

Hannah Sunderland

*Very Nearly
Normal*

avon.

Published by AVON
A division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2020

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2020

Copyright © Hannah Sunderland 2020

Hannah Sunderland asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-00836570-7

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.

The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work
of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted,
down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced
into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by
any means, whether electronic or mechanical, without the express written
permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC™ C007454

This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

*For Mom, Dad and for anyone who has ever
felt like a failure.*

Chapter One

The bevy of children and teens, freshly released from the shackles of school, moved against me and as usual I was swimming against the current. Not too long ago, I had been just like them; full of entitlement, the idea of failure ridiculous, the thought of ageing impossible, and death was just a fictitious destination. But now – after years of unadulterated disappointment – entitlement had transformed into self-pity, failure was inescapable, ageing was in full swing and death seemed like a quiet holiday.

The question I had asked myself over and over since graduating from one of those carefree young creatures to a bitter, twisted, ne'er-do-well, was *How could such big dreams amount to so little?* I'd wanted to write and be read. I'd wanted to see someone reading my book on the train and feel pride swell in my chest. I'd wanted one of those little recommendation cards that sit on the shelves in Waterstones. I still wanted all of those things. I had a finished manuscript sitting beneath my bed, the words obscured by dust. I'd sent it out into the world in an attempt

to achieve that dream, but life hadn't quite played out the way I'd planned.

By all accounts, I was a failure.

I failed at everything I touched.

You could gift me the rarest, most beautiful flower in the whole galaxy and it would be compost in my hands within ten minutes.

Failure had always been what I was best at, but funnily enough, my first failure hadn't even been my own. It had been my parents' when they had chosen to burden me with the world's most ridiculous name. My full name is Matilda Effie Heaton, but I'd refused to be called by my first name since I was eight, after years of people telling me to showcase my telekinetic powers and asking me why Miss Honey wasn't picking me up from school. But the actual name wasn't the failure, no, the real failure was the initials and what they spelled when put together. That's right; my name literally spells the word *meh*.

Meh: *The universal, millennial term for anything uninspired and unexceptional.*

I'd thought about changing it a couple of years ago, and foregoing the 'Matilda' part altogether, but the process had seemed complicated and, in the end, I simply couldn't be bothered. No one ever used that name anyway unless it was for something official or if I'd angered my mother – which happened to be quite often – and in those cases she would be certain to use my full name, just to piss me off.

As I approached Bobby's corner shop, I reached into my pocket and withdrew my purse. I glanced down at my bank card and saw my full name printed across it in blocky silver

letters. I stabbed my PIN into the buttons with my flaking dark green painted nails and pressed the button for twenty quid. The machine almost laughed at me as it rejected my withdrawal and offered me ten instead.

‘Fine!’ I spat through gritted teeth and snatched the ten-pound note from the slot.

That was another thing I’d failed at, building any kind of savings in either of my pitiful accounts.

But, don’t worry, it doesn’t stop there. These are by no means my only failures.

I’d failed to do anything other than coast through three uneventful years of university and at the ripe old age of twenty-eight I had failed to move out and begin my own life. I’d simply returned like a homing pigeon to the town I’d been born in, a suburb on the outskirts of Birmingham, famous for producing Emma Willis, having a very large park, and less famous for being within two miles of what may or may not be the oldest traffic roundabout in the UK.

My failures wouldn’t have been so pronounced, however, had it not been for the ocean of people around me who seemed to effortlessly succeed to sickening levels. I saw them, with their smug faces plastered all over the internet. I’d stay up into the early hours, slowly torturing myself by browsing through the endless photos of my successful ‘friends’ posing on their London apartment balconies. They’d always be holding sparkling glasses of Cristal as they toasted their promotion, all whilst draped over the arm of their fiancé, who had cool ice-blue eyes and the torso of Khal Drogo. One of those loathsome people just happened to be my ‘best friend’, Kate, who at this very moment was on her way to the same café that I was, probably with a sexy new haircut and some exciting news to

tell me about all the things that she was most recently excelling in.

What did these people know that I didn't? Had I been sick from school when they'd taught the *How Not to Suck at Life* portion of the syllabus? Or did I just innately lack the talons that everyone else seemed to use to claw their way to the top?

Everything in my life had fallen short of expectation. Every endeavour doomed from the outset.

Failure was and always had been my default setting. In fact, the only thing I'd excelled at in any way, was staying alive long enough to witness every single crushing disappointment; which I hoarded like the greedy giant atop the beanstalk.

A young girl sauntered in my direction, her long chestnut hair flowing lustrously over one shoulder. She flirted easily with the sliver of a boy beside her who listened intently to her every word. Her skin was flawless, as mine had been at her age, before those little lines had appeared in my forehead after years of frowning. The girl's skirt was strategically rolled at the top to achieve the optimum amount of peeping thigh, the rolled-up fabric making her stomach look rounded and floppy.

In a few years she'd need no help getting herself a muffin top, I thought pessimistically. As I passed the two young lovers, the boy's shoulder knocked into mine. His eyes barely lingered on me for a second, before his mouth curled back into a smirk and he returned his attention to a more interesting subject matter.

If she was lucky, the romance would end before the summer holidays came. Short and sweet was the way to handle an adolescent romance. Otherwise, ten years from

now, that happy teen would find herself with two squalling brats and a council flat that her partner never spent any time in because he was forever off working nights at the depot and having an on-the-side fling with Kathy from despatch.

I'd always thought that the idea of falling in love at fifteen and staying that way for your entire life would be one of the most depressing things ever. Sure, the idea was romantic, but it left no time for making mistakes and sometimes mistakes were the most interesting part of life.

At least love was one thing I was happy to have failed at, especially when I look back at the saddening array of boys I've attempted to love in the past. I don't know if it's because I'm too picky or if I'm simply never destined for the music-swelling, grand-gesture kind of love that Richard Curtis had fooled me into believing existed. Maybe life is different for you if you look like Keira Knightley, but I'd never had someone turn up on my doorstep with placards, declaring their undying love for me.

I turned away from the lovers and headed towards the high street; the sound of thumping incessant grime music from a passing car masking the calming sounds of the indie-folk playlist that I had stuffed into my ears.

Now, I hope you don't think I was one of those insufferable children who were told that they could *be* anything, *do* anything, that the world was theirs for the taking. I mean I was, but I never have and never will have any grandiose ideas about who I am or what I'm capable of. In all seriousness, if I get through a day without severely injuring someone, breaking something or accidentally insulting someone, then I take that day as a win. I have found, from years of personal experience, that once you accept that you are a loser, a failure, a flop, a piece of white dog turd adhered to the side of a

shoe, you will be altogether more prepared for what your loser life throws at you.

Not every person is meant to change the world, despite what everyone told us as we grew up. If we were, then the world would be in an even greater mess than it already is. Maybe being a failure was a blessing in disguise. Maybe my inability to change the world in any way was my gift to humanity.

Being a failure wouldn't even be so hard, had I managed to perfect the art of giving zero shits about anything. But the point was that I gave *far* too many shits, and therein lay my downfall. I gave a shit about my mother and the way she ate with a cacophony of *smacks* and *slurps*. I gave a shit about my 'friend' Kate and her fancy-schmancy job and her penthouse apartment (that I had never set foot in, purely on principle). And I gave a shit about my own shittiness, which was reflected and magnified by the shits that no one else seemed to give. I didn't know how they did it, breezing through life like it was a path already laid out for them and all they had to do was walk forward and the path would find their feet. I had never seen my path. It was hidden beneath the failures that lay at my feet like long-dead leaves.

There was something about seeing the café that made me feel like a dog being dragged to the vets to be neutered. I could see Kate inside through the window, playing with a silky strand of her hair as the sun fell over her face. My stomach tightened with regret before I'd even stepped through the fingerprint-smearred glass door. I moved inside, the aggressive heat from the overhead fan hitting me square in the face. I'd never been in this café before, mostly because it intimidated me with its repurposed furniture and copious choice of coffee beans.

I saw Kate up ahead, sitting at what looked like two lidded school desks that had been pushed together to form a table. She sat casually with her long dark hair pulled up into an effortlessly neat high ponytail and her nose inches away from the screen of her phone. She sipped glutinously at the foam of her cappuccino, her face glowing blue in the light that emanated from the screen.

So, here's what you need to know about Kate.

We'd been best friends since we were four years old. When we met, we were both weird and otherwise friendless, so we latched on to each other and it suited us both well for a while. But as time wore on Kate began to acclimatise to the rest of the world, finding a best friend in the most popular girl in school, Eloise 'Fucking' Kempshore (not her given middle name, obviously, but it was what I'd called her since the day in year seven when the teacher had left the room and she'd stood up in class and picked on me about my red hair).

To be fair, Kate hadn't climbed the social ladder without trying to carry me along with her, but I had proven to be a less than willing passenger and after struggling for a year or so, Kate all but cut the line and dropped me back into the social abyss that I should have never left in the first place. Kate had always known the right clothes to wear and the right way to do her hair. She never clammed up in conversation or thought of the most inappropriate thing to say and then accidentally said it instead of keeping it to herself.

Eloise had stolen Kate away about eleven years ago now and since then we had started to feel obligated to remain in contact, just so long as I remained separate from her other friends, her other life. We became interested in wildly different things, Kate with her popular clique and her Ken doll

boyfriend, and me with my writing, introversion and hating the world. It wasn't uncommon for friends to grow apart, I knew that, but unlike most people Kate and I simply didn't have the balls to admit that it was over.

I walked over to the table and pulled out the chair while Kate's eyes remained fixed to the screen that glowed in her palm. Kate has always had this annoying habit of becoming so engrossed in her phone that she often forgets she has company and rousing her from it is like trying to wake Sleeping Beauty without giving her a quick snog first.

I managed to take off my coat, sit down, cross my legs and heave a sigh before Kate even noticed I was there.

'Effie! You're here!' she gushed, placing down her phone, the screen still open and showing the other conversations she was having on the side – it was like being blatantly cheated on. She grinned widely at me, her eyes darting to her phone, then back to my face. I wished she'd stop pretending to be excited to see me; we both knew she wasn't. 'I didn't know what you drank these days, so I just got something for myself.'

I desperately tried not to grimace and roll my eyes.

I'd only been drinking lattes for ten years, but then how would someone who still insisted on calling me her 'best friend' know that?

'No worries,' I said through gritted teeth. 'I'll go and get it myself.'

She didn't notice my passive aggression and happily went back to phoneland while I got up and joined the queue.

The guy at the counter was pretty, in a grubby hipster kind of way. He had a thick black beard, which I instantly deemed unhygienic to have dangling that low over the tray of exposed pastries beneath, and wore braces that held up his burgundy drainpipe jeans.

He greeted me with an overly enthusiastic ‘Hi there!’ and waited for my order. I ordered my latte and looked longingly at a cinnamon bun that sat close enough for me to catch a whiff of its sickly sweet goodness. I thought about ordering one, then looked over my shoulder at the slim and beautiful Kate and decided to forgo the calories.

I looked down at the barista’s name tag; it read *Bernard*.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Bernard was his actual name or if, like Catholics, you got a new name when confirmed into the fold of Hipster.

‘Which of our coffees would you like today?’ Bernard asked.

I looked up confused.

He took this as an invitation to elaborate. ‘You could have our house coffee, which is a dark roasted bean with a bitter finish and hints of raspberry and chocolate or our guest coffee, which is a medium roast with a velvet finish and caramel undertones.’

I looked at him with confusion, wondering when ordering a coffee became like the general knowledge round of *Mastermind*.

‘Which would you recommend?’ I asked, trying to hide that I was out of my depth.

‘It depends entirely on your palate, madam,’ he replied, unhelpfully.

I flinched at his use of the word *madam*. It made me feel like an old biddy or the proprietor of a whorehouse.

‘Erm, the cheapest one.’ The rising intonation at the end of my sentence made me sound like I was asking a question.

He gave me a pitiful smile, as if he thought me a complete philistine, and took my money.

When I returned, Kate had a smile plastered over her sickeningly made-up face. I found it difficult to do the most

basic of tasks, like draw matching eyeliner flicks for both eyes without making my entire face look lopsided, but somehow Kate had managed to become the Rembrandt of cosmetics.

‘So.’ Kate grinned and splayed her manicured hands out on the table. ‘I have massive news.’

‘Really? Do tell,’ I replied, as eager to hear her news as I was to have an unnecessary root canal.

‘I’ve been asked to go to Toronto for three months and broker a deal between my company and some fancy Canadian firm. If they approve the deal, then I can pretty much retire at thirty.’

‘Wow,’ I said, jealousy building inside me like Vesuvius, ‘are you taking it?’

‘*Am I taking it?*’ she scoffed. ‘What kind of question is that? They’re practically begging me to go. I mean, the flight, the hotel and every ounce of food and wine will be paid for. It’s basically a free holiday with a tiny bit of work thrown in.’

The green monster inside my brain began to scream and tie a noose for itself.

‘There’s just a lot to think about isn’t there?’ I tried in vain to talk her out of it, just so I could cease to be friends with someone so perfect and accomplished. ‘What about Callum and your parents?’

Kate scoffed. ‘My parents? Honey, I’m late twenties.’ I felt the blow of Kate’s words hit me directly in the gut. She may well have escaped the purgatory of living in the family home, but I was very much still there. ‘And as for Callum . . .’ Kate paused and I instantly knew what was coming. If the intonation of her voice hadn’t given it away, then the sickeningly self-gratified grin had.

I knew what she wanted me to do, but I refused to do it. I would not look at her hand.

It was my one small act of defiance.

When I didn't look down, Kate brought her left hand up into the air and that's when I saw it, the oval-cut diamond that sat on her perfectly polished ring finger. '... he proposed.' The diamond reflected the neon green light of the exit sign behind me and all I wanted to do was turn around and use it.

'I'm so happy for you,' I lied. What else could I have said?

'I knew you would be. Of course, you will have to be part of the day,' Kate cooed. The idea of being stuffed into a powder blue bridesmaid's dress and forced to pretend to be happy for an entire day made my toes curl. And if spending an entire day with Kate wasn't bad enough, I knew that Eloise 'Fucking' Kempshore would be there too. 'Eloise has already agreed to be my maid of honour—' boom, there it is '—and I already have eight bridesmaids, but we'll find a place for you somewhere.'

A place for me somewhere.

I replayed the words in my head. If that sentence didn't sum me up completely, then no sentence ever would. She would shoehorn me into her special day like that time I tried on a pair of size eight jeans and had to ask the attendant to hold the ankles while I lay on the floor and tried to wriggle free of them.

How stupid I'd been to think that I even warranted the nightmare task of being one of Kate's bridesmaids, when there were already so many volunteers.

'That would be amazing, thank you.' The words fell from my mouth like dry turds during a bout of constipation.

'Enough about me,' Kate said, picking up her phone and staring back down at the screen. 'What's new with you?'

'New with me?' I repeated as I tried desperately to think

of something that had happened in the two months since our last unbearable coffee date. Kate's French-tipped nails click-clacked across the screen furiously as she typed out a text and frowned with concentration. I tried desperately to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind. Kate wasn't listening anyway so, in the end, I just said, 'Mum got a new kettle last week.' That wasn't even true.

Kate didn't reply, react or even listen as she continued to tap away at the screen, her nails sounding like tiny hooves as my words hit her solitary bubble and bounced away into the atmosphere.

I felt my nostrils flare as I took a sip of my latte. I guessed that the barista had given me the bitter option because it tasted like battery acid.

I *had* planned on telling Kate that I had a date tonight with some guy I'd met on Tinder; but Kate wasn't listening.

Kate never listened.

Almost two full minutes of silence passed as I continued to force down the coffee I'd wasted four quid on and Kate giggled at a group chat message that I wasn't allowed to join in with.

The argument was brewing inside my mind. It had marinated itself in years of bitterness and subtle betrayals and by the end of those two minutes my words were fully oiled and ready to hit the scalding frying pan. I waited for myself to do it, to slam my mug down hard on the lid of the 'table' and say everything I'd always wanted to tell her, but the truth was that I would never say the words that filled my mouth like bile. I'd never been able to do it before, what made me think I could do it now?

I looked down at the illuminated phone in Kate's hand and noted the time. We'd spent the grand total of

twenty-seven minutes ‘catching up’ – that was record time, even for us.

‘It was great to see you again, Eff,’ Kate said as she pulled me into a hug that felt both unnecessary and intrusive.

Fuck, she even smelled amazing.

‘It was great to see you too,’ I lied, almost hearing the thud of more heavy, dry word turds as they hit the frosted pavement.

‘I’ll be in touch before I leave for Toronto. Love ya, bye.’ She blew a kiss over her shoulder and walked away, her ponytail swaying behind her like a silken pendulum.

I stood for a moment and watched as Kate walked away. The memory of our school prom photo leapt into my mind and brought slight warmth to my chest. Our mums had paid in advance and forced us to have it done because, just like us, they’d still refused to let our friendship die the quick death it so truly deserved. The image in my brain was of two sixteen-year-old girls, hugging each other like the years of history would prevent us from ever truly drifting apart. Of two beaming smiles that held years of secrets, shared joys and shared pains; of love.

I *had* loved her once, there was no denying that, but that time and that love was now nothing more than an image in my brain; a memory.

Chapter Two

I'd never found it easy to make friends and so replacing what I'd lost with Kate had been a struggle. Everyone said that the friendships you make at school and university are the ones that will last a lifetime.

Well, I'm officially calling bullshit on that over-sentimental statement.

I'd made absolutely no friends at university.

Zero. Nil. Nada.

The people on my course had all seemed so childish, annoying or utterly humourless, content only with getting shitfaced and bragging about who they'd slept with the night before.

I'd spent what should have been my carefree years of drunken frolics, nights of regret and getting into awkward situations – stories of which would appear at every dinner party for the rest of my life – studying and working hard. I wouldn't even have felt so pissed off about that, had I not barely scraped by with a third and managed to come out of that failure with a crippling debt, the likes of which I could

never hope to repay. All of my friendly ties from school had ended with the final bell and uni had been nothing more than three bloated years of persistent carb consumption and bitter disappointment.

I'd spent a year after that on Jobseeker's Allowance, which had all but stuck the final rusty nail into the coffin lid of my own self-worth. But one good thing that had come from the hours of sitting in itchy corporate chairs under harsh fluorescent lighting was Arthur.

Arthur Dale, owner of Dog Ears Bookshop, had come in to the job centre to talk to me and twenty other hapless, joyless, jobless fuck-ups about owning our own businesses.

Truth be told, I was the only person who got anything from Arthur's talk and when he'd finished rambling on about tax returns and marketing, I'd gone up to speak with him. He was mid-forties with a shaggy wilderness of untamed black curls and a pair of extremely well-worn Birkenstocks that looked as if the leather was hanging on to the sole for dear life. After that, I latched on to Arthur like a parasite and we swiftly became, what I liked to think of as, unlikely friends; whether Arthur liked it or not.

My mother, Joy – ironically named as she rarely found joy in anything – had worried about Arthur's intentions towards her lost and insecure daughter, but I'd soon put her mind to rest when I'd informed her that Arthur had eyes for only one person and that was his accountant, Toby.

Arthur was the opposite of me in every way. He was successful, with an established business that continued to win the battle between book and Kindle, a nice flat above the shop and an unwavering sense of sarcasm that I could only ever dream of reaching. He wasn't self-conscious and was persistent when it came to getting what he wanted, a

trait best illustrated by the epic pursuit of Toby that had been going on for at least six years.

He wasn't afraid to put his mind to something and nine times out of ten he ended up achieving what he'd set out to.

I made my way to the bookshop, the anger from the coffee date still swilling around with my stomach acid. I pushed the cold brass handle of the door with a little more force than necessary, catching the bell by surprise. The loud clanging caused everyone in the shop to turn and stare at me with startled expressions on their faces. Everyone, that is, except Arthur who was used to me by now and remained undisturbed. He stood at the top of a stepladder, rearranging travel guides into the order of the countries he wanted to visit next.

'Afternoon, oh ray of golden sunshine,' he droned as I threw my bag over the counter, its contents spilling out and clattering across the floor. 'Don't be shy, come in and destroy the tranquillity by all means.'

'Sorry. I had a shitty morning,' I said as I hoisted myself onto the counter, pulling my feet up and crossing my legs.

'Which by default means that *I* am going to have a shitty afternoon,' he replied, clutching the ladder with one hand and swinging around to face me. 'So, what happened?'

'Kate.' I sighed.

'Ah, I see,' he replied, his lanky frame looming over me from above.

'She's been promoted *and* she's engaged.'

'Ouch.' He winced. 'I bet that stung.'

'I wouldn't say stung. It was more like a creeping flesh disease, leprosy maybe?' I picked up a complimentary mint imperial from the wooden bowl beside the till and placed it in my mouth.

‘Those aren’t for you!’ Arthur snapped with annoyance, quickly descending the ladder and placing the bowl out of reach.

I still wasn’t one hundred per cent sure that Arthur liked me, but he tolerated me and that was why he quickly became one of my favourite people. I’d pushed my way into his life with as much subtlety as a baby pushing itself from its mother’s womb – desperately attaching myself to him and refusing to let go. In the weeks following his talk at the job centre, I would sit and read at his shop and eventually I began to serve customers when Arthur was busy. After a while he decided that he’d better start paying me and so not only had I forced my way into his life, but into his business as well. In all fairness it was the best job I’d ever had, with no official shift times, no dress code and basically no rules; except to keep my hands off the complimentary mint imperials.

There were a few people milling around the shelves, their eyes searching the spines for their next bedside read. I turned away from them, not caring if they overheard, and looked to Arthur, my very own agony aunt.

‘I just don’t get it,’ I began as Arthur leaned against the counter, making himself comfortable for what he knew would be a long one. ‘I try so hard and achieve nothing, yet Kate puts in the bare minimum and people just seem to fling opportunities at her. Should I stop trying so hard to sort my life out? If I just give up completely, will someone come to me with a sexy new boyfriend and a six-figure salary? Tell me, Arthur, tell me to give up.’

‘What? You mean you haven’t totally given up already?’ He smirked.

‘Can you be serious for just one minute? I need your wisdom right now.’

‘All right, listen, some people just get all the luck and others don’t. That’s just the shitty way that life works. You are one of the latter, whereas Kate is part of the former. She may get everything she ever wanted, and she’ll never have to work for it, but when you finally get where you’re going, it will mean all the more because of how hard you worked to get there.’

I frowned. ‘So, you’re saying I’ll try twice as hard to fail at something as everyone else?’ I asked.

‘Precisely!’ He grinned, his tone upbeat.

‘Wow, thanks.’ I sighed as a customer approached the till. He looked at us sheepishly and held a book out in front of him.

‘Can I buy this?’ he asked, as if he was worried he’d interrupted our counselling session.

I sighed and pasted on my ‘of course I don’t hate the customers’ face. I took the book from him, glanced at the front cover and felt the familiar jealousy. Each and every book that I sold was clouded with the thought that that could have been my name on the cover with my words inside, but alas, the countless agents and publishers I’d sent my manuscript to had deemed me unworthy of such a feat and so, I had stashed that ninety-thousand-word dream in a box beneath my bed and resigned myself to forever being a bookseller rather than a writer.

I charged the man and he left with the book cradled under his arm.

‘You’ll get there one day,’ Arthur said with a sympathetic smile curling his lips.

‘Will I?’ I asked, almost to myself.

Seven thirty hit and I found myself crammed into a sticky vinyl booth at the mock-American diner in the centre of

town. I'd never liked this place but, Daz – my Tinder date – had suggested it and so I'd decided to give it another shot. The Fifties doo-wop music blared angrily from crackling speakers and the smell of sickly-sweet milkshakes and chip fat filled the air. The place was basically empty except for me, a family of four in the far corner and a lone diner behind me, who munched noisily on his fries.

I wasn't kidding myself, I didn't anticipate much from this date with a guy whose name sounded like a cleaning product, but what did I have to lose?

If all went well, then it would be an evening of flirting, followed by a kiss or two and then we would probably part forever. It was sad really, but all I really wanted was to feel desired for one evening.

I took my phone from my bag while I waited and opened Facebook to complete my allotted self-torture time. The phone was old and battered and the edges of the screen were a spiderweb of cracks from the various abuses it had suffered at my hands.

The first post that made my stomach acid boil in my gut was an overly sentimental inspirational quote about being kind to others. Ironically this was posted by a girl I had once witnessed kicking the shit out of another girl in the park before school started because said girl had *looked at her funny*. Next was a post about someone's dad who'd died fourteen years ago. It was a long, arduous text, almost an essay, which was generous in its use of clichés. I wondered why people posted these. Was it a well-known fact that the afterlife had nothing better to do than monitor Facebook for remembrance statuses? I scoffed and scrolled further.

A woman I'd met once at a job centre workshop had posted a picture. It was a shot of her legs, crossed at the ankles, a

cocktail in her hand and a pool glinting in the distance. The caption read: *'So, how's your day?'*

Pretty shitty so far, Karen, thanks for asking.

I hazarded a glance at Kate's page. The latest post was a photo of her and her fiancé, Callum, their eyes squinting into the flash of the camera as they embraced and grinned like maniacs. I wish I'd someone I could grin about like that. Maybe, after this date, I would. Who knew, Daz could be The One.

The more I thought about the date, the more I began to talk myself around to the idea. Life hadn't found me my romcom leading man yet, but maybe Tinder would prevail where life had failed. But those hopes were dashed the moment he stepped through the door. He wore expensive-looking trainers, low-slung jeans and a T-shirt with a V-neck so deep it was basically a cardigan. He was laughable, with a pathetic attempt at a goatee sitting on his receding chin, and yet I knew that I would have to sit through a date with him out of pure politeness. I lifted my hand and waved to him. He lowered his Primani shades and cast me a disappointed glance.

'You Effie?' he barked.

'Yes. You must be Daz.' The lone diner behind me made a loud choking noise and then regained his composure.

'Yeah, dat's me.' He slid into the booth and placed his phone face up on the table. He surveyed me for a second before saying, 'You don't look like your Tinder photo.'

'Really?' I asked. 'Well, it's definitely me in the picture.'

He tapped around on his phone before pulling up the image and holding it out to me. I caught a whiff of his aftershave, which was trying to be *Boss for Men*.

'Who's the other girl then?' he asked.

I leaned forward and looked at the picture, my heart sinking when I understood the confusion. I'd never been one to take selfies. I'd tried it a couple of times but I just ended up feeling like a knob, standing there pouting at the camera. Who was I taking them for? I certainly didn't want them, so all of my photos were in groups, snapshots of nights out where I'd tried to breathe in and stand taller beside Kate. With an encroaching sense of nausea, I realised Daz had thought he was meeting her, instead of the disappointment sitting opposite him.

'Oh, that's my friend,' I said quietly, the word *friend* feeling uncomfortable in my mouth.

'She single?' he asked without irony.

I paused for a moment and wondered if he was being serious.

'No. She's engaged actually. Sorry to disappoint,' I spat angrily.

He tutted. 'All the hot ones are.'

His shoulders sagged and he pushed his shades back onto his nose. The awkward silence hung in the air like a stagnant fart until he finally stood and excused himself to go to the bathroom. My eyes stung as I felt the tears, but I'd be damned if I'd let him see me cry. Maybe I could just leave, slip out while he was gone and make a run for it? No. Effie Heaton would not run from a man-child who thought that an Ali G beard was still an acceptable form of facial hair.

I ordered a Coke – full-fat not diet – and chugged on the straw hungrily as I waited for my disappointed date to return. I could feel the grease in the air, settling on my skin and laying foundations for the bulging spot that no doubt would begin to sprout before the end of the day.

I looked around at the rest of the diner, trying to ignore

the audible masticating of the person behind me. Why did some people have to make such a song and dance about eating? Surely he'd had enough practice.

There were twenty or more rusted metal signs nailed to the wall above the serving hatch, through which grimaced a sour-faced old man with a weak chin and bushy eyebrows. One of the signs depicted the face of a smiling 1950s woman giving a thumbs up. Above her head it read, *Today could be the start of the rest of your life.*

I couldn't help but feel that the message wasn't for me. Daz was not a life changer and I'd be lucky if he even came back rather than trying to squeeze his inflated ego through the skinny awning window in the bathroom.

I saw him walking back over and surmised that the window had been too small. He made his way to the table but didn't bother sitting down.

'Hey, listen, I don't mean to sound like a dick but you're not what I signed up for and I don't really wanna waste my money on someone who I'd have swiped left.'

I recoiled and tried to form a retort but the words collected in my throat and remained there like a cork. He lifted a finger to his forehead and saluted me before sauntering out the door and letting a draught in as he left.

I turned, my jeans squeaking against the pleather, and fixed my eyes on a poster of Elvis that sat on the wall opposite. I tried not to cry, but I could feel the sob building in my throat.

'Excuse me.' I heard a voice in my right ear and turned around to see the face of the noisy eater from the booth behind. 'Hi, my name's Theo and I couldn't help but notice that your date was a complete wanker.' He smiled at me, his blue eyes hidden beneath scruffy blond hair. He held out

his hand and waited for me to shake it. 'You can come join me if you want – I'll never eat all of this.' He gestured to the half-eaten burger and grease-sodden fries that remained on his ketchup-smeared plate.

'You were listening?' I asked, embarrassed.

'I'm sorry, but as soon as a douchebag walks in dressed like that, it's pretty much impossible not to pay attention.' He grinned.

'Well, I'm glad there was an audience to my humiliation.'

I pulled out my purse and slammed the money for my Coke down onto the table.

Then, with anger fuelling me, I pulled my bag strap over my shoulder and slid out of the booth.

'Why are *you* the one who's embarrassed? He was the one being a dick,' he said as I walked quickly past.

I spun around, a frown fixed on my face, and said, 'You should try and eat more quietly. You sound like a cement mixer.' I turned on my heel and headed for the door.

'Now who's the eavesdropper?' I heard him mumble but I ignored him and as soon as the cool October air hit my burning cheeks, I let the tears fall and cried all the way home.

Chapter Three

I woke with a pounding head and a blockage of dried snot in my beetroot-coloured nose. The night before had been filled with a lot of red wine – the evidence of which could be seen in the magenta stain that tinted most of my lower lip – and what can only be described as a ‘mama hug meltdown’. For those people not sure what one of those is, a ‘mama hug meltdown’ can be defined by three invariable characteristics.

1. It is generally conducted on some kind of floor and whilst being called the ‘mama hug meltdown’ it doesn’t necessarily involve a mother and can be conducted in or around the arms of a parent, guardian or trusted figure to whom you look for emotional comfort.
2. There must always be copious amounts of snot, tears and/or saliva, which are periodically smeared onto said parent or trusted figure as you spew forth lines of self-hatred and woe about your life and situation.

3. These events are usually, but not always, followed by wine or some other kind of numbing alcoholic liquid – this can be interchanged for tea if necessary – and the meltdown will eventually come to a close when you end up in bed with a thumping head, a blocked nose and a feeling that tomorrow cannot possibly be as bad as the day you are putting behind you.

I'd opted for the bathroom floor for my meltdown, my tears pooling in the grooves of the colonial-style tiles as my mother tried to soothe me with Cabernet Sauvignon and promises of karma coming back around to give me everything I wanted. Joy and I rarely saw eye to eye. We had the rare talent of being able to make an argument out of anything, and I mean *anything*. We once didn't speak for two days because I insulted the blouse of a local newsreader who happened to be her favourite. But despite how little we got on, I knew that she was always great in a crisis. I had listened and cried and drunk and thought of all the hundreds of thousands of things that I could have (but hadn't) said to Daz in retaliation for his rudeness, before ending up falling asleep at around five o'clock in the morning; my drunken, stained lips still mumbling retorts into the darkness as I drifted off.

Daz had been the final straw in a month that I had hoped would be better than the last, but which had actually turned out to be worse. In the last thirty days, I had received three rejection letters for my novel, been thrust back into my overdraft whilst paying off the charges for being overdrawn the month before, been on two failed dates, had one screaming argument with my parents and broken my little toe. The month had been a shit show of dramatic proportions, but

Daz was the rancid glacé cherry atop the shit sundae that had been October.

I showered and washed the scent of Daz's knockoff Boss for Men out of my hair, but somehow, I couldn't get rid of the red wine stain on my swollen lip. I found the sienna-brown lipstick from the bottom of my bag and dragged it across my mouth, covering the stain and making it look like I cared enough about my appearance to have put on make-up.

I always had an image of what I looked like in my mind – an image that had passed through the Photoshop of my brain and which I'd fooled myself into thinking was true, yet the mirror never showed it to me. I'd always straddled the line between curvy and slim, with rounded hips, a small waist and a little pooch of stomach that sometimes made me look ever so slightly pregnant. I stared into the toothpaste-spattered mirror and took in the puffy skin that sat around my large green eyes and the tip of my ski-slope nose that refused to stop blazing red, no matter how much foundation I dabbed on to it. My hair lay in a tangle of russet curls, which should probably have been washed yesterday, reaching down to the small of my back. My hair had always been my defining feature but it seemed to be forever getting caught in display units and car doors.

I applied a third layer of concealer to my puffy purple eyes and pulled the collar of my cardigan tightly around my neck. I tugged tighter and tighter. At first trying to keep warm but somehow, for just a moment, I entertained the idea of pulling it so tightly that I strangled myself, thus ending the sad short life of Effie 'Meh' Heaton.

I let go of my collar and left for work, abandoning the fleeting idea of suicide on the bathroom floor.

* * *

The shop had the good sense to know when to keep quiet. It was almost as if my force field of ennui ran to just outside the door, not permitting anyone through. I knelt beside the bestseller shelves, pulling out the ones that people hadn't been able to get enough of last month and placing them into the bargain bin beside me. Arthur sat at the counter staring, almost manically, at his phone.

'What exactly are you waiting for it to do?' I asked without turning away from what I was doing.

'Nothing,' he replied too quickly.

'You sure? 'Cause you've been staring at it like that for twenty minutes now.'

'I'm just waiting for a call?'

'From who?'

'No one!' he snapped.

A moment later the screen blazed into life and the theme from *Doctor Who* played from the tinny speakers. Arthur leapt back like he'd just seen a viper; his mouth drawn open, a look of terror in his eyes.

'Well,' I prompted after hearing it ring for a full five seconds. 'Answer it then.'

He accepted the call and raised it to his ear. He took a deep breath before pulling his mouth into a smile and donning a laid-back tone. 'Hi, Toby. How's things?'

I couldn't help but smile as well as I finally understood Arthur's strange behaviour.

'I was just wondering,' he continued, clearing his throat a few more times than necessary, 'if you wouldn't mind popping by. I've buggered up on my tax return again and I need someone who knows what they're doing to take a look at it.' His fake smile turned into a real one when Toby accepted his invitation and when he hung up, his face was bright red with excitement.

‘Tax returns?’ I asked whilst trying to keep a straight face. Arthur’s smile dissipated as he tried to shrug his way out of the conversation. ‘Oh, shut up. I need him to check it for me.’

‘And this has nothing to do with the fact that you’re completely in love with him?’

Arthur’s face drew into an expression of outrage. ‘I am not in love with him, Effie. He is my accountant!’

‘Yes, and you’re in love with him.’

‘I most certainly am not.’ His face turned from pink to puce. ‘It would be completely inappropriate.’

I made my way over to the counter. ‘He’s an accountant, not a Montague. If you want to ask him out, then do it, Juliet. It’s been almost six years and this will-they-won’t-they thing that you’ve got going on is getting kinda old.’

Arthur sighed and placed his forehead on the counter. ‘But what if he says no?’

‘Oh please,’ I replied as the bell above the door jingled. ‘That awkward, specky man is just as much a fool for you as you are for him. Just shag and get it over with already.’

Arthur pressed his finger to his lips and shot me a warning glance before turning to the customer behind and asking if they needed any help.

‘Hi, I’m here to see Matilda.’ Something about his voice made me feel like I’d heard it before and when I turned, I saw that I had.

‘You!’ I exclaimed, stepping closer to the man who’d borne witness to my date from hell the night before. ‘The Eavesdropper.’

‘That is my formal title, yes. But I prefer to go by Theo.’ He smiled and it was one of those one-sided, dangerously alluring smiles that can lead a girl to make bad decisions.

‘Well, Theo, what are you doing here and how do you know my name?’ I crossed my arms and shot him a questioning scowl. The anger, born from my utter embarrassment, still burned brightly in my chest.

‘The waitress handed me this after you left. I guess she saw us talking and assumed we’d come in together.’ He held out his hand. My purse sat in his fingers and regret for my earlier moodiness changed my frown to an apologetic smile.

‘Oh my God. I didn’t even know I’d lost it. Thank you.’ I took the purse and opened it to check everything was still inside.

‘Don’t worry, I didn’t do anything with it, except buy that speedboat, of course, but I doubt you’ll miss seventy grand.’ He pushed his hands into his pockets in the same way that awkward teenagers do, although he was clearly not a teen, and flicked his floppy blond hair out of his face.

‘How did you know where I worked?’

‘Facebook,’ he said simply. ‘So, as a thank you for not stealing all of your money and returning your property to you, I was thinking that you could buy me a coffee.’

I raised an eyebrow and recrossed my arms, realising that my forgiveness had been a little premature. ‘Did you now?’

‘Yeah, well it would be rude of you to not give something in return for me being such a good Samaritan.’

I thought about it for a moment. There were positives to going out for coffee with an alluring and persistent stranger. He was hot, there was no denying that, and apart from being overly sarcastic and cocky, he seemed all right. But Daz had taken my last surviving molecule of confidence and crushed it under the sole of his Nike Airs and the idea of possibly facing humiliation again was enough to make up my mind.

‘You know I would, but I’m working and so I don’t think I’ll have time,’ I said in a transparently fake apologetic tone.

‘It’s fine. Take a break.’ Arthur’s voice came from behind me. I spun around and scowled at him. ‘Take as long as you need.’ He smirked and leaned back in his chair.

‘It’s settled then,’ Theo said, making for the door. ‘I’m thirsty, let’s go to the café in the park.’

I walked to the counter where Arthur was holding my jacket in his outstretched hand, a wicked smile on his lips. ‘I hate you so very much right now,’ I whisper-shouted.

‘Oh, just shag and get it over with,’ he replied mockingly.

With a sigh, I followed Theo out of the door for our impromptu coffee date and inside my brain, the *Countdown* theme began. It wouldn’t be long until I embarrassed myself and this handsome stranger saw what a complete loser he’d worked so hard to spend time with.

It took almost ten minutes before the dreaded question was asked: ‘What do you do for fun?’

My immediate answers were ‘Nothing’ and ‘What is this fun you speak of?’ But it was too early to let him know what a bore I really was.

‘You know. Stuff,’ I replied as we took a seat on a frigid stone bench.

‘How very in-depth.’ He smirked and took a sip of his decaf flat white.

‘What about you? What do you do?’

‘You know. Stuff,’ he replied, looking at me with a grin, his lips curling up and sending creases to the corners of his mouth. He had high, sculpted cheekbones and a roman nose that made him look like an artist had chiselled him out of marble. He was at least half a foot taller than me with wide shoulders that sat beneath a green cable-knit jumper and

denim jacket. 'You know, I can't help but feel like you're not the chatty type.'

'I'm not.'

'Well, I am.' He looked up at the sky and watched a flock of pigeons descend onto the square in front of us. 'You're an odd one.'

'That's the most accurate description of me I've ever heard,' I replied, the *Countdown* theme almost at the final *bong*.

'Odd and needlessly angry.'

'Oh, there's plenty of need for it. It fuels me.'

I shifted on the cold stone bench and bounced my knees to try and keep warm.

'Is this on my account or do you do this all the time?' He turned to me, placing one of his large hands on his knee; the trace of a smile just visible.

'Do I do what all the time?'

'Bombard others with hostility and take an instant dislike to people you know nothing about.'

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but I knew that what he'd said was true.

Hostility was my comfort zone.

'You can't just make me buy you coffee and then insult me,' I said, my voice thick with annoyance.

He rolled his eyes and turned back to the pigeons that were now pecking around on the ground in front of us. A male pigeon puffed out his chest and attempted to seduce one of the females; she was having none of it and I felt a strange kind of affinity with her.

'There was a time when a handsome stranger could notice a pretty girl and take her out for coffee and she wouldn't think that he had some sort of hidden agenda.'

'Ha! You see, that's where you've gone wrong.' I held up

a finger and looked into his eyes with lowered lids. 'I'm the one who took *you* out for coffee, so clearly the secret agenda is still in there.' I poked my finger into the centre of his chest, then realised that that was far too familiar and scooted away from him slightly.

'We *do* live in the age of equality; if you want to pay for coffee I'm not going to stop you.' He swigged at his drink. The ever-present gleam of mischief that glinted in his eyes was somewhat irksome.

'Which is the real you?' he asked, his tone suddenly serious.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, the person you are being now isn't the same as the one who went out for a date with that *Love Island* contestant last night. If this version of you had been in that booth, then I'd have been surprised if Daz had left alive. But instead you just let him put you down. Why did you do that?'

I scowled at him. Who the hell was this person? I hadn't known him for more than half an hour and he'd already asked me more in-depth questions than my mother had in twenty-eight years.

I stood up, my body zinging with an amalgamation of fury and discomfort.

'Well, as lovely as this has been, I'm going to go now.' I thought about tossing my cup into the bin beside me but it was still half full and I didn't want to waste what little money I had.

'Hey, wait a minute.' He stood, holding his hands up in front of him in surrender. 'I didn't mean to upset you. I wasn't being cruel; I just wanted to know the answer. Sometimes I do this thing where I just say what I think without it going through the filter of social acceptability.'

Snap.

'I'm going,' I said, stepping away from him in the direction of the shop.

'Before you go, can I just ask you one more question?' He stepped in front of me, blocking my path and causing me to bump into him.

I groaned loudly and looked up into his face. I tried to ignore how amazing he smelled and kept my grimace intact. I shrugged dramatically and he carried on.

'Why is it that you happily went along to that date last night with someone terrible, but you won't give me the time of day? Are you one of these girls who date douchebags because they think they don't deserve better, or do you just not like me?'

My shoulders slumped as my bravado abandoned me and I sat back down on the frigid bench without uttering another word. How was it that he had me pegged already? Was I that transparent?

'It can't be because of how I look – you called me handsome.'

'*You* called yourself handsome; I had nothing to do with it.'

'Ah! But you didn't disagree.' His smile was almost a super-power, the way it ignited his face and caused something to twist inside me in return.

'Look,' I sighed, my anger now reducing to a worn-down feeling of general shittiness, 'you seem like an okay guy and you're . . . not awful in the face department, or the shoulder department for that matter. If last night's date hadn't happened, then I might be more into this, but it did and I don't think I can handle another disaster right now.'

'What makes you think that I'd be a disaster?' he asked with a frown.

I looked him up and down – and from his eyes, the colour of the ocean during a storm, to his lips that always seemed to be teasing a smile even when he was trying to be serious, all the way down to his feet that absentmindedly tapped out a rhythm on the path beneath them, there was no question that this boy would spell disaster.

‘Why are you trying so hard? I’m not a nice person, I’m not much to look at and someone like you could walk twenty paces in any direction and find himself a date.’ I slumped forward into my lap and rubbed my forehead with cold fingers. Something about talking to him had made me feel like crap.

‘Just . . . because,’ he replied simply. ‘Hand me your phone.’ I took it from my pocket without question and handed it to him. He frowned at the state of it before he tapped in his number and saved it into my contacts. ‘The power is with you now. Sleep on it and see what you think tomorrow.’

He placed the phone back in my hand, his skin brushing my palm. He didn’t notice, but I felt it all the way down to my toes.

‘Hopefully I’ll hear from you soon, Matilda.’

‘Actually, I go by my middle name: Effie.’

‘Well, Effie, I hope I hear from you all the same.’

I returned to the shop with an overwhelming sense of relief.

All I had to do was not call him and I’d never have to see him again.

Toby was sitting on the century-old leather sofa by the window with a sea of papers spread out over the coffee table in front of him. Toby was a gangly Scotsman, with once dark brown hair that was now streaked with shades of white

and grey. He always wore sharp suits, colourful ties and those shiny red winkle-pickers that I'd once made fun of, but now found to be a brave fashion choice.

Arthur sat beside him in an unnatural position, his legs crossed and his whole body leaning Toby's way. I greeted Toby cheerily before directing my angst at Arthur.

'You're welcome,' Arthur said after I turned to him; my hand resting on my jutting out hip.

'Yes, thank you for sending me out on a coffee date with someone who could have been a stalker,' I replied.

'A date? Do tell.' Toby placed down his fountain pen and awaited my story with gleaming dark brown eyes that sat behind his square-rimmed glasses.

I threw up my hands and sat down on the floor opposite them.

'There's not a lot *to* tell.' I told him about Daz and Theo The Eavesdropper.

'Well, it seems to me that you've got yourself a real admirer.' Toby pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his aquiline nose. 'He went to the trouble of finding out who you were and where you worked. Is he nice? Good-looking?'

'He's . . .' I paused and thought of those cheekbones that you could shave Parmesan on and suddenly I lost my train of thought.

'I'll take that as a yes.' Toby chuckled. 'Effie, life is short. You could get run over by a taxi or hit your head on the kitchen counter and you'd be dead. You're alive now, so when a handsome lad comes along and wants to take you out, let him. You can always decide against him later.' He leaned back and looked at an oblivious Arthur from beneath his lashes. 'Life's too short to let matters of the heart slip by.'

* * *

I sat at the kitchen table with a freshly opened bottle of wine and a bowl of pasta steaming the glass that sat beside it.

I know you're thinking it so I might as well address the Shiraz-shaped elephant in the room. I drink too much – that is not news to me.

Am I an alcoholic? No.

Am I an alcoholic in denial? Absolutely not!

But wasn't there that study once that said that drinking red wine could lower your risk of having a heart attack? I never paid much attention to those kinds of studies anyway. One week they'd be telling you that oolong tea could increase your life expectancy by twenty years and the next week they'd come forward with a discovery that drinking too much of it made your nipples fall off.

I looked around at the dark room, lit only by a dull standard lamp in the far corner. There was a small cupboard next to the lamp that acted as a museum of my failures. Inside the cupboard sat my crumpled and torn graduation certificate that Joy had confiscated from me after I'd tried to rip it in half and set it on fire one night after a little too much Black Tower. In the top drawer were the remaining thousand or so pairs of handmade earrings from when I got it into my head to open an Etsy shop, and hanging above the cupboard on its sad little hook was the lead that I had used during my brief period as a dog walker.

I had enjoyed being a dog walker. I loved animals and the job required absolutely zero contact with other people. But the money had been a pile of crap and I'd had to stop after Gumbo, a long-haired chihuahua, managed to get loose and remained lost for a further six hours. His owner had threatened to take me to court and so I'd decided to cut my losses and end that business venture then and there.

I heard the front door open and flinched.

They were home.

I braced myself for the worried glance at the bottle that sat already two glasses less than full in front of me.

My mother and father entered carrying armfuls of shopping bags, flicking the overhead light on as they arrived and making me temporarily blind.

‘Wine already and it’s not even six,’ Joy said as she dropped the bags onto the work surface. I blinked the stunned tears from my eyes but didn’t bother with a snarky reply, even though there was a queue of them lining up in my head.

My dad mumbled something in his indecipherable northern accent. I just ignored him and carried on sipping my wine and letting my food turn cold.

‘Effie, do you remember Marcus Roe from school?’ Mum asked with a grin that suggested she’d been meddling.

‘No,’ I lied. A shiver of embarrassment shook me as I remembered the last time I’d seen him. Of course I remembered Marcus Roe. I’d been at school with him since I was seven and he’d been the first person I’d ever slept with. He was always drop-dead gorgeous and the night we’d spent together had been okay, up until . . . well, let’s just not get into that right now.

‘Well, I met his mother in the Aldi just now,’ she carried on, clearly ignoring the tone of my voice that was urging her to forget Marcus Roe. ‘Did you know he’s working for the BBC? He’s a casting director for all those period dramas.’

‘Is that so?’ I asked in a monotone drone. I *did* know this. I’d seen it on Facebook along with all the other people whose lives were actually going somewhere.

‘He’s coming home for a few weeks while they renovate his apartment,’ she prattled on. I knew what was coming.

She was no Paddy McGuinness but I knew that a date was coming all the same. Let the *daughter* see the *blatantly set-up date*. ‘Kelly and I thought that the two of you should maybe meet up and have a chat. He’s single, you know.’

‘He’s not? What a shock!’ The sarcasm almost choked me.

She sighed and pushed a box of cereal into the cupboard. ‘Effie, you’re never going to meet anyone if the only thing you do is sit at home and drink like one of those French bohemians.’

I lifted the glass and took two large gulps, maintaining eye contact with her over the rim. She huffed and went back to unpacking.

‘His number is on the fridge. You should call him, when you stop being so judgemental.’

I wasn’t being judgemental and I was most certainly not going to call him.