollocking I gave him this morning, I change the subject as casually as I can. I sit back in my chair and adopt my friendliest tone.

'Now then, how far have you got with booking somewhere for that weekend I asked you about?'

Brat lights a cigarette and slings a trained foot on to his trendily trousered knee.

‘What weekend?’ he asks, dumbly.

I hate it when he does this. He knows exactly what I’m talking about.

‘You know. *The* weekend? I asked you to book somewhere for seven people. *Ages ago?*’

I watch him blowing out smoke and shifting uncomfortably in his chair. It annoys me that he smokes in here, but since I’m the only one with a smoking office, it’d be fairly hypocritical to put my foot down.

‘Oh that. I couldn’t find anywhere like you wanted,’ he starts.

I put my elbows on the desk and rub my eyes, before looking at him. ‘But you have booked somewhere, right?’

He nods and flicks his ash towards the ashtray Amy stole for me from a posh restaurant in Piccadilly. The ash misses and showers over on my desk.

‘Well . . . yeah,’ he says, flicking his hand to wipe away the ash and missing half of it. ‘I got you a nifty deal.’

‘Where?’

‘Um . . . Leisure Heaven.’

‘Leisure Heaven! That dreadful place they advertise on the TV?’

‘It’s dead good, honest,’ says Brat. ‘You wanted saunas and all that girlie stuff and they’ve got that. There’s loads of waterslides and they’ve even got a disco on Saturday night . . .’

I push my hair back with both hands. ‘You *are* joking?’

He shrugs his shoulders. ‘It’s the only place I could find.’

I close my eyes, visions of screaming, scabby children all helplessly urinating in the water filling me with horror. And that’s just for starters. Think of a holiday camp-style disco full of teenagers on dodgy Ecstasy!

‘What about all those country houses I suggested?’ I panic. ‘Surely we could get in to one of those?’

‘All full. It’s too late now, anyway. I’ve got the brochure, if you want.’ Brat gestures over his shoulder to his desk outside.

I nod wearily.

Why did I trust him to make the booking? Why didn’t I do it myself? This is a total nightmare. So much for being the most organized person on the planet.

A few minutes later, Brat brings the brochure in, along with a few message slips.

‘Thanks,’ I mutter, turning round in my chair to face the ‘Study in yellow’. In the window, I watch Brat’s reflection as he turns and leaves. Is it my imagination, or does he have a smug look on his face?

My afternoon doesn’t improve. Eddie spends most of it going ballistic about the schedules and, much to my annoyance, I have to rejustify every decision I’ve cleared with him in the last month. At the end of it all, he shuts the door and tells me in dramatic whispers about the imminent programme reshuffle from above. That’s all I need: the powers that be playing Russian roulette with all my hard work. I’ve spent months getting this far. *Make my day, Eddie*, I feel like saying when he leaves, winking and tapping the side of his nose. *Go ahead, punk. Make my day.*

It’s not until everyone has gone home and I’m left alone in my office at last that I have a chance to look at the pile of message slips. There’s another one from Gav. I screw it up and have great satisfaction aiming it at the wastepaper bin and scoring in one. Yes! I wasn’t wing-attack in my school netball team for nothing.

I check the emails and smile when I see a new one. I open it up and lean forward to read it.

To: Helen Marchmont
From: Laurent Chaptal

Hello, Helen. Are you ready for me? I will need you from a week on Monday. Call me – Laurent.

I touch the screen.

Laurent. Ah. I can hear him saying his name in his scrummy French accent. I know it's ridiculous to have a crush on Laurent, since every single girl who's ever been within two foot of him fancies him too, but I can't help it. But on the plus side, *they* don't get personal emails from him on a daily basis. And they don't have a whole week of filming with him.

I can't wait.

I must admit, it was a stroke of sheer genius on my part to suggest a visit to our sister company in Paris. I justified the expense to Eddie by saying that it was important that we were more Euro-friendly. And since talking to Laurent, who runs the network in Paris, is the only discernible perk of my job, it would seem a pity not to capitalize on the opportunity of getting him to myself for a bit.

Wishful thinking, I know. It's just that that twinkly Gallic charm of his gets to me. Not that I could do anything about it even if I wanted to. Let's face it, it would be a tad unprofessional to fling myself at him. Still, Paris in the autumn . . .

I untangle myself from the tousled sheets of my fantasy and tell myself to get a grip. It's ridiculous. Laurent is probably already married, or something ghastly.

I must need a shag. There's nothing more to it than that.

I finally shut down my computer at 9.30 p.m. My head is pounding and I bolt down a few fluffy Anadins I locate in the back of my drawer. I lock up my office, say goodnight to the cleaners and wait by the lift.

I'm vaguely humming 'Cry Me A River' when the lift stops at the third floor and Lianne, one of the presenters, steps in.

Lianne is not my favourite person in the world. She's about fifty, although she only admits to forty, and is one of

those affected people who claims to have worked in 'the business' since television was invented.

Yeah, right.

'Ah, Helen. Everything sorted for tomorrow?' she asks, shaking her giant blonde hairdo.

'Yep,' I lie, for the fiftieth time today. As if I've had time! Today I caught up with yesterday. Tonight is for thinking about tomorrow. Everyone knows that.

'I'll read through the script revisions first thing, then,' she says.

First thing? Why am I bothering to go home? I'll be working all night at this rate. I suppose it's just as well I don't have a lover. A fat lot of good I'd be.

'You're sure it'll be OK?' she asks.

'Don't worry, it's going to be fine,' I say, heaving my bag on to my shoulder and easing my mouth into an utterly unconvincing smile. But Lianne smiles back. She believes me! For a moment I wonder what would happen if I ungritted my teeth and let the words behind them tumble out. *Go and pester someone else, you bossy cow. Do your own script revisions. Do you hear me, you miserable shrivelled eighties throwback? I don't care. I've got a life.*

Except that I haven't.

'Have a nice evening,' she says, when the lift pings open on the ground floor.

My flat is a complete mess when I get in and I'm tempted to turn round and book myself into a hotel. I've been thinking about getting a cleaning lady, but I can't bring myself to do it. It seems too extravagant considering that this mess has been totally generated by me and me alone.

I kick off my shoes and open the fridge. Inside there's a Marks & Spencers ready-made lasagne, a chicken-and-ham pasta bake and a family-sized chilli with rice, all of which passed their sell-by date five days ago. In addition, there's a family-sized bag of Italian salad which has gone brown and

slimy, a deluxe Vichyssoise soup which has started to ferment and half a tub of houmous.

Great.

This happens every week. I turn over a new leaf and on the way home from work do a huge, expensive shop, promising myself that this week I *will* eat healthily every evening and no, I *won't* survive almost exclusively on Marmite on toast or late-night take-aways from the Indian on the corner. But it never happens, because every time I throw away all the expired food in my fridge.

I've lived on my own now for about six months, but I still haven't learnt the basics of cooking for one. It's really tricky. Instead I buy family-sized everything, harbouring this little fantasy that someone – I don't know who – will turn up of an evening and I'll open my fridge, peruse its contents and rustle up a gourmet dish in a nanosecond. I don't know where it's come from, because no one ever turns up uninvited. In fact, my social life is totally arranged, usually weeks in advance. Nothing is impromptu in my life any more and even if it was, it certainly wouldn't happen in my flat; I'd be too ashamed of the mess.

I chuck some cereal in a bowl and flick through the post. There's nothing interesting, just bank statements and the usual junk mail that someone, somewhere deliberately targets at me. It's a scary thing that I'm now old enough to qualify for all this stuff: credit-card holiday offers, 'you have already won £2,000' subscription cons, photo-developing envelopes, and nasty mail-order clothes catalogues. I fling them on the sofa and hit the answering machine. There's a message from my brother, complaining that he hasn't heard from me for ages, and then there's one from Gav, my ex-boyfriend.

I sit on the sofa and listen to him speaking on the answering machine, annoyed that the sound of his voice still ties my stomach in knots, or that I can still imagine how it was when he lived here.

‘Hi, it’s me. Listen, I’ve been trying to get you at work, but you haven’t returned any of my calls. I really need to speak to you, H. Will you call me? I’ll be up late, or catch me at work tomorrow. OK. Bye for now.’

Bye for now, I mime at the phone.

Excuse me? How arrogant?

I mean, what does he think? That he can call me and I’ll immediately take him back? Does he have the nerve to think that I’m as lonely without him as he *obviously* is without me? The cheek of it! *He* was the one who was scared of commitment. *He* was the one who, after a happy two-year relationship, calmly and quite callously engineered things to get so bad that I had to finish it. *He* was the one who walked out without so much as an ‘I’m sorry’.

If he wants me back, he can pull his finger out and do some serious chasing.

Secretly I’m pleased, though. Because I knew he was making a mistake and maybe he’s realized it, too. Why else would he be calling me all the time?

On the night he left, I watched him pack his bag, pulling books off my shelf, boxer shorts out of my drawers, shampoo and razors from the bathroom cabinet we’d put up together and I watched him in silence, my heart breaking. Because I didn’t want it to finish. I didn’t want him to leave. All I wanted was a reason. Just one reason why he’d let our precious relationship slip through his fingers.

It was no use, though. A week before, I’d begged him to tell me whether he was having an affair or not. Another woman seemed to be the only logical explanation for his behaviour. But Gav was outraged by the idea and started ranting furiously. It seemed that any problem we had was entirely my fault and this, didn’t I know, was the last straw. How could I expect him to love me when I was so suspicious all the time? How could he be his own person with me pulling him down and smothering him? How could there ever be trust in our relationship when all the time I did

things like accuse him of infidelity? It went on and on until he ran out of steam. Then he went silent. And stayed silent for a week.

I tried to make him see things from my point of view, begged him to communicate with me, but in the end I knew I'd failed. So the only option left, without sacrificing my last shred of dignity, was to let him go.

So he did.

It was midnight by the time I had calmed down enough to be able to speak. And the only person I wanted to speak to was Amy. She was the one person who I knew wouldn't judge me, who'd lift the burden of the crushing defeat I felt.

I knew she'd been out for dinner with Jack and I knew it was late, but I held my breath as her phone rang, willing her to be in. Eventually, she lifted the receiver and I curled up on my beanbag, ready to pour out all the anger and grief I felt.

'Amy, it's me.'

'I was just about to call you. You'll never guess what?'

'Hang on. Listen, I . . .'

'Jack and I are getting married! Isn't that great?'

Stringer

Thursday, 19.02

I get back from playing squash with Martin at 19.02 and check my watch's stopwatch feature. According to the London A-Z, it's spot-on three miles across town from Martin's sports club to my mother's Chelsea riverside house and, seeing that I've knocked a minute off the personal record I set for the distance last week, I smile. This time two years ago, running three hundred yards, let alone three miles, would probably have killed me. Although the September air is chill, I'm sweating like a horse, so I stay put for a few minutes, staring down at the familiar cracks in the pavement outside Mum's house, remembering how, as a child, I used to play hopscotch here with my sister.

Mum and Dad bought this place - a Victorian three-storey redbrick - twenty-five years ago. That was 1974, the year I was born. It was because of my arrival that her and Dad and my elder sister, Alexandra, moved here. Their old place in Putney wouldn't have been big enough for all four of us and what with the money they'd come into following my grandfather's death, it made sense. Mum kept the building on after she and Dad divorced in 1993. Xandra and I had left home by then (Xandra in with her boyfriend and me off at university), so Mum moved herself and her belongings upstairs, and converted the lower-ground and ground floors into two separate, self-contained flats for renting out.

I swing my rucksack down from my shoulders and, digging out my flat keys, trot down the basement steps to the front

door of the flat I now rent off Mum. Once inside, I check through the mail. There are two bills: phone and electricity. It's hardly what I need on my current salary (or lack of it). There's a letter from my Quit4Good drugs counsellor, David, suggesting we get together for a 'chat' some time next month. Inside a pink envelope is an invitation to a *Kids From Fame* fancy-dress party that Roger's throwing to celebrate his divorce from Camilla. I wonder, will this eighties revivalism never pass? There's also a postcard from Pete, my best friend from university, who's currently coaching tennis for Camp America out in California. Finally, there's a Ken's Gym sponsorship form for next month's Aerobathon Spectacular in aid of Children in Need. I can imagine the aches already.

'Hi, honey,' Karen chimes, as I enter the sitting-room. She's got a soft Cheshire accent that just kills me. She's huddled up on the sofa. Her favourite Reebok baseball cap is pulled low over her brow, concealing her cropped copper hair. Cradled between her hands is a Sony Playstation game paddle, upon which her fingers are orchestrating a series of frenzied movements. Her eyes are glued to the television screen, where Lara Croft is busting her way through the latest Tomb Raider instalment. 'Who won?' she asks.

I walk through to the kitchen and get a carton of juice from the fridge. There's a smell of spicy food and in the sink is a used saucepan and bowl. 'Martin,' I call out, returning to the sitting-room and slumping down next to her. 'He thrashed me. Nine-four. Nine-two. Nine-four.'

Throughout the many years I've known Martin, I've never taken a game off him. He was at boarding-school with me and then we both went on to study Economics at Exeter University. Where I ended up specializing in DJ-ing and slobbering-out, he stuck with mastering the intricacies of macro- and microeconomics. Ergo: he got a first and I got a third. He's now on the fast-track, an investment banker in the City.

‘Did you try that serve I showed you on Sunday?’ Karen checks.

Aside from being my flatmate, and the secret, unrequited love of my life, Karen is my ally in the clandestine war currently being waged against Martin on the squash courts of London. The rules of engagement run along the lines of Martin being incredibly successful and me childishly wanting to get one over on him by beating him at something. Karen used to play squash at county level at school and has been teaching me a few tricks on the sly.

‘Yes,’ I reply.

‘And?’

‘I made a mess of it,’ I admit. ‘I got too riled. He was running me ragged. You know what I’m like when I get competitive . . .’

‘Don’t sweat it,’ she says, nudging me with her knee reassuringly. ‘I’ll take you through it again next week.’

I watch Karen kicking virtual arse as I drink from my juice carton and wind down. She’s a one-off. There are no two ways about it. She’s the biggest tomboy I know. Her current outfit consists of denim dungarees and scuffed-up Reeboks. There’s a sticker-ridden skateboard by her feet. Her room says it all: Manchester United and skate punk posters on the walls; assorted football memorabilia on the shelves; clothes scattered across the floor. (My mother told her it looks like my room did when I was nine, which struck me as a particularly Mum-like observation, seeing as it *was* my room when I was nine.) I don’t mind about Karen being messy. The reality is that I get a buzz out of her feeling so at home. It’s cosily his and hers, although this illusion is shattered every time her boyfriend, Chris, comes over to stay.

I developed a hideous crush on Karen over the first few months she was here, and it shows no signs of abating. My stomach flips over every time I hear her keys in the front door and sometimes at work I catch myself daydreaming about her, wondering where she is and who she’s with.

Nothing has ever happened between us, however, and I don't think anything ever will. She's been seeing Chris since I've known her and I've never made a pass at her. As far as I know, she's completely unaware of the way I feel. Aside from the odd whiff of sexual tension between us, I think that in her eyes our status as just good friends has been cemented and set. That's fairly par for the course with me: falling in love with someone, then missing the boat; listening to my heart, then failing to act on what it has to say. That said, I'd be lying if I claimed hope was dead. There are times – particularly when there's only the two of us, or when she's grumbling about Chris – that I catch her looking at me, and I wonder if the connection jolts her heart as hard as it does mine.

Chris is a strange one. It's hard to be certain, but I think I'd still believe this even if he didn't have chronic halitosis and I didn't think his girlfriend was chocolate and envy him every second he's ever spent with her. Their relationship has been ongoing since their first year at college. They've never lived together and Chris has sidestepped the several advances towards this that Karen has made over the years. He takes the view that cohabitation isn't something they should even consider until their careers are irrevocably established. He's been unfaithful to Karen twice with women he said didn't mean anything to him. The first time broke Karen's heart, the second hardened it. He's on his last warning now. I know all this because Karen has told me. I also know that if I were going out with Karen, the establishment of my career and seeing other people would be the last things on my mind.

Karen has been living here for six months now, ever since I decided to boost my income by placing an advert in *Loot* for a flatmate. The copy I submitted was fairly unspecific: 'Twenty-five-year-old male seeks similar-aged flatmate to share spacious Chelsea flat. Male/Female. Professional/Unprofessional.' All the same, I couldn't believe

how many people replied. Karen was the last person I saw. She was happy in her job (as a freelance journalist). Chris had just started working in Newcastle for an engineering firm. She saw him every other weekend and generally had a good time. She wasn't symbiotic in any way. She'd neither drag me down, nor get dragged down by me. She was perfect. She moved in the following weekend. Then came my crush, and then our friendship, all of which brings us up to now.

'Doing anything tonight?' she asks.

'I'm meeting up for a drink with Jack'

'How is he?' she asks. 'Still loved up?'

'Completely. Do you feel like tagging along?'

She shakes her head. 'Early night for me, I think Shit!' she curses at the screen, tossing the game paddle across the room in frustration as Lara bites the dust again. 'Those wee nasties do for me every bloody time.' She grabs the juice off me and takes a noisy slurp. 'Alice popped in half an hour back . . .'

My mother. There's something in Karen's tone of voice that makes me edgy. 'On the snoop?' I ask.

'Uh-huh.'

'What did she want this time?'

Karen smiles awkwardly. 'The usual.'

'God,' I groan.

It's occurrences like this that make me wish I hadn't moved back here to begin with. I don't mean that badly. I love my mother to bits. Truly I do. It's just that I sometimes wish she'd leave me to my own devices a tad more. It's not as if I don't understand where she's coming from, but even the biggest of life's casualties should be given the benefit of the doubt from time to time. Deep dark secret: I'm very much the 'after' photo from the lifestyle magazine. I was a mess at the beginning of last year - a bloody mess - and had been fairly consistently ever since my father died in 1996.

He died of a heart attack, keeled over on the way out of a board meeting at Sang, the electronics corporation of which he was European Marketing Director. He was fifty-nine and due to retire in six months. I loved him and when his heart broke, so did mine. Instead of looking to the future, as he'd always counselled me, I buried myself in the present. Dad was so young. The week before he died, he'd taken me out for dinner and everything about him had seemed normal. He'd nagged me about getting myself a postgraduate business qualification, and had told me that I had a good brain and should use it for something more challenging than being a DJ. I say nagged, but Dad was never a nagger, not in the traditional sense of the word. He was just ambitious for me, and I was just too young to understand.

I inherited a pile of cash from him and bought myself a second-hand Porsche 911, rented a house in Notting Hill, got myself kitted out with some state-of-the-art decks, and set about ploughing the rest up my nose. Nothing seemed to matter. Getting wasted and forgetting myself was enough, just so long as I didn't have to think too hard.

The money – thankfully, I now believe – ran out at the beginning of last year, and with it went the lifestyle. The first big surrender was the Porsche. I traded it in for the beaten-up Renault 5 that's parked outside now. Next up was the house in Notting Hill. I moved out of there and, at Mum's insistence, in to here. She said it was because I couldn't afford anywhere else (true), but I also think it was because she wanted to be in a position to keep an eye on me. The last, and most painful, aspect of my former life to go was the coke. I went to rehab at Quit4Good and did precisely that on my twenty-fourth birthday, 15th March, 1998. That's well over a year ago. It was the best birthday present I've ever had. In the wake of that, I steered clear of temptation by quitting DJ-ing and keeping away from clubs. Instead, I swapped one addiction for another and started working out