

The
Night *that*
Changed
Everything

*The perfect couple
– or so they thought ...*

LAURA TAIT
AND JIMMY RICE

*'I absolutely loved it. Made me laugh and
cry in equal measure' PHIL WILLIAMS, BBC Radio 5 Live*

About the Book

Rebecca is the only girl she knows who didn't cry at the end of Titanic. Ben is the only man he knows who did. Rebecca's untidy but Ben doesn't mind picking up her pieces. Ben is laid back but Rebecca keeps him on his toes. They're a perfect match.

Nothing can come between them. Or so they think.

When a throwaway comment reveals a secret from the past, their love story is rewritten.

Can they recover from the night that changed everything?
And how do you forgive when you can't forget?

The Night That Changed Everything is a funny, feel-good and bittersweet story, told in alternate chapters by Laura Tait and Jimmy Rice.

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Q&A with Laura Tait and Jimmy Rice

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THE NIGHT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Laura Tait and Jimmy Rice

For Rosemary Cowan and
Archibald Carmichael Cowan

Prologue

REBECCA

Opening Night

Where's Jamie?

I have never nailed the art of arriving at a party by myself.

I should have come with Danielle. She was still trying to chivvy me into the shower as she was painting her lips coral and giving herself a *Go get 'em tiger* look in the mirror above the fireplace, but I was balls deep in *Art Deco: Design, Decoration and Detail* and told her I'd meet her here.

I hover awkwardly at the entrance to the bar. Being five foot ten makes it hard to be inconspicuous when you can't find your friends, but at least it makes it easier to scan a room, and I spot Danielle laughing with two men I don't recognize.

One chats incessantly with the look of someone who can't believe his luck and is scared that if he stops talking, she'll disappear. The other looks on shyly. Neither is in with a chance – she and Shane, her on-off boyfriend, are on again. Again.

He'll be here later.

I'm too nervous about my presentation for East House Pictures on Monday to do small talk with strangers. The old cinema in Hackney is in a state of disrepair after years of neglect, and there's a proposal to restore it next year. And

if our pitch goes well, our company could be the one that gets to design and rebuild it.

I grew up dreaming about designing my first building the way other little girls dreamt about getting married. I'm only here tonight because Jamie deserves the support, and my shoulders relax as I spot him serving behind the bar. He planned to play host but I guess he underestimated how busy his opening night would be.

As I fight the crowds, I take in how different the room looks since the last time I saw it, when Jamie put his hands over my eyes as he led me into a disused railway arch, then took them away with a *Ta-da!* and explained he was opening his own bar.

I smile, chuffed he took my advice to restore the walls rather than plaster over them. They now have the names of cocktails in huge letters stained on top of the exposed brickwork in a haphazard fashion.

There's just enough room beyond the red, leather-covered booths for a makeshift dance floor before you reach the sleek back counter illuminated by low-hanging, oversized light bulbs.

Squeezing myself into a gap, I try to get Jamie's attention, but he's at the other end of the bar, chucking a bottle in the air and letting it spin, before catching it expertly in the other hand and pouring it into a Boston Shaker without missing a beat. The girl whose drink he's practically turned into a West End performance claps in appreciation. He winks. I roll my eyes.

I'm drumming my fingers impatiently on the granite surface when a barman returns with a load of empties. I'm hoping he's about to get back behind the bar, but he disappears off into the crowd.

'Hello there.' A smiling barmaid finally appears in front of me. 'What can I get you?'

'Can I have a single-malt Scotch, please? One ice cube.' I glance behind me to make sure Danielle is still in the same

place. 'And a Cosmopolitan.'

Despite the fact that Jamie promised to only employ fit twenty-something models who want to sleep with him – and he wasn't short of offers from this particular brand of applicant – his new barmaid is about five foot three, round-cheeked and in her late thirties by the looks of things. I feel a rush of affection for Jamie. He's a big show-off, but a lovely one.

Something shoves me and I realize a guy has forced his way in and is holding out a twenty. I clock him look at me, double-take slightly and turn his body as much towards mine as the space will allow. The glare I give him is toxic.

'Cheer up, love,' he tells me with a nudge, 'it might never happen.'

'It already has,' I reply, eyes straight ahead. 'Earlier, a stranger invaded my personal space, called me love and offered me unsolicited advice.' I sip the whisky that has just been placed in front of me. 'So I killed him.'

Jamie catches the last of the exchange and I can tell he's trying to suppress laughter as he serves the guy.

'You really have to stop throwing yourself at my customers like that,' he says, pouring himself a small whisky as soon as the man is gone. 'You'll get a reputation.'

'Sorry, I just hate it when people say shit like that. Like anyone stands around grinning.'

'He was just trying to chat you up. You're not an easy person to—'

'Oh, don't start,' I warn him with narrowed eyes. 'Let's talk about Arch 13. This is all kind of aces, Jamie. Your own bar, finally!'

'You don't think I should have waited until the twelfth or fourteenth arch came up for rent, to be on the safe side?'

'Nah – you make your own luck.' I look around again in awe. 'I'm so bloody proud of you.'

His smile is humble and neither of us says what we're both thinking. It should be his parents standing here telling

him how proud they are. Instead, they've stopped talking to him. They never liked him working in a bar after uni, but they tolerated it, presuming it was a stopgap before he finally used the chemistry degree they paid for to become the next Alfred Nobel. Now they've realized he'd rather be the next Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* they're not exactly cock-a-hoop.

But running a bar is perfect for Jamie. Our preference for premium booze was the first thing he and I bonded over at university. As everyone else lined up their pound-a-bottle luminous alcopops and sixty-pence-a-shot lighter-fluid vodka, I was ordering a Scotch off the top shelf while Jamie was refusing to drink his Tanqueray and tonic in a plastic cup.

'These are on me, Erica,' Jamie tells the barmaid when she brings Danielle's cocktail. Then he turns back to me with an apologetic smile. 'I need to serve for a bit but let's catch up later. Go mingle.'

'Yep, we all know how I love to mingle,' I drawl, but I take my drinks and do as I'm told.

'Better late than never,' is the first thing Danielle says. 'You really must do something about your punctuality, Becs. It's rather annoying.'

'Sorry,' I say with false sweetness to my best friend who has never once been on time for anything in her life. 'But I realized my toenail colour clashed with my dress, and even though I'm wearing closed-toe shoes, I couldn't possibly go out until I'd repainted them.'

'One day you're going to stop going on about that,' she huffs. Then, turning to the guys she's talking to: 'Russ, Tom, this is Rebecca.'

They say hello and I fear we're stuck with them.

My fear is realized and magnified when Danielle's mobile rings and she motions to us that she's going outside so she can hear better.

‘Shane? Shane?’ I hear her yelling into the mouthpiece as she retreats.

I check my own phone for messages and then when there are none, I check my work emails. Unsurprisingly, there are none at half nine on a Saturday night. When I eventually slide my phone back in my pocket, the two lads are deep in conversation between themselves. I wonder if this is what Jamie means when he says I’m unapproachable.

The barman who was collecting glasses appears with a tray laden with a beer, a coke and a big pink cocktail, garnished with about eight different fruits and a cocktail umbrella. He hands Russ the beer and Tom, the shy one, the coke, placing the cocktail on the shelf next to them.

‘WHOA!’ I leap back, my drink spilling down my front as someone barges into me. It’s the same guy who squeezed in at the bar.

‘Sorry,’ he says, his mouth curving down in an almost comical *oopsy* expression. It’s clear now that he’s shitfaced. He reaches a hand out to dab my wet top so I hold out my own hand to block him. ‘Leave it. It’s fine.’

‘Everything all right?’ asks the barman, with the tray still in his hand.

‘Accident,’ the guy mumbles, holding up his palms before stumbling away.

‘Twat,’ I mutter, before turning to the barman. ‘Thanks. You couldn’t grab me some napkins, could you?’

‘Sure.’

‘And a large single-malt Scotch,’ I yell at his retreating back.

While I wait, Russ and Tom take their drinks to the pool table, leaving me alone. Where the feck is Danielle?

‘Here you go.’ The barman places my drink on the side and hands me some napkins.

‘Thanks.’

I dab myself self-consciously and he doesn’t go away, then I realize I haven’t paid for my drink. ‘God, sorry,’ I say,

grabbing a tenner from my purse. 'Keep the change.'

He waves away my money, looking bewildered. 'Um, no, that's OK.'

Jamie must have known it was for me.

'OK, thanks.' I press the napkins back against my top.

He still doesn't move but suddenly laughs, scratching his head. 'Do you think I work here?'

As his words sink in I feel blood creep slowly into my cheeks. 'You don't?'

'Nope.'

'But the tray of drinks . . .'

' . . . were for my mates. I'd just got a round in.'

'And you were collecting glasses earlier!'

'It was rammed and there was a massive queue at the bar – I thought I'd help them out.'

'But why did you get me a drink?' I squeal.

He thinks for a moment then smiles. 'I honestly don't know.'

I cover my hot cheeks with my hands. 'Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I'm mortified.'

'Don't be,' he chuckles.

I make myself meet his eyes, pleasingly having to tilt my head back and look up – a gesture I don't get to make often. They're dark brown and long-lashed, and he holds my gaze for about two and a half seconds. Something weird happens. Like an electric shock – a chemical surge – though I'd never describe it that way out loud, because then I'd have to punch myself in the face. I blink and shift my gaze, taking in the rest of his face.

It's a nice face. You don't see many clean-shaven men these days, I realize. It makes him stand out. That and the slight kink in his nose, which suits him.

'I'm Ben,' he says.

'Rebecca,' I say, holding out the hand that's not full of wet napkins.

He grins. 'Strong handshake.'

'Thanks,' I say, though I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. It's a good thing at work, but is it a sexually attractive trait? Christ, who am I?

He picks up the cocktail from the side and starts to sip it.

I look at it. Then look at him. 'Really?'

'I'm mates with the fella that runs the place.' He looks at his drink and sighs. 'He stitched me up.'

'You know Jamie? He's one of my best friends.'

'Mine too! We went to school together in Manchester. Then obviously he came to London for uni and I stayed up there.'

'Oh, you're *that* Ben,' I say. 'Jamie's mentioned you.'

'How do you know him?'

I explain how he, Danielle and I all lived together at university.

'Ah, you're *that* Rebecca. I've met Danielle, actually, at Jamie's old bar. That's her with Jamie now, isn't it?'

I look over and see her slipping her mobile back into her bag. Wonder what Shane wanted. Did he miss his flight from Ireland? Going to be late? A no-show?

'Yep, that's her.'

I should really close this conversation and go over as I can't stay too late tonight, and it's Jamie's big night. But . .

'So you live in London yourself now, don't you?' I ask him, remembering what Jamie has told me.

'Since last year, yeah. Guess I needed a change of scenery. I went travelling, thinking I'd work out what to do with my life while I was away, but I've been back a few years and I'm none the wiser still.'

'What did you do at uni?'

'History. So, of course, my options were limitless.'

'They were?'

'Yeah. I could have been a comedian like Sacha Baron Cohen, or a novelist like Salman Rushdie. Or, actually, a Prime Minister – Gordon Brown did history.'

‘So . . .’

‘I temp in HR for London Transport.’

‘Ah, that classic cliché.’ I smile. ‘Running away to the big smoke to fulfil a life-long ambition in personnel.’

Sarcasm comes as naturally to me as flirting does to Danielle, but as soon as it’s out of my mouth I panic. What if he thinks I’m mocking him?

Thankfully he properly laughs, flashing straight white teeth, and if I was that sort of girl, I’d say his laugh is like sweet, sweet music, but I’m not, so I won’t.

‘That’s why I’m temping,’ he says, meeting my eyes again. ‘I’m still trying to work out what my life-long ambition is. I want to leave my mark, you know?’

A girl pushes her way through the middle of us to get to the bar and the spell is broken.

‘Where did you travel?’ I ask, enjoying the way he moves his hands whenever he talks.

‘All over Asia.’

I try to conceal a smile. ‘Be honest, Ben . . . did you spend a year drinking Thai whisky from a bucket, playing drinking games at your hostel and making people take photos on a beach while you jumped really high in the air?’

‘Not the whole year,’ he says, laughing again, then looking thoughtful. ‘My favourite was staying the night with Buddhist monks on a Japanese mountain.’

‘Mount Koya?’

‘Yeah! Have you been to Japan?’

‘I lived there.’

‘No way – how come?’

‘We travelled a lot with my dad’s job.’ Someone else pushes through, then I notice Ben closes the gap ever so slightly so no one else can pass between us. I get a faint whiff of cigarette smoke and wonder if it’s from him. ‘So where do you live?’

‘Here in Greenwich, with those two.’ He nods towards the pool table where Russ and Tom are still playing. ‘I work

with them too.'

'Are they as passionate about HR as you?'

'Pretty much,' he says with a laugh. 'Tom's always wanted to be an artist and Russ has always wanted to be a superhero, so it's the logical career for everyone. What about you?' His eyes find mine again. 'What was your dream when you were a kid?'

'Becoming an architect, like my dad.'

'Nice. So what was your degree in?'

'Architecture.'

'That makes sense. What do you do now?'

'I'm an architect.'

'See? We're the same. Indecisive.'

We both laugh, then sip our drinks in tandem.

'So, what was Jamie like in school?' I ask.

'Same. Popular, confident. Good with girls. He was going out with Freckly Fiona for a while before he moved.'

'He did that alliterative nickname thing even back then?'

'Yeah. Talking of which . . .' He looks around. 'Any idea which one Tidy Tania is?'

'Who? Also, why have I never heard of this Freckly Fiona?'

'I guess he doesn't really like to talk about it. She didn't take it well when they broke up.'

I see him turn to Jamie again. 'Anything going on there, do you reckon?'

I look over too, seeing Danielle with her arm around Jamie's waist and Jamie with his arm slung around Danielle's shoulder.

'Nah, they're just the world's two biggest flirts. Jamie's probably the only man in here who doesn't fancy Danielle.'

He looks confused. 'I don't.'

We eye-lock again, the tension thick.

'Ben?'

'Yeah?'

'Your drink is dripping on your shirt.'

'Argggghhh. Crap.'

He straightens the straw to stop the flow.

'Want me to go get you a napkin? I owe you one.'

He laughs that lovely laugh again, then pauses and says: 'I do if it has your number on it?'

It's spoken as a question and his eyes are looking for mine again so I know I'm meant to answer, but I freeze. I can't reply how I'd usually reply to such a cheesy line, because my standard ripostes are designed to make the guy run away, and I don't want that to happen.

What would Danielle do?

She would calmly take a pen out of her bag and write her number on to a napkin, kissing it to leave a red imprint of her lips before handing it over and shimmying away.

I laugh inwardly. No way I'm pulling *that* off.

The silence is growing.

'You've finished your drink,' Ben says, nodding at my empty as if the last thing he said wasn't a question after all. He's making it easier for me not to answer, and I hate myself. 'Can I get you another?'

Out of the corner of my eye I see Danielle retreating towards the door with her coat on. Why is she leaving? 'Sorry,' I tell Ben. 'I just need to check in with Danielle quickly. I'll be back in two minutes.'

I rush towards the exit, bumping into Jamie on the way.

'Hey,' he says. 'I didn't realize you were still here. I've hardly had a chance to talk to you all night. How's work going? Are you all ready for Monday?'

'Getting there,' I say, mentally groaning when I remember how much I still have to do tomorrow. 'Where'd Danielle go?'

'Shane called earlier and said he was running late. He asked her to meet him outside when he gets here. Seemed he isn't in the mood for a party.'

I sigh. Danielle wouldn't leave a friend's party for anything usually, but Shane is her weakness. The

kryptonite to her Superwoman.

Jamie is still talking but I'm only half listening. I position myself to face the room so I can look for Ben without Jamie realizing. Eventually I see him standing by a booth, chatting to his friends.

'Anyway,' Jamie is saying, 'I need to nip back behind the bar while Erica takes her break. Are you sticking around?'

'Er.' I glance at Ben again. He's deep in conversation - there's no way I can go over and interrupt. 'I should really head off.'

'What is it you keep looking at?' asks Jamie, twisting his neck. 'Ah ha. That's Ben,' he tells me, lowering his voice. 'He keeps looking over at you, I've noticed.'

'He does?' I try to keep the keenness out of my voice but fail, and I can see Jamie is taken aback.

'You like him!' Jamie says incredulously.

'Why? What's wrong with him?'

'Nothing, he's a legend. It's you - you never get doey-eyed over anyone.'

'I'm not doey-eyed, you knob.'

I go to slap him on the chest but he catches my arm and laughs.

I glance over at Ben one last time. He's whispering something to Russ. There really is no way I can butt in. And it's even more awkward now Jamie has cottoned on.

'I'm off,' I say, a cheery smile covering my disappointment. 'I'll see you later.'

'Will you be OK getting home? Shall I get you a cab?'

'Don't be silly, I'm only round the corner.'

'Fine,' he says, knowing there's no point arguing. 'Text me when you're home. And good luck on Monday.'

That's that then, I think as I turn on my heel and start making my way out. Who knows, I might even run into Ben again at some point. He's friends with Jamie, after all. Even though he's lived in London a year already and tonight's the first time I've met him. And maybe by the time I see

him next he'll have a girlfriend in tow. Someone like him won't stay single for long.

I'm passing the pool table when I make up my mind, in a moment of madness that I can only blame on drinking whisky on an empty stomach, to turn back around, march up to the bar and grab one of the red napkins.

'Erica, do you have a pen I could borrow? Thanks.'

I scribble my number on it, wondering if Ben is watching me now but not daring to look because I know I'll bottle it if he is. It goes against every instinct I usually have, but I'm scared this will be my only chance to let him know that . . . I felt it too.

'Give that to Ben,' I say, returning to Jamie, who takes it with a smirk. 'And shut your face!'

'I didn't say a word.' He holds up his hands with a laugh after he's tucked it into his shirt pocket.

'Good, because if this goes tits up and he doesn't call, I'm going to need you to unfriend him so I never have to face seeing him again.'

I have a feeling, though, as I walk out the door and pull on my jacket, that it won't go tits up.

It feels like something has just begun.

Eleven Months Later

Chapter One

BEN

Tuesday, 23 September

'I'm so proud of you,' I say, as Rebecca lays knives and forks on the dining table.

'I still can't believe it,' she says. 'My first building to design.'

Her company is overseeing the rebuilding of a cinema in Hackney, thanks in no small part to her pitch eleven months ago. She found out yesterday they're making her the lead architect, so I've come round to her and Danielle's place to cook a celebratory meal.

'It was never in doubt,' I say.

How could they not give it to her? It was one of the most attractive things about her that night we met – her passion for what she did.

I kind of hoped it would rub off on me.

I still *am* hoping it'll rub off on me.

The intercom buzzes, but Danielle is in the shower and Rebecca is still setting the table, so I answer it myself, planting a kiss on Rebecca's temple as I go. I glance back from the door and see her smiling.

'All right, Nicholls,' Jamie says to me, once he's conquered the two flights of stairs.

'All right, Hawley,' I say, stepping aside to let him in.

Jamie's eyes are immediately drawn to the bathroom.

'Jeez, what's that *noise*?'

The three of us stop and listen as Danielle adds an unscheduled key change to a Black Eyed Peas song. Rebecca and Jamie share a knowing look.

‘Remember at uni when we ended up in that karaoke bar?’ Rebecca says, shuddering at the very idea.

‘You mean 2 Unlimited-gate?’ Jamie puts down his gift bag and addresses me. ‘She thought people were singing along but they weren’t, they were saying, *No, no, no, no.*’

Danielle pads out of the bathroom in her dressing gown, a white towel Mr Whipped on her head.

‘Rebecca was just saying how much she’s going to miss your singing when you move out,’ Jamie calls over.

Danielle’s cousin has bought a place in Blackheath and offered her a room for bugger-all rent. Which I’m secretly pleased about.

‘She’ll get over it,’ Danielle says. ‘Just like I got over not being able to steal your facemasks after living with you at uni.’

She vanishes into her bedroom with a smirk while Jamie turns his attention to my shopping bags.

‘What’re we having?’ he says.

‘Cambodian beef curry.’

I learnt the recipe from a hostel owner in Phnom Penh.

Jamie nods. ‘Nice, anything I can do?’

I pluck the red onions from their bag, kicking a basket of wet washing out of the way to make space before handing him one of the knives from the set I bought on the way here.

‘The box says this bad boy can cut through the sole of a shoe,’ I say.

‘That’s an everyday problem solved.’ He laughs. ‘I thought you were skint, though?’

‘Overdraft.’

Rebecca tuts, but I think she gets why I’m suddenly buying stuff for this place. We haven’t talked yet, but with Danielle moving out, it makes sense for me to move in.

That's why I was happy when I found out she was going. I mean, I like living with Russ and Tom, but I'll be twenty-eight in a couple of weeks, and I've had enough of wondering who stole my cheese.

I keep imagining cooking for Rebecca every night, always giving her the best portion, and I can't do that with the single, blunt kitchen knife that she and Danielle have been getting by with for years.

'Bastard onions,' says Jamie, burying his eyes in his elbow.

'It's weird,' says Rebecca, 'chopping onions never had any effect on me.'

'Shocker,' I say.

She gives me a curious look. 'What do you mean?'

Seriously? I turn to Jamie for help.

'To be fair, Becs,' he obliges, 'you're the only girl I know who didn't cry at the end of *Titanic*.' He cackles to himself. 'Actually, Ben is the only lad I know who did, so . . .'

'I wish you'd stop telling everyone I cried at the end of *Titanic*.'

Jamie and Rebecca are clearly amused.

'Hold your breath near the onion,' I say, ignoring them. 'Then it won't make you cry.'

I can tell he's sceptical but he does as he's told, and a minute later the onions are chopped and Jamie is tearless.

'Maybe you should have tried that trick in the cinema?' he says.

Jamie rejoins Rebecca at the dining table while I chop ingredients for the marinade in front of the kitchen window. I can see Natasha and Angus strolling around the perimeter of the green.

'Tash looks like she's about to pop,' I say.

'Who's Tash?'

'Natasha and Angus, your neighbours, from downstairs,' I say, but Rebecca looks none the wiser. 'Have you never spoken to them?'

‘What would I speak to them about?’

‘The weather? The fact she’s having a baby? European fishing quotas? It’s a bit strange you’ve never—’

‘Yes, but you’re the guy who gets into random conversations on the Tube – *that’s* strange.’

She’s never got over the fact I did this on our first date. We’d been to Vertigo 42 in the City for champagne and panoramic views, and while Rebecca checked her work emails on the DLR back to Greenwich I got chatting to a fella wearing a Man City shirt with Kinkladze on the back. She has since told me that this cancelled out any points I’d earned for being a gentleman and not trying any funny business.

‘Only Danielle could be late for a dinner party at her own house,’ says Jamie, peering towards her bedroom door.

Rebecca picks up one of the napkins she has transformed into swans. ‘What’s the rush?’ the swan says.

It was our second date when I discovered her talent for origami. We’d gone for tapas, and before the first dishes arrived she made a rose from her napkin and handed it to me with a smirk. I told her I’d contemplated bringing flowers on the date and she laughed a worried laugh and said she was glad I hadn’t.

When Danielle finally appears she is several inches taller and has the white towel scrunched in her hand.

‘High heels for dinner in your own flat?’ says Jamie.

Danielle chuckes the towel at him.

‘I’d be careful around Ben and his new toy in a nice pair of shoes like that,’ he adds.

Danielle looks confused but no one tries to explain.

‘You look stunning,’ says Rebecca instead.

‘Well, if I can’t make the effort to celebrate my bessie mate getting her first big project, when can I?’ She and Rebecca trade a smile. ‘Though to be honest,’ she adds, turning to me and Jamie, ‘the real reason I’m wearing heels is because I feel like a dumpy little midget next to *her*.’ She

points to Rebecca, then clops back to her room. 'One second!'

When Danielle reappears she is carrying something in her right hand. 'I made something for you,' she says, handing whatever it is to Rebecca.

'This is brilliant!' says Rebecca.

It appears to be a crumpled crisp packet with a hole punched through to make a keyring. Rebecca sees that I'm not quite understanding *why* it's brilliant.

'Danielle once said the only thing she found annoying about me was discovering empty Frazzles packets around the house.'

'But if you put them in the microwave for five seconds they shrink and turn hard,' adds Danielle.

Fair enough.

'I got you something too,' says Jamie, reaching for his gift bag.

Rebecca draws a wrapped bottle from the bag, her decisively green eyes broadening. She is wearing a dark blue dress that she knows always reminds me of the first time I came back, when I ripped it off. Not like the Incredible Hulk. More unbuttoned it really fast and threw it recklessly on the floor, where she seemed to keep all her other clothes.

Rebecca tears the paper, catching my gaze for a split second to communicate that she's hating the attention, but when she sees what it is . . .

'Jamie!' she gasps. 'This is, like, three-hundred-pound whisky.'

'Not at wholesale it's not.'

Danielle pouts. 'All right, Jamie - way to outdo me.'

'Wasn't difficult,' he replies, draping an arm around Danielle's shoulder. 'You literally gave her rubbish.'

With my ingredients chopped, I measure soy and oyster sauce on instinct and add the steak pieces to the marinade for about twenty minutes. I hope they like it.

'I couldn't care less about the sofa,' Rebecca is saying when I start listening again. 'But, man, I'm going to miss this dining table.'

I join them.

'Yeah, I've got happy memories of this table too,' I say, giving Rebecca a look to see if she'll play along.

'It's just so versatile,' she obliges, and the other two look puzzled, oblivious to the fact that under the table I'm sliding the tip of my foot down Rebecca's shin. The corners of her lips are starting to crack. 'I mean, it's great for spreading all my work sketches out,' she says, 'and eating, and—'

'Oh yeah, versatile,' I chip in. 'It's perfect for dinner parties, and reading the Sunday papers, and—'

Having had sex while the Sunday papers are strewn across the room. It was a few weekends ago while Danielle was visiting her dad and stepmum. Rebecca was finally better after a stomach bug, and when I got out of bed to make us ham and cheese toasties, she followed me in here, hoisted her arms around my neck and, well, we never made it back to the bedroom.

'OK, we get it,' says Jamie, raising his palms to stop us. 'Jeez, anyone would think you'd had sex on it.'

Danielle laughs until she realizes that neither Rebecca nor I are saying anything, and that both of us are gazing around the room as if we hadn't even *heard* Jamie.

'Eww!' she moans, and I flee to the kitchen to fry the beef.

'Well, Nicholls,' says Jamie, laying his knife and fork on his empty plate, 'that was the best Cambodian beef curry I've had in ages.'

I laugh.

'Seriously, though, Becs,' says Danielle, 'you should keep hold of this one.'

‘He’s pretty hard to get rid of,’ says Rebecca, before directing a private smile my way.

I have to stop myself from asking her here and now: *Shall we live together?* But I learnt that night at Arch 13 that Rebecca doesn’t like being put on the spot. Sometimes it’s better to be patient, and so with this, asking her to live with me, I’ve waited, because I want her to know that I’m serious, and that it’s not another one of my whims.

I’m going to do it on Friday, after I’ve *finally* met her dad, which is another thing I’ve had to be patient about, what with Rebecca working every hour God sends to bag the cinema project.

I’m not even worried living together will change things. We managed to spend a week together in Rome for her birthday without killing each other, and a holiday is the first of the relationship tests, isn’t it? Come through that and you can probably live together; come through the living together test and the next step is marriage; then you get a dog to see if you’d be good parents.

Maybe I’m getting a bit ahead of myself.

‘How’s Markus?’ Rebecca asks Danielle.

Sadly for Markus, the only test Danielle seems to set is: are you Shane? He dumped her on the night Rebecca and I met, but she still isn’t over him.

‘Why do guys always think I want a relationship?’ she says.

‘You sleep with them,’ says Rebecca. ‘You can see why they’d get confused.’

‘It’s just two people rubbing body parts together,’ Danielle whines. ‘How come Jamie can have mindless, meaningless sex and everyone understands what it is but when I do it men assume I’ll want to date them?’

Danielle chucks her crumpled swan on to her empty plate and helps me clear the dishes. She checks her phone for the umpteenth time as I fill the sink with water.

‘So how is Shane?’ says Rebecca casually.

Danielle turns and puts her phone against her chest, blushing. 'No, I haven't . . . We haven't . . .'

'I know that look!'

Danielle makes a show of slapping her phone on the sideboard. We work wordlessly for a minute or two while Jamie wipes down the table and Rebecca puts away the condiments. We're a well-drilled team.

'When did he get back in touch?' Rebecca asks.

Danielle has been drying the same plate since Rebecca caught her out. The pots are starting to pile up.

'A few days ago,' she answers guiltily.

Rebecca doesn't say anything.

'We've been texting all day and then suddenly he's gone off the radar without warning.' Danielle scoops up her phone. 'I'm thinking my last text might not have got through.'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa.' Jamie stops what he's doing. 'You're not texting him again, are you?'

'How else am I going to know if he got my message?'

'What are you thinking happened to it?' asks Rebecca.

'Did aliens abduct it? Did it fly over the Bermuda Triangle?'

I dodge aside so Jamie can put the anti-bacterial spray back under the sink.

'The rules are quite clear,' he says. 'You can only double text if you're an actual thing.'

'Or during an argument,' I say, and then smiling at Rebecca: 'Not that I'd know about that, obviously.'

'*Not that I'd know about that, obviously,*' mimics Rebecca, then laughs when I whip her legs with the tea towel.

Danielle places her plate in the cupboard with a clack. 'I know the rules,' she says. 'But Shane is complicated. He doesn't reply to anyone the first time around, he's really busy. And also forgetful. He's always leaving his phone somewhere.'

The three of us eyeball her until her chin sinks towards her torso. 'OK, OK - I'll wait for him to text me. God!'

Once everything is cleared away Rebecca joins me at the window, wrapping her arms around me from behind. She nestles her chin into my shoulder so that her dark brown hair falls down the front of my shirt. We stare at the moon, its roundness pared only slightly at one side.

'Dinner was lovely,' she whispers. 'I'll thank you properly when we're alone.'

'Right, everyone,' I say, turning around with a clap of my hands, 'time to finish your drinks and go home.'

Rebecca laughs.

'This *is* my home,' says Danielle.

'Not for much longer,' I point out.

Danielle looks crestfallen.

'He's joking around,' says Rebecca, laughing.

She goes to sit on the couch with Danielle, but I stay where I am, contemplating the last eleven months.

'Remember that time you bought a telescope because you decided you wanted to be an astronomer?' says Jamie, following my eyes to the moon. 'How's that working out for you?'

I ignore him. 'I was just thinking how fast the last year has gone.'

'It'll be your anniversary soon,' says Jamie.

'Wow, a year!' calls Danielle. 'When was your first date?'

Rebecca asks Jamie the date of his opening night.

'October the twenty-sixth last year,' he says before I can point out that, actually, it was a couple of weeks before we went on a proper date.

Then Danielle changes the subject with a loud groan at her phone.

'Just delete his number!' Rebecca pleads.

I watch Jamie laugh at the spectacle of Rebecca and Danielle going back and forth, and I try to remember if I've ever properly thanked him for being the matchmaker when

he had a million other things to think about: getting Arch 13 off the ground, trying to placate his parents. They still haven't visited the bar.

'I still owe you one,' I tell him now. 'For the napkin.'

He smiles. 'I just hope it doesn't all go to pot on Friday.'

'How do you mean?'

'Oh, you know. Rebecca being so close to her dad, and all that. She dumped a guy once cos her dad didn't approve.'

'Ta for that.'

He cracks up. 'Just thought I should warn you.'

'Leave him alone!' interrupts Rebecca. 'Although he's right,' she says to me. 'I did dump Nick McDermott cos Dad wasn't keen.'

I fold my arms, suddenly feeling quite anxious about the whole thing.

'Actually, that reminds me,' says Rebecca. 'I need to go into work on Friday morning before we get the train to Kent.'

'I thought you had the day off?'

'I did, but Jake wants to introduce me to the structural engineer I'll be working with on the cinema.'

'Talking of which . . .' says Jamie. 'We're supposed to be celebrating!' He picks up the thirty-year-old Glenfiddich he bought her. 'Let's have a toast.'

'Not that,' Rebecca bawls, scuttling over to take it from him. 'I'm not wasting that.' She looks at me. 'Ben, let's open that prosecco your mum got us.'

'Life's too short to save good whisky,' Jamie protests, but I'm already fetching the bubbles from the fridge.

The cork proves stubborn, eventually releasing with a pop, and the three of them shove their glasses underneath the bottle to collect the spillage.

'To Rebecca!' says Danielle.

'To my awesome girlfriend!' I say, winking at her.

'To friends,' adds Rebecca.

We all clink glasses, and the last word is Jamie's.

‘To life!’