



Chapter One

I'm so tired by the time I get back into bed that I don't know where to put myself. I've reached a level of exhaustion where the room is swimming slightly and it feels a little like I'm walking on enormous lumps of cotton wool. Sliding noiselessly under the duvet next to Pete, I sink gratefully down into the warmth and, finally, close my eyes. I've been crying so much it's as if I've sandpapered them red raw. They ache on the inside.

I almost brained myself a second ago, creeping back into our bedroom and trying not to disturb Pete. Unfortunately I tripped over a picture frame that we haven't got round to hanging back up after the break-in and stubbed my toe on the edge of the bed. It really hurt and made me yelp, but he didn't wake up.

Earlier we were lying in bed talking before we went to sleep . . . well, before Pete went to sleep. He was remarking on how much damage the burglars had done in such a comparatively short space of time, probably mere minutes. I didn't say much to that and, misinterpreting my silence,



he reached out and squeezed my hand in what I think was meant to be a reassuring 'I'm here' sort of way. Then he started to snore.

I haven't found it so easy. Even now, when I'm desperately tired, I can't get comfy. I can't switch off.

Scrunching my eyes a little tighter I try to breathe deeply, focusing on emptying my head of horrible thoughts . . . but I can't. My brain is still blindly buzzing, like a bee trapped in a bottle.

Eventually I try to think about something happy and relaxing instead. A picture of my mum, my sister and me having a picnic on a beach pops into my head. God, life was simple as a child. I think about us just skipping around on the sand, laughing, and Mum watching us happily – but then thinking about Mum makes me want to cry again.

I want to get up now and ring her, confess everything, so someone knows what I've done. But I can imagine her pity and horror, her saying 'Oh you poor, poor little thing . . . I'll be there just as soon as I can', but that would ruin her holiday and she so needs this break. I know that I won't tell her, not tonight, not tomorrow. Apart from anything else, it'd make it all real.

I still have a lot of tidying up to do tomorrow anyway. I found a small shard of glass embedded in the bottom of my shoe when I was walking through the hall earlier, even though I've hoovered thoroughly.

Pete was simply speechless when he got home from work and surveyed the damage. It's difficult to prepare someone for something like that over the phone, even though I tried. I'd explained how no room had been left untouched and how it had been a very thorough job, but he was still visibly shocked. He'd been especially gutted when he spied the

elephant lying on the carpet in the sitting room, a snapped-off tusk lying miserably next to it.

'I can't believe it,' he said incredulously. 'They've even broken Bert. The bastards.' He'd crunched over the cracked CD cases, mashing flowers from a broken vase into the rug en route. 'Who could do something like this? Don't they ever stop to think about the fact that all this stuff is someone else's memories, their lives?' He'd held Bert up to me sadly and said, 'D'you remember that funny little guy who made him, the one with no teeth?'

I hadn't been able to say anything; I'd just nodded dumbly, trying not to let myself cry. I didn't trust myself to speak anyway.

He'd set Bert down carefully and shaken his head slowly. 'How can someone be so evil? It's just mindless damage! I hope they get what they deserve – the fuckers.'

We'd stood there and looked around our living room: smashed photo frames, ripped cushions, cupboard doors forlornly flapping open with the contents spewing out over the carpet. When we started to move from room to room, he gasped at each one. In the bathroom there were open bottles rolling on the tiles and dribbling puddles of shampoo on to the floor, squirts of sun cream up the walls and over the mirror, reams of loo roll festooning the shower. In our bedroom, clothes were strewn over the bed, the drawers upended, books and magazines flung wildly around, pictures at drunken angles.

'How could anyone just wreck everything with no thought for how much hurt it would cause?' Pete had said in disbelief.

And at that, I *had* cried. I hadn't been able to help it. I'd done a big gulping sob and tears had started to stream down my face. 'Oh, don't!' Pete had begged as he rushed

over and pulled me into his arms, hugging me fiercely. 'It's just stuff. All that matters is that neither of us were hurt.'

That had just made me cry even more. He had to hold me, make gentle shushing noises and rock me like a baby until I calmed down.

The memory of Pete holding me so sweetly makes my heart thud painfully as I glance over at him lying right on the other side of the bed. There's a huge gap between us and he has taken practically all the duvet. I shiver slightly and wriggle over, reaching out for him. He flinches in his sleep as my cold feet touch his leg but doesn't protest as I wrap myself round him and huddle up for some warmth. We lie like that for a moment or two and then he shifts uncomfortably and turns over. I turn over too, facing away from him, but he reaches out for me as he always does and draws me towards him. We fit together and he sighs happily as he sinks back into deep sleep.

For as long as we've been together he has always liked to go to sleep with us hugging. It took a bit of getting used to, but now I don't drop off unless he *is* draped over me.

The first night we slept in the same bed together I instinctively rolled away when he switched the light off, as that was what I'd experienced with all other blokes. Pete had flicked the light back on and said in amazement, 'What are you doing?'

I'd been a bit confused by that and said, 'Er, going to sleep. Why, what are you doing?'

'Nothing. Just wondering why you've shot over to the furthest side of the mattress. Do I smell or something?'

I'd blushed and mumbled 'No!', all embarrassed.

Pete had laughed good-naturedly and said, 'Well, come here then!' So I'd snuggled into his open arms gratefully, my heart melting.

And that's how it's been ever since.

I tried to describe it recently to my younger sister, who was having bloke trouble. She'd spent about an hour snuffling into a tissue that she just wanted to meet the man who *was* right for her. Was that too much to ask?

'I just feel like it's never going to happen,' she said desperately as I stroked her hair and she started to wail again. 'I mean, I'm twenty-two! I can't keep getting it wrong, I'm running out of time! It won't be long before I start getting saggy and *no one* will want me.' I'd ignored that and tried to think of something positive to say. After all, her boyfriends always seemed perfectly nice to me and I couldn't really see what the problem was.

'Well, you could just . . . ' I began gently.

'Don't tell me to put up with Jack! Just don't!' She'd sat up fiercely and looked warningly at me. 'You don't understand. I just can't be with someone who doesn't get *why* I need to do this.'

'But you're talking about a very big change here, Clare,' I tried to reason, offering her a fresh tissue. 'You've got to admit that not many people would want to give up studying law to be a . . . salsa instructor.' I'd bitten the inside of my lip to try and stop myself smiling. It really wasn't funny; she already had enormous student loans.

She'd waved the tissue away and reached crossly for the Revels, shoving four in at once.

'I hate these,' she said mutinously. 'Don't buy them again.'

'But it's fun . . . not knowing if you're going to get a coffee or a toffee or a . . . '

She rolled her eyes. 'I'm so excited I'm going to wet myself. Anyway, we're talking about me and Jack. I just don't see what's wrong with me wanting to, to explore life more. To get out there . . . to—'



‘But in fairness, Clare,’ I’d interrupted, ‘he didn’t say you *couldn’t* be a tango teacher . . .’

‘*Salsa!*’ she exploded through a mouthful. ‘It’s sodding *salsa!* Not tango! They are two completely different things!’

‘He didn’t say you couldn’t teach salsa,’ I continued soothingly, ‘he said he didn’t understand why you wanted to, but if it was important to you, it was important to him.’

‘Exactly!’ Her eyes blazed. ‘Don’t you see what is so wrong with that?’

I’d hesitated: the simple answer was no, I didn’t.

‘If the man I’m with can’t understand *why* I need to do something, if he doesn’t *totally* get what makes me tick, if we’re not *completely* on the same wavelength, then what’s the point?’

I sighed inwardly and felt about a hundred. She had a lot to learn. Pete’s and my puppy, Gloria, trotted in. I scooped her up and began to tickle her tummy.

‘How did *you* know Pete was The One?’ she demanded.

I shrugged. ‘I just knew. That’s the thing, you just do. You’ll know when it happens to you.’

She shot me a cross look. ‘Don’t be so patronising.’ Then she was quiet for a moment and stared into space before adding in a smaller voice, ‘But *what* did you just know? I don’t get it.’

I sighed and tried to think. ‘We just get on.’

‘I get on with my boss at the restaurant, but I don’t want to shag him. Any more.’

I looked up in alarm and she rolled her eyes. ‘Joke. But seriously, what did attract you to Pete? I’m not saying he’s not fit or anything, but what made him that little bit different?’

‘His laugh and his smile,’ I said without hesitation.



She groaned. 'God, you two are so sad. I want some more wine.' With that, she'd got up and moodily stomped off to the kitchen.

But it's true: when we first met, one of the things I was immediately attracted to was this sort of glow around Pete. He had a spark in his eyes and looked lively, hungry for fun. The first time I saw him he was in a circle of people in a noisy, busy pub. He was telling a story and they were all listening to him eagerly, waiting for the punchline. When it came, the group erupted with laughter, him included, and he just grinned delightedly at all of them. He obviously liked making them laugh and that was, well, very sweet. Then he looked up and caught my eye and I blushed and dropped my gaze. I've always been hopeless at flirting like that. Anyway, after a bit he came up to the bar where I was sitting perched on a stool, trying to look alluring and not in fact like I was about to fall off, and asked me if I was someone who was likely to respond to crappy chat-up lines or not.

'Would you,' he wondered as if it were a truly interesting question, 'be the kind of girl who could appreciate a truly awful line and laugh, or would you be the kind of girl who would prefer just to politely be asked if I could buy her a drink?'

That would entirely depend on which awful line he chose, I said (I was a bit tipsy – there was a reason why I was staying seated). What lines had he got?

He understood the game immediately and pulled up a stool, asking if he could interest me in a cheeky little number that began with it being my lucky night. I pointed out that whenever a man says that to a girl it is rarely *her* lucky night, it is his, and he is unwittingly revealing that all he wants to do is shag you then leave – and that he is the

kind of man who doesn't get to have sex often at all. (I would never had said that if I was sober. Never.)

He smiled and said he understood perfectly. What about a line that required props then? He could procure an ice cube and attempt to hit it, which would break the ice?

That, I said, would be lovely if he were George Clooney and we were in the Sky bar in LA, but a little ridiculous in the George and Dragon on what was, after all, quite a drizzly, cold night.

Hmm, he said. What about something a little more audacious then? A 'let's not waste time with small talk, let's just get out of here and go someplace else *right now* . . .' Not bad, I responded thoughtfully, except he could be an axe murderer for all I knew and, also, any man who doesn't bother with small talk probably doesn't bother with foreplay – so no thanks. I remember him smiling and saying that he hadn't realised sex was in the offing this early in the frame and had I considered playing hard to get?

He almost lost me there. Had I been sober enough I would have taken offence at that, or been unnerved talking about sex with a perfect stranger, but I wasn't, I was enjoying myself. What about something with humour? I suggested helpfully.

'Make my day, tell me you're Swedish, single and you've got a twin sister?' he offered. I grimaced; absolutely not. If that was his best shot at doing funny, he'd better try doing sweetly romantic.

He pondered this for a moment and said calmly, 'You're the kind of girl I'd like to come home to.' I laughed at this and said that I didn't mean to be rude but I'd kind of hoped for a little bit more from life than sitting at home knitting and waiting for my bloke to get in from t'mine to eat the rabbit pie I'd made him.



Heck, he said, biting his lip in mock fear, his repertoire was running low. How about a plain and simple ‘I want to kiss you?’, he went on, because it was true, he very much wanted to.

I stole a look at his gently smiling face, his kind, shiny brown eyes with crinkly bits at the corners that showed he smiled a lot, and felt myself melt a bit. Then I laughed again, a little nervously this time because there was a moment where everything else seemed to stop and go quiet, where we both realised something was starting between us . . . and said firmly that would never work. Did I look like the sort of girl who went around kissing random men in pubs for goodness’ sake? Of course not. Anyway it was a really cheesy line, it would never work. It would definitely never work.

It did work though. By the end of the night he’d given me his number and asked me please to call because he wanted to try his first-date lines on me. Purely in the spirit of research, I was to understand.

I left it all of three days before I got in touch and, two days after that, I was sitting in a restaurant opposite him peering at a menu and trying to think of something witty and amusing to say.

‘I hate this bit,’ he said. ‘I should warn you that I’ll probably blurt something out to try and start a conversation that will end up making me look a total idiot and you’ll be sitting there wondering where the loos are and how big the windows might be.’

That relaxed me a little. I assured him that he’d be okay. After all he had his first-date lines, didn’t he? He looked a bit sheepish and said no, he didn’t actually, they mostly consisted of ‘You look very nice’ and ‘So tell me a bit more about yourself’.





We both agreed that while these weren't wildly original, they were safe. Then we spent a fun twenty minutes composing a list of things that should *never* be said on a first date, which included 'Well, I hope you like the food. My ex and I used to come here all the time', and 'This is really embarrassing but I can't remember your name', as well as 'You're a bit overdressed for the dogs'.

We were getting on famously and then he said, just as the waiter arrived, 'Or what about: "I'm warning you now. It's not very big!"'

There was a silence that seemed to go on for ever before the waiter coughed in a crap attempt to cover a laugh, looked pityingly at me, took our order and then legged it back to the kitchen to tell everyone that the man at table ten had just told his date he had a small penis.

One of us had to speak and break the horribly uncomfortable social nightmare that had suddenly become our night out, so once I'd recovered myself I agreed that yes, he was right, that probably wouldn't be *such* a great thing to say. Not least because it assumed the evening was going to end a certain way. Which it wasn't.

He looked horrified. 'Oh God, no,' he flustered, utterly appalled at himself and flushing deep red. 'I didn't mean I was expecting you to . . . although if you wanted to it would be . . . anyway. It's not true,' he said quickly. 'About me, I mean. It's okay . . . just in case you were wondering if it was . . . sufficient. Oh Jesus, I'm still talking . . . I can't believe I just said that.' He stopped and exhaled deeply, and then tried to take a deep, calming breath. 'I can't *believe* I just said that. You'd think that by now my brain would have stopped this, this verbal car crash happening, but no . . . words are still coming out . . .'

He took another deep breath. 'Could we pretend I didn't





just say all of that to you and could I ask you to tell me a little bit more about yourself instead?’

After I’d got over the initial shock and resisted the urge to do a mad sprint to the door (maybe it was just curiosity at how he was going to recover the evening after such a dreadful outburst of social Tourette’s), we ended up having a surprisingly lovely time. He asked if he could see me again and I said yes without even hesitating.

Then it began. An evening here and there, a walk on a hot summer’s afternoon in some quiet fields, just us, where we shyly began to talk about what we each wanted for the rest of our lives. When he said nervously that he had always imagined getting married and having children at a young age, I said *I’d* always wanted to have children too, with the right man . . . There was a silence where we both looked at each other, smiled gently and my heart felt so light and happy I just wanted to cry. It was as if we made an unspoken promise to each other there and then. I felt I was his from that moment onwards and he hadn’t even kissed me.

As time went on we became closer and closer . . . we talked several times a day and never ran out of things to say to each other. He made me laugh and laugh, and when he did first kiss me, it was the sweetest, gentlest kiss in the world. I wanted to be with him as much as I could. My heart would flip over when I heard his car pull up outside my flat . . . it was perfect and I fell very much in love with him.

We spent a first blissful summer together driving around country lanes and having pub lunches and after one, late in the afternoon as the sun was starting to sink, we stopped at the beach on the way back and he wrote ‘I love you’ in the sand. Then he shouted it as loud as he could, to the alarm of the squawking seagulls circling overhead. I laughed



like a loon and hugged him so hard we both fell over. I felt like I was in a film – cocooned in happiness.

That was what Clare just hadn't found yet – that being sure. That certain knowledge that it just didn't get any better. Knowing that the search could stop, you were a done deal.

Clare wandered back in carrying another bottle of wine and found me grinning to myself.

'God, you're thinking about him now, aren't you? Mr Totally Wonderful.'

I'd laughed. 'He drives me totally nuts in lots of ways. You know he does.'

'But you see, this is what I don't understand!' She'd started to wrestle with the cork. 'If someone pisses me off, I'm out of there.'

'Pete doesn't piss me off. Well, he does, but I don't spend all day wandering around thinking I've got to do something about it. If he does something twatty, sometimes I ignore it because it's not worth arguing about, sometimes I don't and we have words, then one of us says, "Do you want a cup of tea?" and it's forgotten. That's what a real relationship is all about.'

Clare wrinkled her nose. 'Sounds really exciting. I'll have to check my diary and see if I can fit it in between rebellious university years and death . . . Oh, turns out I'm busy. What a shame.'

That annoyed me a little and I started to get a bit more animated as I tipped Gloria off my lap and reached for the bottle myself. 'Look, real love – *true* love – is about an awful lot more than roses, candlelight and remembering Valentine's Day.'

Clare took a big gulp from her glass and put it unsteadily back down on the table. 'What, it's about picking up his pants for the hundredth time and *still* loving him? Balls to

that . . . I want passion, excitement, spontaneity. That can't be too much to expect.' She'd started to look feisty and determined.

'It isn't.' I'd gently leant over to remove the bottle that she'd just picked up again from her hands, firmly putting the cork back in it. 'It's just that all that stuff gives way to something much deeper, much more lasting. No one is perfect, every relationship takes a lot of work and once you meet the person that you really, truly love, it won't matter if he doesn't understand why you want to do something, it'll be enough that he's willing to support your choice *even though* he doesn't really understand why.'

I listen to Pete breathing next to me, steady and untroubled, and I think about what I said to Clare and I know it to be true. I love him so much.

But I can't tell him what I did earlier.

Twelve hours ago, after he'd left for a meeting, I slammed from room to room in our house like a human sledgehammer, clutching one of his golf clubs with a grip so tight my fingers went white. It was hard to hear the shattering of glass and the crash of cascading CDs over my shrieking as photo frames, ornaments, Bert, all flew off shelves and tables, splintering into pieces. I threw things at walls, ripped apart anything I could get my hands on, pushed chairs over, kicked piles of DVDs. I was totally shattered when I finished and sank to the floor in a crumpled heap, breathing heavily.

Pete can't ever know that when I told him we'd been burgled I was lying. Tomorrow I will make everything okay. I know how to fix this mess. It *will* be all right. It has to be.

And with that thought I finally start to drift away, my body unable to fight sleep any longer.