

THE LUCKY SPIN

JUST MY



LUCK



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Chapter 1

GENNA

My ears are taking a bashing, and I have to admit, I'm having a hard time concentrating on driving. But you know what? Rosie is having a ball, wiggling around in the back seat with her glasses sliding down her nose and her blond hair falling across her face. Singing along to Liberty X's "Sexy." You've got to see it to believe it. Trust me. Abi's next to me, grinning. It's that gorgeous grin that puts a dimple in her right cheek. The one that makes me want to touch it. *No. Not going there today.* I shake my head and focus on the road before I have a bloody accident. Not what I need right now. Not that there's ever a good time for an accident, but when you're driving your girlfriend's car, also known as "her first love", while she's in bed after working yet another bloody night shift and you're on a day trip out to the safari park, it's really not a good time.

"So what was Ruth's excuse this time?" Abi asks.

I shift in my seat. I hate it when I have to explain why Ruth, my girlfriend, doesn't want to spend time with Abi and Rosie. Who are Abi and Rosie and why doesn't she want to spend time with them, I hear you ask? Well... I'll come to that shortly. "She was working again last night."

"More overtime?"

"Yeah."

Abi lifts her eyebrow. “The NHS must be even more understaffed than I realised. She hasn’t had a night off in months. That’s got to be against the Geneva Convention.”

“Ha ha.”

“I’m serious.”

“She loves being a nurse. She takes her responsibilities seriously. That’s all.”

“But not her responsibility to you?”

“She isn’t responsible for me.”

“I know she isn’t. I said *to you*.” She turns in her seat so that she can look at me while I’m driving. Normally, I love that. Right now, though, it makes me feel like an ant under a magnifying glass. “Everything all right?”

Nope. My girlfriend hasn’t wanted to make love to me so far this year, and now it’s October. I think she works every night to avoid me, and I’m not all that bothered because I’m actually in love with someone else and always have been.

“Yeah, everything’s fine, thanks.” I smile at her. I hope it’s one of those genuine ones. You know, the kind of smile that someone trusts and that makes them believe the fib you just told them. Abi doesn’t smile back at me. Fail. “What about you? How’s everything going?” When in doubt, deflect.

Abi sighs and shakes her head, but at least she starts to talk about other things. “I’ll tell you about w-a-n-k-s-t-a-i-n later.”

Wankstain, aka Rosie’s teacher, aka Mr Prentice, is a real smear on the education system. He has no time for anything that means he has to do some actual graft with actual kids. And with kids like Rosie, it’s even worse. Because Rosie is a lot of effort. I love her to death, but she’s hard work. Sweet, loving,

kind, generous, but hard work. Rosie has Down Syndrome, and everybody and their dog have been trying to get her into a special school for the past three years. But there's a problem. She's high functioning. She can tie her own shoes—well, she can with the velcro ones—she can spell her name, and she can go to the toilet. At eight, that's high functioning. Too high functioning to warrant a huge amount of money from the welfare system to fund her going to a special school with kids who need a lot more help with the basics than Rosie does. I get that. I understand that there are those with greater needs. And there's no way Abi can afford to send her to one. The costs really are astronomical.

But I know Rosie. And she needs more than a normal state school can provide. Even if she did have a better teacher than Wankstain. She needs one-to-one help in the classroom because she's vulnerable and easily manipulated by the other kids. Instead, there's a teaching assistant that helps four of them at the same time. Two kids with ADHD, one with autism, and Rosie. It's not the teaching assistant's fault, but she can't cope with all that. No one could. The ADHD kids take delight in winding up Adam—autism kid—and then rolling around in fits of giggles while he starts ripping the room apart and Rosie's left to her own devices. Last time I saw them, Abi told me that one time, Rosie ended up wandering out of the classroom to go to the toilet and the bell went, and she ended up locked in. Rosie was in there for over half an hour while Abi was tearing her hair out, ready to call the police because she thought Rosie had been kidnapped.

Yeah, I know. It's a shit school, but what can you do? You get what you get in this life, right?

“Okay. Anything else interesting going on?” I ask.

Abi shakes her head.

“Any job possibilities?”

She looks out the window. “No.”

Abi used to be a social worker but resigned when Rosie was born. Single mum, special needs baby—she just couldn’t make it work. But now that Rosie’s back in school, Abi’s trying to find something. Maybe just part time, you know? To help make ends meet. I don’t know how she’s done it all these years. I know Rosie’s dad hasn’t helped at all. He can’t. He’s a doley himself. Sorry, a doley’s what I call a lazy, good-for-nothing who never gets off his backside to earn an honest wage. He just draws it from the dole, the benefit system, aka my bloody tax pounds at work. Hasn’t got two pennies to rub together... Well, he has, but they both get spent in the pub.

I shouldn’t think of him like that, really. He is my uncle after all. But he’s a proper prat. I know what you’re thinking now: that makes Abi my aunt and me a disloyal cow, right? And I’ve got to admit, I did have a bit of a problem with this when I first realised that I had a crush on her way back when, at the dawn of time, like, six years ago or something. But think about it like this: Abi and Uncle Kevin had a one-night stand—beer goggle induced, I’m sure—and she got pregnant with Rosie. They never had a relationship, they didn’t get married, and she can’t stand him.

If I had to apply that criteria to every woman who’s had contact with my uncle, well, I’d have to call every woman in the north-west of England “aunt.” I mean about the no relationship, no wedding, and can’t stand him bits. I seriously doubt he’s slept with half of Greater Manchester, despite what he says, or that he’s got seven kids to seven different women.

Still think I'm a disloyal cow for telling you he's a prat? I'm mean, you'd think you'd learn to bag it after one unwanted kid, but not my genius Uncle Kev. So, as far as I'm concerned, it takes more than a one-night stand to make an aunt. Rosie is my cousin, there's a DNA link. My sperm donor—don't get me started on my own dad—and her dad are brothers. Genetic link. Abi is not my biological aunt. We're clear on that, right? Good. So don't look at me funny when I tell you I've been in love with her since I realised I liked girls, or rather women, instead of lads.

Do you think girlfriends can sense it when you've got feelings for someone else? Do you think this is why Ruth's so distant and doesn't want to make love with me? I mean, I care about her. I really do. We've been together for three years, lived together for two. We've built a life together. I think, in my own way, I do love her. It's not that kind of passionate, all-consuming, sexy kind of love that you read about in books or see in films, though. It's that kind of comfortable, know-what-you're-getting kind of love. Like a comfy pair of slippers. It's more real. I mean, real people don't go round ripping each other's clothes off every couple of minutes, do they? They don't have that burning passion to be with each other every minute of every day. That's just make-believe, right? A fairytale.

We live in a terraced house in Edgeley. Just one in a row of terraced houses with inadequate parking, narrow streets, and too many kids sitting on garden walls that aren't theirs, drinking cheap bottles of cider, and smoking stolen cigarettes. It's not the greatest place in the world. But it's home and it's ours. Ruth's a nurse in the Accident and Emergency department at Stepping

Hill Hospital. I can hear you thinking: *What does she look like?* Well, she's got dark hair, short with messy spikes on top, and really dark brown eyes, like Green & Black's dark chocolate. Five-foot-eight, skinny as a whip. She says it's from running around like an idiot at work. She's thirty-five and sexy as hell.

"Anyway, I want to talk about happy stuff. This is your birthday trip, after all," Abi says. Rosie starts singing "Happy Birthday" and giggles.

I shrug. "Okay, what do you want to talk about?"

"I think, as you're the birthday girl, you get to decide."

"Anything." *As long as I'm with you, I don't care.* "I really don't mind."

Abi sighs. "Fine, what do you have planned for tonight? Are you and Ruth going out on the town?"

I shake my head. "She's working again. She couldn't get cover for her shift."

"But it's your birthday."

"Doesn't matter."

"Of course it does. She should be with you tonight."

"I'm twenty-four, Abi, not four. Her job is important. People rely on her. We'll do something next time she's off."

"Did she even remember it's your birthday?"

Probably not. "I'm sure she will have. She was already asleep when I woke up this morning, and I didn't want to wake her up. Anyway, enough dissecting of my relationship. What about you? Anyone look promising?"

In all the time I've known her, I've never known her to have a relationship with anyone. She always says she's too busy with Rosie and happy enough as things are.

She laughed at me. “Don’t be silly. I’ve told you, I’m happy as things are. I’ve got Rosie, I’ve got a ton of good friends,” she says, and smiles at me. “I’ve got you. What more do I need?”

When she says things like that, it makes my belly go all funny. Sort of warm and, I don’t know, squishy. I know that sounds weird, doesn’t it? But that’s the only thing that fits close. Squishy. I just wish she meant what she said the way I want her to. I wish I made her feel squishy too. *Stop it, Genna. Get a grip. That’s not how it is. Never has been, never will be. The sooner you get over this, the better.*

“What about Claire? Are you going out with her instead?”

“No.”

Claire’s my best mate. Well, she was my best friend. Then six months ago, she started to drop hints that I should break up with Ruth. She might be right, but she wouldn’t specify why she thought it was the right time. She just said that it was apparently clear I don’t love Ruth and that I should just get out. I do love Ruth. Anyway, when I told her to keep her nose out, she took it literally, and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since. Six months. So much for best friends.

“She still not been in touch?” Abi asks.

“No.”

“So why don’t you call her?”

“Why should I? I wasn’t the one in the wrong.”

“No, but sometimes you have to bite the bullet and make the first move regardless. Or you’ll miss out on something that you’ll regret in the end.”

“Mum, there’s an efilump and a grafe.” Rosie leans as far forward in her seat as she can and points between us to the huge sign for Knowsley Safari Park.

“Elephant and giraffe, sweetie,” Abi corrects.

“S’what I said.”

I chuckle. “Are you ready to go and join the monkeys?”

“You mean see ’em?”

I pull off the motorway and follow the sign posts all the way to the gate. “Maybe,” I say and pull up at the ticket window. “Or maybe I’ll decide to leave you with them all.”

Rosie squeals. “No, no, no. Mum, don’t let her.”

“Two adults and one monkey, please,” I say to the teenaged girl at the ticket window.

“What kind of monkey?” the girl asks. Obviously I’m not the first to make this joke. Her response was far too smooth.

“A stinky baboon,” I say, playing along.

“Right, I see. Well, they cost extra. The stronger the smell, the more they cost. We have to fumigate after they’ve been round or it upsets the warthogs.” She hands me tickets after I pick up my jaw and pay the standard child and adult fees. Extortion at half the price.

“Where to first, baboon?”

Rosie giggles. “Monkey pen.”

“See? I knew you needed to see your relatives.”

“They’re your relatives too,” she shouts indignantly. Abi snorts a little laugh.

I think about our mutual family. She’s got a point. “Monkey pen it is.”

Knowsley Safari Park is well signposted, fairly logically set out, and busy as hell. Especially on the weekend, which it is, and during the half-term holidays, which it also is. So it’s doubly hellacious driving around, bumper to bumper, with a very excited

Rosie shouting at each and every tiny thing she sees. I love it. I always love it when she has a blast. It's like seeing the world over again. Colours are brighter when she tells you she sees them, rain's wetter, and everything's just...better. She just lives totally in the moment. Loving every second. No wallowing in self-pity or grumpy moods, no fear of the future. Everything just is. She's like an antidepressant with legs.

"Genna, that lion's got hair like yours," she shouts, pointing out of the window. The lion in question has a spectacular mane of red hair, no doubt tangled and knotted and sticking up like a bad back-comb job from the eighties.

Abi sniggers.

"The colour, right?" I ask.

"Uh-huh." She plunges her fingers into my hair and pulls it out to the sides. "And how long it is." She giggles when her hand hits the window before she can pull it all out straight. "Mum, can I have hair like Genna's when I grow up?"

"I thought you liked your blond hair. That's what you said this morning."

"Oh yeah." She lets go of my hair. "Like Mummy's. I remember." She scratches her head. "Maybe instead I could have some like yours and some like Genna's. Then it's like both of you."

Abi shakes her head. "We'll see."

There's really no point agreeing or disagreeing. She'll have changed her mind by breakfast tomorrow, unless you make a big deal out of it. Then it sticks. You're wondering what Abi looks like, aren't you? I can hear your mind ticking. Okay, let's see if I can do her justice. I'm going into Sophia-from-*The Golden Girls*

mode. Picture this: It's 2016, we're sitting in a car, driving—and I use the term loosely—around the safari park. Blond hair, brown eyes, full lips that are just made for smiling, or kissing, and I already mentioned the dimple in her right cheek. Her hair is long, but she's got it piled up under a hat today. One of those fedora ones that have made a fashion comeback. Not that that's why Abi wears it. She's been wearing it for years because she likes it. And fuck me, does it make her look hot. It's kinda low at the front, and she's got this habit of looking at me from under the brim and quirking just one corner of her mouth in a little half smile. Holy shit, but that look could chase the Pope out of his cassock. Me? It just makes me slide off my bloody chair. Sexy minx.

Abi had packed a picnic: cans of pop, bags of crisps, a bar of chocolate, and sandwiches for us all. Ham and coleslaw for us, peanut butter and sliced grapes for Rosie—don't ask. We munch on it all as we make our way slowly around the park from one animal enclosure to another. The animals are all doing animal things, which includes poo fights, normal fights, and, as Abi calls them, man-and-lady fights. She came up with this when Rosie once pointed out a couple of monkeys having a jolly good time, rutting away. Little exhibitionists.

I don't want to take them home at the end of the afternoon, but I know Ruth will need the car to go to work, so I drop them both at their door, wave until they're inside, and then go home.

Ruth is waiting in the doorway, watching for me. It's half past five, I know because I check the clock on the dashboard. She doesn't start her shift until nine.

I smile when I get out of the car and walk up the garden path. "Hiya. How was your day?" I ask and lean in to give her a kiss.

She grasps the key from my hand and turns her head so I catch her cheek. Just. I almost end up with nothing but hair. “I’m starting early. We’re short-staffed again. I told them I’d be there by six.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Bye.”

Then she’s gone. Sixteen words. And not a one of them “happy” or “birthday.” The inside of the house is dark. She’d turned out all the lights behind her, she hadn’t thought to leave one on for me.

“Happy birthday, Genna,” I say and go straight up the stairs to bed.

Chapter 2

ABI

“Which box, Rosie?”

“Dave,” she says from the table without even looking up from her colouring book.

“Dave it is.” Two sandwiches, no crusts, cut into triangles, not squares, wrapped in cling film, not foil, made of peanut butter, smooth not crunchy, and slices of green grapes, not red, and placed, not dumped, into the lunch box known as Dave. Dave is a Minion-decorated lunch box, with two goggly eyes and a centre parting. At least it isn’t crisp sandwiches for every meal. This way, she’s getting some nutrients. Sliced grapes are still grapes at the end of the day.

“Turn’t up.”

“Excuse me?”

“Music. Turn’t up, please.”

I reach over and turn up the volume. Rosie does love music. Though I sometimes despair at her choices, today’s pick is a good one. The Buzzcocks’ “Ever Fallen in Love With Someone (You Shouldn’t Have Fallen In Love With)”. From the mouths of babes, huh?

“Couldn’t have put it better myself, pal.” I put an apple, red not green, into Rosie’s box with a box of raisins and a carton of orange juice with no bits in and close the lid. “Right, Mrs, last colour and bed. You’ve got school in the morning.”

“Aw, but I need to finish this to says thank you to Genna.”

“Say not ‘says’. And you can finish it tomorrow.” I’m smiling, I can feel it. My cheeks are pulled tight, and my vision’s gone a bit, well, sort of wonky. You know, when your eyes scrunch up a bit. I can’t help it. I smile whenever I think about Genna. That whole fallen in love with someone you shouldn’t shit. Why shouldn’t I? Well, there are many reasons, really. One, she’s living with someone else. Two, she’s fourteen years younger than I am and I’ve known her since she was sixteen. That took me a while to get my head around. And there’s no need to look at me like that. I didn’t fancy her when she was sixteen. That’s a bit gross.

What I mean is, it took me bloody ages to realise what it was that I was feeling for her, because it was like getting to know a different person. Grownup Genna as opposed to teenage Genna. They’re really very different people. Actually, maybe not that different, but I only knew a very small part of teenage Genna. You know how secretive girls can be at that age. So it was like I knew one side of her, and then when she grew up, I saw this whole other side, and she wasn’t kid Genna anymore. Anyway, it wasn’t until I saw her with Bitch Face, also known as Ruth, that I saw her in a different way. I saw them kiss. And then I really saw Genna. As a woman, not just the kid that babysat for me. And you know what? I’ve never, and I do mean never, felt so jealous in my life.

Christ, I’m waffling. Where was I up to? Oh yeah, three, she’s my daughter’s cousin, and that took me a while to get my head around too. Again, it’s that whole seeing someone you know in a different light thing, but it takes a while to adjust. Seeing her as someone other than just Rosie’s cousin, even though I never

considered her my niece, took a while. Do you know what I mean?

Four, I come with some baggage. It's gorgeous baggage. Almost four feet of blond-haired, blue-eyed baggage, to be exact, and I wouldn't have it any other way. But Rosie isn't like most other kids. She won't grow up and find her own way and eventually move out like most kids. Truth is she'll probably always live with me. And I love that as much as it scares the shit out of me. I mean, while I'm here and she's with me, I can look after her, protect her, you know? Because there are a lot of arseholes out there who look at her like she's subhuman as it is, and she's just a little kid now. It makes my blood boil. I could swing for them, I really could, and I don't consider myself a violent person.

Her teacher's one of the worst. I swear if I could get him sacked, I would. Wankstain really is too kind a nickname for him. Rosie has a lower IQ than other kids her age, but for a Down's kid, she's actually doing really, really well. And that's not just a protective mother talking. She really is. But he treats her like she's a stupid child, and that has an effect on her self-esteem. When she starts to believe she can't do something, that's when she gives up on it. And it's not necessarily true. It just takes her longer to learn it than most kids her age.

Okay, climbing off my soapbox now, but you get the idea? It isn't just about me. Actually, my life seems to be entirely about Rosie now. That's the choice you make when you decide to have a child, right? For the rest of your life, that child comes first. Their well-being, happiness, and health, they are your main concerns. So, baggage. Genna's twenty-four, she doesn't need the kind of

future I have ahead of me. No one does. It doesn't make me an attractive dating proposition.

Then we have the biggest of them all, number five: she's not interested in me that way. She's in love with bloody Ruth. And that wench does not deserve her. I'd bet my last bloody pound she doesn't remember that today's Genna's birthday. Working every bloody night... Genna might be young enough, naive enough, nice enough to fall for that load of shit, but I'm not. I can tell Genna isn't happy. She thinks she's hiding it, but she's not. Not from me. I can see it in her eyes every time I ask about her. She could do so much better. She's lovely. She really is. I know she's all down about her looks. Always has been, for no good reason. She's got these gorgeous eyes. Hazel green, with these flecks around her iris that look like gold, and gorgeous, long red hair. And those freckles. God, I'd love to kiss every single one of them. But Ruth doesn't pay her the slightest bit of attention. I can tell. Okay, time to stop this.

"Come on, I've got mummy stuff to do now."

"Likes what?"

"Like ironing."

"Borings."

"Exactly. So to bed, or I'll make you do it."

Her eyes go all wide and round, like she's trying to match the frames of her little glasses, she puts the top on her felt tip, and she scampers from the table. The quick kiss I'm offered hits the outside of my thigh, and she's up the stairs before I've finished putting the colouring pen into her pencil case for her.

"Don't forget to brush your teeth." I smile when I hear her stop halfway across the landing, turn back, and pull the string

to turn on the light in the bathroom. Then I fight the pang that hits me at random moments. It's a pang I don't think I'll ever get rid of, but it's one I've learnt to live with. It's the pang that hits when I think about the future. The one where it hits me that Rosie isn't a "normal" kid, whatever the hell that is. She has Down Syndrome. Faulty genes. Bad genes. I know intellectually that Down's is as much a roll of the dice as many other genetic disorders, but her father has six other children and not one of them has anything wrong with them. Well, nothing genetic, anyway. So why my daughter?

Like I said, intellectually, I can say it isn't my fault. In my heart, I can't believe that. Well, I suppose sometimes I do. But mostly not. I mean, come on, who else does she get genetic material from? It's that pang. It strikes when I least expect it, and leaves me feeling raw. And protective. Oh God, so protective. I know every mother feels protective of their child, it's the instinct, right? Maternal instinct. But add guilt to that instinct, and I'm an intensely protective mama bear. No one will hurt my baby. Not in any way, shape, or form. So, you see, the pang's awful. It's too big a feeling to narrow down more than that. It's just awful.

I check the clock. Seven twenty. Forty minutes to get her settled and asleep before I have to log on and work for four hours. Yay. Not.

Twenty minutes later she's snoring lightly. The weird orange glow from her Minion eyeball nightlight on the stairs gives me the creeps, but apparently it keeps monsters away, so I have to live with it. I cracked up when she told me, "These are the sac'ifices we all have to make for the great good."

So I have two choices. Cup of tea and a biscuit before I log on, or a glass of wine and a bar of chocolate. Oh, who am I kidding? I grab the wine, glass, and chocolate, then collapse on the sofa. I kick off my shoes and wriggle my toes against the carpet. Bliss. The wine's red, shiraz, I think, and it's mellow and fruity and heady and boozy and all that crap they talk about on the telly when they try to describe a taste. It's bloody alcohol, it tastes good, and it gets you drunk. There, end of. The chocolate is sweet, chocolatey, and...stuff. You can tell I make my living as a reviewer of fine cuisine, right? Not. I bloody wish. Another quick look at the clock. Still got ten minutes. Another good swig, trust me it helps with this job, and I pick up my phone to dial in.

The first one of the night's always the worst. I think it's that break between my real life and the one I pretend to have for the person on the other end of the phone that hurts. It's not so bad on the rare occasion when I get a female caller. I pretend I'm talking to Genna. But those are by far the minority, not the majority. I punch in my activation code, then hang up and put the phone on the table. All I have to do now is wait. It won't take long. It never does.

Twenty seconds. That's all it takes for the handset to start ringing. I swallow another mouthful of wine and press the button.

"Hi there, I'm Coco. What shall I call you?"

"Erm, Gary."

Gerodie accent, fairly thick. Let's hope I can understand it once the panting starts. "Gary it is. And what've you been up to this evening?"

"Erm, I went to the pub with the lads. For a pint, like."

"I see. And are you home now?"

“Christ, no. If me bird knew I was calling one of these things, she’d rip me knackers off.”

Wonderful. “I see. So you’re looking for a little, ahem, relief before you get home?”

“Huh, what? I’ve got a lob on from looking at the barmaids’ tits all night. If I go home like this, she’ll think I fancy someone else and cut it off.”

I can hear voices in the background, raucous, rowdy, lewd.

“What’re you wearing, pet?”

And now he’s taking instructions. Deep breaths, Abi. Just a few words and he’ll be gone. I look at my jeans and the baggy grey sweatshirt I’m wearing. Vamp time. “Not a lot, big boy. Just a bra, a thong, and a pair of stilettos.”

I hear a zipper opening and the panting begins.

“Nice. Have ya’ got big tits, pet?”

Not particularly. “Uh-huh. I’ve got this thirty-four double-D bra on, but they’re sorta spilling out over the top.”

“Christ. Are ya’ nipples hard?”

“Like little stones just from talking to you.”

I pour myself another glass of wine. Old Gazza won’t take long, just enough time for the wine to breathe.

The things I have to do to pay the bills.

Chapter 3

GENNA

Have you ever noticed how slowly time goes when you're dying for it to speed up? The seconds feel like minutes. Minutes like hours, and every hour feels like a whole day. Well, today is one of those days. I get into work, in the administration office of a haulage company, late. Thank you very much, Greater Manchester buses. When I do get there, I find that my chronically late boss was punctual for the first time since I started working here three years, three hundred and sixty days, one hour, and twenty-seven—no, make that twenty-eight—minutes ago. Would he accept that I got on the same bus today that I get on every day?

Not a chance. Apparently, I'm lazy, I need to get me fat arse in gear, I'm stealing money from the company, and I need to think about my colleagues and how I'm taking advantage of them. Oh, and I'm good for nothing too. Um, hello, pot, this is kettle, do you know you're black?

"Genna!"

I know I'm rolling my eyes as I turn around in my chair. I know it, and I still can't stop it. "Yes, Dave?"

That's the boss. David Sullivan. Fondly known around the office as "Prick." I'll try to describe him for you. In the words of my favourite Golden Girl...picture this. He's six-foot-tall, has broad shoulders, dark hair, and kind of grey eyes. Not bad

looking, I hear you say. Now let's complete the picture. Do you remember those bad late eighties, early nineties hairdos called "curtains"? Jason Donovan and Hugh Grant were big supporters. You got it? Well, stick one of those on him, but greasy. Really, really greasy, like he's washed his hair in olive oil. Spread his nose halfway across his face, and picture really, really skinny lips. His head sits directly on top of those broad shoulders, and underneath them are the growing sweat stains justifiable of a man running a marathon—through the Sahara Desert. May I take this opportunity to remind you that this is late October? In Manchester. The rest of us have broken out the hats, gloves, and scarves to fight off the frostbite. Oh, and did I mention the beer gut overhanging the ill-fitting trousers and that the buttons on his poor, tortured shirt look as if they are about to revolt and flee for their lives? *Please, please, please, take my eyes with you!*

"Are you listening to me?" David asks.

"Absolutely, boss." Blatant lie.

"Then get it sorted."

I briefly consider asking him to repeat himself as he lumbers back towards the door. I decide better of it and look across the room to Cathy, knowing that she has not only been watching but listening too. Bless her.

"Did you listen?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Why would I do a thing like that?"

Cathy is about fifty years old. She's never actually told me how old she is, says it will ruin her mystique. So, fiftyish is my best guess. She's mumsy. I know that's a crap way to describe someone, but she really is. Kind of cuddly, with hair that's more grey than brown, and I think she wears curlers and a hairnet to

bed. That kind of mumsy. She has small half-moon glasses on the end of her nose, a dark brown skirt, a white blouse, and a brown-and-cream cardigan. A really thick, knitted cardigan. The kind you want to curl up with in front of the fire, with a big mug of hot chocolate, a blanket wrapped around your legs, and a proper girl's film on the telly. Like *Titanic* or *Bridget Jones' Diary* or *Beaches*. You know the ones that make you laugh, cry, and thank God that your life's not like that.

She kind of reminds me of my gran—not my mum. My mum is not mumsy in any way, she's more...willowy and elegant and a bit bony, if truth be told. Not the cuddly kind of mumsy mum. It's probably why I like Cathy so much. She lives with two border collies now after she lost her husband a couple of years ago.

“Well, technically he is the boss.”

“Yes, and technically he has an IQ higher than a plant. Have you seen any evidence to prove it?”

She cocks her head to the right. Clearly she's thinking about it. “No.”

“Exactly. So what was his problem, anyway?”

“He thinks the delivery van has ‘lost’ some of the stuff that was meant to be on it.”

I love it when people put words in apostrophes with their fingers. Love it. “So he wants me to go out in the freezing cold to check the invoice for him?”

“Basically? Yes.”

“Oh goody.”

Now don't get me wrong, I know it's part of my job to check these things. I am the logistics officer at a warehouse, after all.

So it's my job and I don't mind that. I really don't. However, today it is two degrees centigrade outside, and there is frost and ice all over the place. You can see your breath, and I have on dress trousers and shoes because I have to attend meetings this afternoon. So I'm not exactly kitted up for the outdoors. I know I'm whining. But damn it, I hate the cold.

"I'll have a brew ready for when you get back, love. That'll warm you back up."

"Thanks, Cathy. Can I borrow your cardie too?"

"Bugger off."

I knew that was coming. I grab my coat and head out into the cold. The lads working on the warehouse floor are all pretty good boys. I know a few of them from school and a couple of others from a program I volunteer with. I work with an adult literacy program two nights a week, helping people who have severe dyslexia and left school unable to read. So far, two of my graduates have been working here for over a year, and another has just started with me. As soon as I round the corner, I can see what the problem is.

"Liam, how come you're checking the invoice?"

He holds up his right hand and waves it in front of me. A grubby-looking bandage covers it. Liam is my current literacy student. He's making steady progress, but he is still only a few weeks into the program.

"I sprained my wrist this morning, so I can't drag the pallet fork. Soapy said he'd swap with me—"

"Is there not another job you can do?"

"Not really. And I don't want to go home. You know Dave won't pay me if I do, and I need the money, Genna."

"I know, kiddo." Liam's sixteen, and his girlfriend's eight months pregnant. They're trying to get enough money together to get out of his mum's flat where they're currently sleeping on the couch together. His girlfriend and his mum get on about as well as oil and water. Combine that with Liam's five younger sisters, aging between eighteen months and twelve years, and it doesn't bode too well for the future.

"I was doing all right, just a bit slow. Some of this writing's like, I dunno, it's tiny. Look."

"Yeah, it's pretty bad." In truth it really isn't, but why kick the kid when he's already feeling bad about himself? "Well, since I'm already here, why don't I start checking the stuff, and you can direct the forklift with the pallets?"

"That'd be great, thanks." He grins at me. A big toothy grin. "You're brilliant, Genna. You always know just what to do."

"Yeah, well, by the time you get to my age, so will you."

"You're not old—"

"No, just older than you are." He laughs with me as I take the clipboard from him and start checking over the stack of pallets.

It only takes me fifteen minutes to check them and get back inside, where Cathy is pouring hot water into a mug for me.

"Coffee or tea?"

"Vodka."

"Coffee it is," Cathy says, ignoring my heartfelt request, and hands me a mug.

I hang my coat up and stand next to the radiator, trying to get my bum as close as I can without burning it.

"So, what was wrong?" she asks.

“Nothing.” I shake my head and take a sip, careful not to burn my tongue. I hate that feeling. When that little blister starts to form right on the tip, and you can’t taste anything properly for days. “Liam sprained his wrist this morning, so he was checking the invoice. Too slowly for Dave’s liking.”

“He still not told them he can’t read?”

“Nope, and if you give me a couple more months, he won’t have to. He’s doing pretty well, and he’s motivated. He really wants to be a good dad, bless him.”

“Babies raising babies.” Cathy shakes her head and sinks back onto her chair.

“Well, at least he’s sticking around.” Not like mine. Lumbered me with the worst name in the world, then fucked off. Bastard.

“True. Here, check my lottery numbers, will ya?” She drops a slip of paper on my desk and waves her hand towards my computer.

“Cathy, you use a computer every day. Why can’t you ever check your own?”

“It’s bad luck. Now go on, you can check yours while you’re at it.”

“But it’s not bad luck for me to check mine?”

Cathy shrugs. “Probably, but I’m hoping your bad luck will be my good luck, and then I’ll split my winnings with you for being my lucky charm.”

I pull up the website, still trying to wrap my brain around her arse-backwards logic. “You do know that makes no sense at all, don’t you?”

“Yep. I’m an enigma, wrapped in a conundrum—”

“Covered in bullshit—”

“Parcelled in a riddle. Thank you very much.”

“I’ll read them out, you check what’s written on your slip. Okay?”

“Yep. Gimme yours and I’ll do that at the same time.”

“Eh, I’m not sure I trust you.” I grin at her and offer her a wink to let her know I’m only joking. “Let me write my name on the back—”

“Cheeky little bugger.”

That doesn’t stop me writing my name. Full name, mind you, in case it becomes legally binding. Then I turn it over and hand it to Cathy. She doesn’t hesitate to turn it over and check out my name. Three years, three hundred and sixty days I’ve kept the secret of the worst name in the world from her. Not anymore. “Genesis!”

I refuse to respond.

“Genesis Collins.”

I told you it was the worst name in the world.

“I never would have put your mum down as the religious type.”

“She isn’t religious.”

“Oh. So is your dad religious then, Genesis?”

“No. He’s a music fan.”

“Huh.”

“He was a Phil Collins fan.”

“Phil Collins. The drummer—”

“From the band Genesis. Yes.”

To her credit, she does try to control the hysteria that hits her. She does a piss-poor job of it, but she did try. I timed it. Just out of curiosity. Eight minutes and a trip to the ladies’ later, I am

ready to read out the Euromillions lottery numbers. She wipes her eyes once more and resettles her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

I clear my throat. "Two." I wrap my hands around my mug, my fingers still cold from being outside.

"Hm." She looks from one pink slip to the other. "You've got that one."

"Good start. Nine." I sip my coffee.

"Oh," she says, smiling. "We've both got that one."

"Excellent. Fourteen."

"You've got that one as well." She looks at me over the tops of her little glasses. "What do you get for three numbers?"

I frown and shrug. "Something like a tenner, I think. Twenty-nine."

"Well, it'll be more than a tenner, lassie. That's four you've got."

"That means I'll have to buy the takeaway this weekend."

"Oh, the hardship of it. What's the next one?"

"Forty-one."

She stares at me. Her mouth open in a little round circle.

"What?"

"Bloody hell, girlie, you've got 'em all."

"You're joking?"

Cathy shakes her head at me. "I'm not. What about them lucky thingies? You have to get them too."

"Lucky Stars? They're three and seven."

Cathy's staring at me like I've grown another head.

"What?"

"You've won."

“What?”

“You’ve won.”

“What?”

“You’ve won the bloody lottery.” She thrusts the paper into my hand and waves at the computer screen. “You’ve won the lottery. How much was the jackpot last night?”

“What?”

“Now who’s got the IQ of a plant? How much was the jackpot last night?” She spaces the words out like she was talking to a very old, very deaf person.

I still don’t get it.

She *tuts* and points at the screen, then takes the mouse from my hand and scrolls up so she can see the estimated jackpot total. “Bloody hell!”

“What?”

“Can’t you say anything else?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s a start.” She waves at the screen again. “It was a rollover. For weeks, by the look of it. Just look at that jackpot prize!”

I do.

Then I blink.

Then I look again.

Then I look at Cathy.

She looks at me.

I do the only thing I can think of.

I blink again.

“Well? Have you seen?”

I do something exceptional then... I nod.

“It’s huge.”

She peers over my shoulder and points my head back at the screen.

“That’s in millions of pounds, isn’t it?”

I nod again.

The fog starts to clear from my eyes, and the numbers on the screen actually start to register in the shock-addled depths of my brain.

“One hundred and fifty-six million pounds.” This is a breakthrough. I know I barely whisper the words, but I engage my brain enough to get my mouth to form words. Not just random words. Words with meaning. Words that can now shape the rest of my life. No, scratch that. Words that will shape the rest of my life. Mine and everyone’s around me. “One hundred and fifty-six million pounds.”

“It says it’s the biggest jackpot they’ve ever had,” Cathy says.

“Yeah.”

“It says on the back of that slip that you have to ring this number to claim your prize.” She points to the paper in front of me. The one I’m staring at as if it’s going to bite me. “Well?”

I turn my head and look at her.

“Are you going to ring it, then?”

I manage to nod my head again. I’ve become a nodding puppet as well as a mute imbecile.

“You’re in shock. I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

She’s been gone two minutes or an hour for all I know. That whole time-standing-still thing I was talking about earlier? Forget I mentioned it. I totally lose track of everything while I sit staring at those numbers on the computer screen. All the

pixels become a blur, and I swear I'm starting to see things—moving things—in all those little squares. The blues and whites converge to create this giant mosaic before my eyes. Little stories play out their plots, creating another world while I just sit there. Watching.

“Here, throw this down your neck. Mind, though, it's hot.” She puts the mug in front of me and actually wraps my hands around it for me. “Have you rung yet?”

“No.” I look around for the owner of the squeaky voice before I realise that it's mine, so I shake my head instead.

“Do you want me to dial for you?”

I clear my throat before I open my mouth this time. “Yeah, please.”

Cathy puts the phone on speaker and takes care of the whole call for me. She writes down the address and time of where I have to go and makes a note that I have to take my driver's license and passport with me. She phones the train line and even books tickets for Ruth and me to go to Watford in the morning. I just sit there like a lump of wood, staring at the screen.

“Should I call Ruth for you? Get her to come and pick you up?”

“No, she was at work last night.”

“Abi?”

“Yes.”

Cathy picks up the phone.

“No, wait.” I should tell my partner before my friend, right? Abi shouldn't be the one I share this with. Not first. It should be Ruth. She's my partner. She's the one I live with. But I can't bring myself to say that to Cathy. I can't bring myself to wake

Ruth up and share with her the news that will mean she doesn't have to work every night anymore. I can't do it. What does that say about us? About me?

"Your mum?"

"Huh?"

"Shall I call your mum for you? To come and pick you up."

"Yeah, that'd be good." I start to sip the tea she's made for me while I wait. I don't know what she tells my mum, but barely fifteen minutes pass before she's pushing me back into my coat, handing me my bag, and leading me by the arm out of the door. Mum's parked just outside the gates. Meeting her there is always easier than trying to find a place in the compound, where she won't get her tiny tin can of a car crushed by one of the delivery wagons. Mum drives a vintage Mini Cooper. Not one of the modern BMW ones. Vintage. She has an old wire coat hanger for a radio aerial, and the locks don't work. It's a good thing she doesn't have an actual radio in it, because it gets broken into at least twice a week. There's a homeless guy that sleeps in there when it rains, and she even found a couple having sex in there one night. In a mini!

"What's happened? Is she sick?" Mum asks.

"No, she'll be fine. Just had some very shocking news," Cathy replies. "She'll tell you when you get her home."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Cos you need to drive, Addison." Cathy says.

I leave them to it and climb in the passenger side of Mum's tin can, the ticket grasped firmly in my sweaty little hand. I'm anticipating the look on Mum's face when I tell her. And Ruth's. Will she stay home tonight so we can celebrate, or will she feel

that she still needs to go in to work? She'll probably go in. She's too honourable a person to leave her colleagues in the shit at the last minute. Mum'll probably have a drink with me to celebrate, though.

I don't even hear it when she gets into the car. "So, what's happened? Are you all right? That asshole hasn't sacked you, has he?"

"No, it's good news. I promise. Just, please can you take me home first? I think I need a drink." I don't see any of the scenery pass by as she drives me from the outskirts of Manchester to Edgeley.

"Okay. I've stopped driving, now tell me."

"I won the lottery."

"Don't play games with me, Genesis Collins. What's going on?"

"I won the lottery." I hold the ticket up in front of her.

"What?"

"I won the lottery. The Euromillions, from last night. I won it."

"You're pulling my leg, right?"

I shake my head.

"Oh. My. God."

"I know." I've heard the expression "eyes like saucers" many times before, and I always thought people had a real tendency to exaggerate. I think in future I'll give people the benefit of the doubt. Mum has really big blue eyes anyway. Now I can see the white all around the iris. They look huge. Her mouth's hanging open too.

"How—"

"How much?"

"Yeah."

“One hundred and fifty-six million pounds.”

“What?”

“One hundred and fifty-six million pounds.”

“What?”

I’m starting to see what Cathy was talking about. “One—”

“I heard you. Just, what?”

“I know. You want a drink too?” I climb out of the car and cross the street.

“Hell yeah. What have you got in here?”

“Vodka. That was my plan.”

“You do know it’s only eleven o’clock, don’t you?”

“Mum, somewhere in the world it’s happy hour. I plan to celebrate it. Just keep it down until I can take Ruth a cup of coffee. She worked overtime last night.” Mum does what mums do and pretends to zip her mouth shut. If only. I open the door and we both step inside quietly. I let my bag drop from my shoulder and put it on the small table while Mum starts to put her coat on one of the hooks.

“Oh God, baby. Fuck me harder.”

Was that my imagination? Did I pass out and wake up in bed? I’m looking around myself, checking where I am. Then I look at my mum.

“Oh, Ruth, baby, just like that.”

Mum’s eyes get just as big as they were in the car. Not my imagination, then. A video? Is my lover of three years watching porn while I am out at work? Not a great boost to my ego, but, hey, I can live with that. I walk up the stairs, purposely avoiding the one that squeaks. Mum follows my footsteps exactly. Now, I’m pretty sure that whatever’s going on in my bedroom is going

to be pretty embarrassing for Ruth. And probably me. Do I really want my MOTHER along for the ride? That's not such a good phrase, considering the situation, but you get what I mean. I turn and look at her. I'm sure she knows that I want her to leave, but she just stands there looking at me. Smiling at me. Offering me support. Thanks, Mum. I should say something, but I'm totally in stealth mode, and I dismiss the thought the second it crosses my mind. What can I say?

"Oh God, I love it when you fuck me with that big cock! You're gonna make me come!"

I suppose you could always say that.

Brace yourselves...I'm going in.

Now, my bedroom is something of a sanctuary to me. A private space, if you will, where I can relax and be the undisguised me. The *me* where I let all hang out. Where the extra five or ten pounds I'm carrying don't matter, because it's my private space. I share it with one other person. Just one. Singular. One. The opposite of many. The person I love. The woman I love. The woman I make love with in our bed. The woman who loves me. She tells me she loves me. She's the woman who doesn't care about the extra ten or fifteen pounds I'm carrying. The one who doesn't care that I've got red hair—everywhere. The one who tells me I have beautiful eyes. Even if you can't tell if they're green or brown from one day to the next. The one who finds me sexy. Even when I don't. The woman who thinks I'm special, when I'm decidedly average. The woman who is shagging a skinny fucking blond in my bed.

I'll say that again because it bears repeating.

The woman who is shagging a skinny fucking blond in my bed.

For the purpose of accuracy, I should really say *our* bed, but I don't really care about accuracy at the moment. That's my bed! And my girlfriend. And I'm not getting shagged.

I want the earth to open up and swallow me. It doesn't happen. I want the alarm to go off and wake me up from this nightmare. It doesn't happen. I want drugs to take away the image of Ruth's arse framed by black strips of leather, banging away at the slapper. In my bed.

Maybe I'll get them later.

Next best thing?

I pull open the wardrobe and jump up to reach my holdall on the high shelf. I'm five-foot four. Said shelf is at least eighteen inches above my head. Snowball's chance in hell of reaching that quietly, hey?

Must be the fourth time I jump for it that I manage to snag the handle and drag the damn thing down on my head. Not sure if it's the motion or the expletive I shout that finally catches the attention of the rutting whores, but all of a sudden there's movement from them not centred on their vajayjay's.

"What the—Genna, babe, what are you doing here?"

Points for originality? Um, nil. "I live here."

"I thought you were at work."

"Obviously."

Blondie is now trying to pull the bedclothes from off the floor while still hiding behind Ruth.

"Mum, could you please go and get me some black bags from the kitchen?" I grab some clothes from the wardrobe and shove them into my bag.

"Genna, what are you doing?"

I stare at her as if she's stupid. It's one of those looks where you just know it says everything you want it to. "What does it look like I'm doing? Sightseeing?" I don't have a clue what clothes I actually grab. Really, I couldn't care less. Same from the drawers. It could be her underwear I'm grabbing for all I could see, but I refuse, absolutely refuse, to let either of them see me cry.

"You don't have to go anywhere, babe."

"Do not call me that." Now, I'm a redhead. We're talking stop-sign red here, but I don't have the legendary temper that's supposed to go with it. Having said that, she's really starting to piss me off. Scratch that, we're well beyond "starting," but in my defence may I point out the skinny blond she was screwing in my bed? Thank you, Your Honour, I will continue.

So, "pissed off" is in for a visit, and it's time to let fly. "You don't get to call me babe. Or sweetheart. Or darling. Not now. Not ever again. You don't get to ask me questions about why I'm coming home to our house. What I'm doing in our bedroom. Not anymore. Try that shit out with Goldilocks there."

"Hey—"

"This is our house. This is the bedroom we shared. The bed we shared for three years. Three years, Ruth! And this is what you do?" I point at Blondie, just to emphasize my point. "How long have you been screwing her?"

"Genna, it's not—"

"Don't even try and tell me it's not what I think. Do I look blind? I walk in here to find you in full rut. It is exactly what I think. How long?"

"Genna—"

I just turn my head and stare at Blondie.

“Six months,” Blondie says.

“And your name?”

“Paula.”

“Paula. And where did you meet Ruth?”

“In the Village—”

“The gay village? In Manchester?”

“Yeah. I went out with Claire a couple of times, but after I met Ruth—”

“Claire Powell?” Blondie nods and Ruth cringes. “My supposed best friend Claire, who stopped coming around six months ago because she told me to split up with you and I didn’t? That Claire?”

“Will you shut up—” Ruth begins.

“Why?” Blondie asks.

“Yeah, Ruth, why? Think you can talk your way out of this mess?” I look at her. I mean really look at her. And probably for the first time, I really see her. When you look at someone you love, or even just fancy, you see them differently, don’t you? Well, now I am really looking at her. I’ve got to say I’m not overly impressed. “There is no talking your way out of this.” I turn back to the dresser and throw more stuff into my bag. I try to hurry, because I know I won’t be able to hold back the tears for too much longer. When the bag’s full, one final question fills my mind. Well, actually, there are loads, but I know I need to ask this one.

“How many were there?”

“I don’t understand.”

“How many women have you cheated on me with?” She’s picking at the bedclothes. I am so not going to like this answer, but my mouth has completely run away from me now. “Simple math, Ruth. Is Paula the first? Second? Third? How many?”

“I don’t really know. I was pretty drunk most of the time.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I fasten up the bag, cursing again when the zip busts. “Were you at least safe, or do I need to get tested for anything?”

“I was drunk. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Clearly. Thanks for everything.” I turn and look at the shivering blond still in my bed. Or rather ex-bed now. “Paula, you might want to think about seeing a doctor. Who knows what Casanova there has treated you to!”

“Genna, that’s ridiculous.”

“No, it isn’t. What’s ridiculous is carrying on this conversation!”

Mum arrives just in the nick of time. I stuff more clothes into one of the bin liners and pretty much run down the stairs, out of the house, and back to the car. Mum, bless her, is trying to keep up, but I am on an adrenaline high, and Usain Bolt would have trouble. I yank open the boot and throw my bag in. I slam it shut and practically throw myself into the passenger seat before Mum even gets there.

“You want me to stop anywhere on the way back to mine?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“How much vodka do you have in?”

“Full bottle and two bottles of that paint stripper your Gran Collins got me for Christmas.” The paint stripper was more commonly known as red wine, a rather nice merlot, to be exact. But it came to my mum via my dad’s mum. So paint stripper it now is.

“That should cover it. Just the doctor’s, then.”

“Why, are you sick?”

“Don’t know. Need to find out what Dirty Harriet in there’s been passing on.”

“I don’t—”

“Blondie is neither the first nor the only extracurricular activity Ruth has been partaking in, and my whore of an ex was not practising safe sex. Just *more* sex!”

“Right-o. Doctor’s it is.”

“Shit!” Passport. Driver’s license. Bank details. Everything is still inside the house. I so do not want to go back in there. I wrap my little mitt around the ticket in my pocket. Screw it.

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to get my documents from the house. I need them for tomorrow.” Mum is looking at me with that sad, understanding, pitying smile. The one everyone tries on when they want to look compassionate, but it really makes them look like a target. For my fist.

“Do you want me to go in and get them for you?”

I seriously contemplate this, and then remember that I keep them in my underwear drawer. Funnily enough I forgot to go into that one when I was packing-slash-dumping my clothes into a bag. But fortunately I also remember that this is where I keep my vibrator and the fluffy pink handcuffs that started off as a joke. Then not so much of a joke. Surely I’ve been embarrassed enough today that I can avoid having my mother get a glimpse into this aspect of my psyche.

“No, it’s fine. I know exactly where they all are, so it’ll be quicker if I go.”

You know how I reckon I could've beat Usain Bolt on the way to the car? Well, on my way back to the house, I'm overtaken by a snail. I'm just getting to the door when it flies open and Blondie comes sauntering out. Short dress. Red. Shocking, I know. And a black bolero jacket, black, high-heeled come-fuck-me shoes. I'm guessing that Ruth wasn't at work last night. On my birthday. Looks like she went celebrating on her own. At least Blondie looks a bit like shit. Her mascara is all smeared under her eyes, her lipstick is gone, only faint stains still on her lips, but smeary, greasy smudge marks across her cheeks attest to the siren-red colour she used. I'm really glad to see that she can't look me in the eye. She just looks at her shoes as she tries to walk down the front steps without falling. I resist the urge to stick my foot out and help her down. Barely.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I hear the shower running and wonder if Blondie is skipping out on Ruth following the awkward encounter or if Ruth is such a bitch that she left the woman to fend for herself regardless. I'm angry enough to pick option two. I make short work of the stairs and I'm in my bedroom—correction, ex-bedroom—and pull open my ex-underwear drawer. I have my documents in one hand and a fistful of knickers in the other when the shower's turned off. The door from the en-suite bathroom opens and Ruth steps out. Naked. Oh goody. That was sarcastic, in case you missed it.

She does have the decency to grab a towel, wrap it around her, and keep her gaze on the floor for the most part too.

“Can we talk?”

“I don't think there's anything to say.” I shake out one of the bin liners Mum brought that's now on top of the chest of

drawers and start stuffing. That vibrator cost a small fortune, with a rotating head, beads for internal stimulation, and two rabbit ears for clitoral pleasure. I'll be damned if I'm going to leave it here. With her! The thought arises that it would be just my luck if the black bag burst and my vibrator and underwear saw the light of day...on the street. Let's face it, it's turned out to be one of those days, hasn't it? Then I have the genius idea of disguising my vibrator by putting it in one of my socks, the ones with Winnie the Pooh looking for his honey pot that Gran Bow got off a cheap market stall and given me at Christmas. There was no way I was going to explain the double entendre to my sixty-nine-year-old grandmother. So I wrap my vibrator in the sock; that way if the bag does burst, it was just a sock. I'm so busy wrapping my sex toy that I don't see Ruth move across the room until she's right next to me. She put her hand on my shoulder. I drop my sock and watch as it starts to vibrate. There's something very disconcerting about a sock with Winnie the Pooh on it wriggling and squirming about my knicker drawer. Looking for its honey pot.

"Genna, please, I made a mistake."

"Yep. A big one. Huge. Gigantic. Total fuck-up of a mistake, Ruth. One you can't take back." I'm graceful as I stop the squirming sock and stuff it into the bag, along with my other knickers, socks, and documents. I think I'll leave the furry handcuffs. Not much use on your own. Not unless you're freakishly double jointed.

"Please, this is three years, Genna. You can't just throw that away—"

"I didn't. You did that." I close up the bag and turn to look at her. I am actually amazed to realise that she looks every one

of her thirty-five years at that moment. “You threw it away by screwing around. Not me. I didn’t do that. I didn’t *do* someone else. In our bed. Using our fucking strap-on!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not good enough.” I’m more upset than angry. I mean, I am angry, but I need to know why she did it. Did I do something wrong? Was I a shit lay? Was my body a turn-off? Was it the extra twenty...okay, maybe twenty-five...pounds I know I need to lose? I don’t really want to know. But I need to. I need the answers only she can give me. I know that I’ll regret it later, but hell...

“Why?”

“What?”

“No, why? Why did you do this?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Why did you cheat on me?”

“Oh.” She looks down at the ground as she shrugs her shoulders like a sulky teenager. And I loved her?

“Well? Do you have an answer?”

“I don’t know. I just needed something a bit different—”

“Like what?” Oh God, I’m a shit lay!

“I don’t know—”

“Was I not kinky enough?”

“No, that’s not what I meant—”

“Then what? Was there something you wanted me to do?”

She shrugs. That bloody shrug. Again.

“You’re thirty-five years old, Ruth. Suck it up and talk to me or I’m just going to leave right now.”

“I just need more variety.”

“In what, exactly?”

“I don’t think human beings are supposed to be monogamous. I think it’s a redundant idea, and I just need more variety than that.”

“So it wasn’t because I was shit in bed?” Oh God, I can’t believe I just actually asked that.

“No, baby, not at all. You’re great. I just needed—”

“Another body to fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“You know what, Ruth? You’re so full of shit. Don’t believe in monogamy? Bullshit!” Anger is overtaking me again, and I know it’s time to go. I grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and head for the car. Mum has the engine ticking over and is ready to go as soon as I am in the seat.

“Just so I know, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” Mum asks.

“Train leaves Stockport station at 9:23. Gets into Watford at eleven thirty, and then I taxi to the office.”

“Want some company?”

“Please.”

“Have you booked tickets?”

“Yeah. Well, Cathy did while I was catatonic earlier. She booked two. I thought shit-for-brains would be coming with me. We just have to pick them up at the station in the morning.”

“Okay. Let’s go and get pissed, then. We’ve got some celebrating to do.”

“Winning the lottery?”

“And getting rid of shit-for-brains.”

“You never did like her, did you?”

“Not so much.”

“Why?”

“Just thought she had shit for brains.”

You know that feeling when you know there is more to something than you're being told. I'm there. I also know my mother well enough to know that I'm probably never going to find out what that secret is. Hey ho. Bring on the vodka.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

JUST MY LUCK

BY ANDREA BRAMHALL

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