

# Rosemary And Me

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We became great friends over those months, myself and Rosemary. We never swapped stories, we never shared a coffee – she never even spoke to me directly, but I spoke to her all the time. Mostly I asked her how she did it. Really. But she never answered, she just smiled at me from the front of the DVD box, her taut body bent at the waist without even a tiny overhang, her hair tied neatly back, her face a study in friendly encouragement.

It had begun at work one morning just after Christmas. Already bored beyond belief and staring blankly at my computer screen I was relieved to see the familiar message:

"New Mail Has Arrived. Would you like to read it now?"

"Oh now, let me see - that's a tough one" I muttered as I clicked on "OK". A moment later I barked laughter, drawing looks from all corners of the room; it was from my best friend Jenny, sitting all but one desk away, behind me. The subject line read:

"New Male Has Arrived. Would you like to shag it now?"

The body of the e-mail was blank, and I turned to look at Jenny. As I'd known she would be, she was watching me over the top of her monitor, with a grin on her face and a knowing smile lurking at the corners of her lips. Catching my eye she flicked her hair back over her shoulder, the movement carrying my attention to the group gathered at the end of the long, narrow office. The group leaders clustered around a new recruit - we'd heard about the new arrival last week but paid little attention. Trust

Jenny to have noticed something going on that far away, and behind her, especially if it involved the possibility of new talent. I raised my eyebrows and turned back to the screen in front of me. I typed,

"Can't see a thing, *is* he shaggable?" Send. Wait a second.

I looked over my shoulder again and she was nodding, with that pursed-lips-solemn-frown that said "OH YEAH" in block capitals.

"How do you know?" I mouthed. She grinned at me and shook her head reprovingly; I should know better than to ask. After five years of knowing Jenny I still hadn't worked out her knack of sensing when a good looking man was in the area ... I found it hard to believe she was in as secure and loving a relationship as I had ever dreamed of. After my own failed, and one-sided, marriage of twelve years, I envied Jenny and Steve their total equality. If I were with someone who adored me the way Steve did Jenny, I would have enough confidence not to back down at every disagreement. Still, at least I had Luke; his love was unconditional, loyal, as pure as a love could be. Although, at five years old, what else could it be?

Jenny had been right of course, that "WeyHey-dar" of hers was reliably fixed on my wavelength; James Bradley was, quite simply, the most attractive male I'd seen since the young Mel Gibson had first grabbed my attention in the Mad Max films. He was the ultimate tall, dark stranger; cool and very handsome in a well-tailored kind of way, but his hesitancy as he was introduced to us shortly after his arrival made him eminently approachable. Except that Sharon McFee got there first.

Sharon was one of those women who could manage to look screamingly chic or charmingly tousled, but never *actually* rumpled or untidy. One day her blonde hair would be scraped back and held tightly with a black velvet scrunchie, emphasizing her fine-boned features and large eyes, the next it would be hanging loose around her face, softening those same severe lines and making you want to be her best friend. Or even just be seen with her - but not standing next to her, if you get my drift.

Worst of all was the fact that she was actually a seriously nice person. How could anyone stand her? I hated her, I loved her to bits, I was scared of her, she made me giggle on a daily basis ... I wanted to be her.

Throughout the morning I watched James surreptitiously as he was shown around the workings of our department, and as he happily took on filing duties for an hour to get accustomed to the system. This was naturally the most unpopular job going, but not so much as a shadow crossed his face as he took the piles of documents and began sliding them into their cardboard sleeves. He approached my desk and took the pile I had in my out tray, giving me a bone-melting smile as he bore them away. Up close I had a glimpse of grey eyes the colour of bonfire night smoke; swirling, shifting patterns, the harsh office lights casting fascinating reflections as he moved.

He must have had a manual job before this one; his hands looked slightly rough as they closed over the pile of papers, and although the shirt sleeve poking out of the jacket was snowy white, I could see the slightly frayed edges of the cuffs. All of this combined to take the edge off his smooth looks, and endeared him to me even more. I knew though, that the same things would appeal to every heterosexual female in the building, so I tried to avoid making it obvious.

Needless to say, Sharon McFee found it necessary to assist him when it came to doing her own files, and it wasn't long before I heard the familiar loud laughter behind the filing racks, this time mingled with a lower, more musical tone, but just as amused.

I turned to look at Jenny and she raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"Tart," she mouthed, turning my scowl to a grin.

Lunchtime at last. Myself and three friends were in the habit of dispelling the Monday blues by having coffee and cakes at the bakery across the road, and no degree of wet and windy weather was going to stop us, particularly on our first day back after Christmas. We piled into the shop, taking those shuffling little pin-steps that were all we could manage as we bottlenecked in the doorway. Brushing Brenda's wet hair from my chin as I huddled too close to her I saw Sharon McFee already seated inside, looking as though she had somehow been transported from the office to here without the necessity of all that tedious walking stuff. Untouched by the elements, she was talking into her mobile phone, a smile twisting one side of her mouth, and smoothly extracting a cigarette from her bag with her free hand. Who could do that in real life? When I'd smoked it was a major, two-handed operation to light up, never mind throwing in the complication of a mobile phone.

By the time we had paid for our drinks, my hair was dripping down my face and with my hands full I was unable to wipe it away as we made our way over to the last table, directly in front of Sharon's. We sat, steaming, in the crowded café, not talking much, just thankfully letting the warm air inside the café work its miracles.

"He fancies you," said Jenny suddenly. I choked on my drink, spluttering laughter at the girlishness of the comment, and looked up to see who she was talking to. To my

amazement she was talking to me, and to my further disbelief I saw she was gesturing to James Bradley, lounging against the counter staring in our direction.

"Don't be ridiculous!" I protested, licking hot chocolate off the side of my hand. Nevertheless I was acutely aware of my ragged, lank appearance and physically unable to prevent my traitorous fingers from raking through my wet hair. Then I came to my senses.

"James Bradley," I said slowly and patiently, "can have any woman he wants. Up to, and including, Sharon McFee."

"But he's looking at you, not her," insisted Jenny.

"No he isn't, he's –"

"Oh, would you listen to yourselves," broke in Brenda, her Irish tones tinged with amusement.

"The pair of you's are like a couple of teenagers!" She set her cup down and stared directly at me.

"Maddy, you're a mess and y'know it. Jenny, James Bradley is looking *past* us, not *at* us, and as for you, Anne..."

The fourth member of our little group, who hadn't spoken beyond ordering her coffee, looked at her with wide, innocent eyes.

"You talk too much, pipe down and drink your coffee," Brenda said sternly, which made us all laugh, me loudest of all, naturally. And yes, I snorted.

"*Now* he's looking at ya," Brenda stated baldly, and I coloured as I realised she was right. I furtively wiped a finger under each eye to remove any traces of smudged mascara and tried to look natural.

"He was looking at you before, don't listen to her," Jenny told me as Brenda left the table to fetch some sugar.

"But why would he be? Brenda's right, I *am* a mess." I hissed back, wondering if I was imagining the eyes on my back. Self-consciously I straightened my shoulders so my bra strap wouldn't pull too tight across my back and make me look lumpy from behind. I glanced at the chelsea bun on my plate and bit my lip; I shouldn't have ordered it. I wouldn't eat it.

"No you're not, you're just a bit ... unfinished," Jenny said soothingly.

"Unfinished? What the hell kind of comment is that?" I picked a currant off the bun; one currant couldn't hurt.

"Well, you're kind of ... *almost* finished," she amended.

"Oh, and that's better is it?"

"Well, okay. What I'm trying to say is "

"You could be lovely," interrupted Anne. We both stared at her; she rarely spoke, but we knew if we gave her a moment she'd explain herself.

"Okay, Maddy," she said, putting down her drink and looking at me seriously, "here's what I see when I look at you. You're about average height, your hair is averagely brown, you have averagely blue eyes. You're not overweight, well, not really, but you're not slender either. In short, you're..."

"Average," I finished for her, picking another currant off the bun, this time accompanied by a bit of the sweet dough.

"Average," agreed Anne, "but lose just a few pounds, get your hair done...basically make a bit of an effort, and in a couple of months you'll be lovely." Jenny and I kept looking at her expectantly, and Brenda, arriving back at the table, didn't sit down in case there was more, but Anne picked up her drink again and slid smoothly back into her habitual, mellow silence.

I thought over what she had said in the twenty minutes that followed, and even forgot about James Bradley until I passed him on the way out of the coffee shop. I glanced at him shyly and he gave me a tiny smile, the smoky grey eyes brushing over me briefly, yet leaving tiny scorch marks where they touched.

"Did you see that smile?" Jenny asked triumphantly as we hurried back across the road, our coats pulled up over our heads.

"No," I lied. I couldn't allow myself to hope.

I had eaten the bun of course.

That afternoon Jenny walked past my desk and snatched the packet of chocolate buttons I kept there.

"We'll start with those," she said firmly.

"What?" I spluttered, amazed at her effrontery, but she shook her head.

"By Easter, at the firm's birthday party, I'll have all the guys in this office panting after you if it kills me," she said, "not least our luscious Mr Bradley."

As if she had summoned him just by speaking his name, he came striding up the centre of the room, his legs outlined beautifully against the cloth of his trousers, lean, muscular physique obvious under his not-new shirt. Behind him, hurrying to keep up on his slightly shorter legs, I saw my friend Mick, who grinned at me and waved, almost dropping the stack of papers he was juggling. I waved back, thinking how much easier it would have been if I'd fancied Mickey instead, but I didn't and there was no pretending otherwise. Watching Sharon moving in behind the two of them, brushing past Mick and catching up with James, I set my lips firmly and doubled my resolve to act upon the advice I'd been given.

After work I picked up Luke from school and we went to spend his birthday money in town. As he browsed the children's section in WH Smiths I stepped around the aisle to look at the fitness DVDs, and that's where I met Rosemary. Sitting among the supermodels, ex-soap stars and TV presenters, all wearing short-shorts, cut-off T shirts and plastic smiles, she was like a moment of sanity in this post-Christmas diet frenzy. The only one who didn't scare me off, she seemed to be inviting me to take her advice, and telling me that if anyone could help, she could.

After a moment I picked her up, studying her closely for signs of superciliousness. She smiled at me warmly, and silently promised to do her best.

"We'll see, Rosemary," I muttered under my breath, and took the DVD up to the counter, along with Luke and his much-desired Bob The Builder.

Later that evening, I took Rosemary from her plastic bag and put her on the coffee table.

"Can you really?" I asked her, "by Easter?" She didn't answer, but the calm assurance on her face was enough. I decided that I would watch the programme through tonight, to get acquainted with it, and then tomorrow morning first thing, I would sneak downstairs before Luke woke and make a start on the new me. Good plan.

I didn't get around to watching it: I'd forgotten there was a double episode of Coronation Street. Still, I'd manage, learning the moves as I went in the morning.

If there's one thing I can't stand, it's those dreams where you've got up, washed and dressed, and started your day already. Often I'm mentally halfway to work before I

wake up and realise I'm still in bed, and this morning was one of those times; I'd done my exercises, Rosemary had congratulated me and told me to take a well-earned rest, and I'd even done Luke's breakfast. Then I sat up in bed.

"Oh, no" I groaned, throwing back the covers and grabbing my dressing gown off the hook; one glance at the clock had told me I'd barely have time to get him ready for school, never mind work up a sweat with my new friend.

At least I no longer had Gary to worry about, I told myself for the hundredth time. I could count the times I'd been late since the divorce on the fingers of one hand, but when we'd been together it had been an almost daily occurrence.

Unfortunately this also meant that for four years I had been sadly lacking in panic-practice, and was therefore completely unprepared for the difficulties in trying to hurry a child who didn't want to be hurried.

"Please," I begged Luke as he happily chased a stray coco-pop around the milk in his bowl.

While he finished breakfast I checked his school bag and filled my flask for work, and finally we were ready. I caught sight of Rosemary as I clicked off the sitting room light and in my rather hurried imagination her smile had a reproachful look about it this morning.

"Sorry," I muttered as I hurried Luke out of the door. "I'll do it tomorrow, I promise"

The intention had been there to do it the next day, it really was, but what with one thing and another...

"What things?" Jenny asked instantly, when I began my excuses.

"Excuse me?"

"What 'things' stopped you from working out this morning?" she clarified, her direct gaze challenging me, "and this better be good; James is looking particularly wonderful this morning."

I glanced over at him as he worked, his eyes fixed on the computer screen in front of him, his long fingers tapping out an impatient rhythm on the desk. He *was* looking gorgeous and, as if he felt the weight of my stare, he turned to look at me and smiled. I could feel the flush rising to my cheeks, but knew the worst thing I could do was to suddenly look away, so I shifted my focus ever-so-slightly to the right of him, and then pretended to swim back into reality as if I'd been daydreaming. I manufactured a start, and smiled distractedly at him, with an apologetic wave thrown in for good measure and turned back to Jenny.

"Wow, that was smooth!" she said admiringly. Then she got down to business, studying her miniscule desk calendar - one of those free ones we got inside the union magazine once a year.

"Right." Squinting, she counted the weeks, leaving a large blob with her black marker pen as she calculated. "You've got just over three months 'til the Easter party, if you start tomorrow morning and stick to it every other day, you'll be able to send James into orbit."

It sounded so easy, I felt a surge of excitement. I grinned as I made my own decision to keep wearing the baggy clothes everyone associated with me, the better to stun everyone when I was finally able to shuck them in preference to the new, slinky gear I'd be able to wear in a few short months.

"What's the smile for?" asked a familiar voice by my shoulder. I turned to see Mick, who squatted down beside my desk. He held a polystyrene coffee cup gingerly

between his finger and thumb, and blew on it as he waited for me to explain. Before I could open my mouth, however, Jenny had done the job for me.

"She's determined to lose weight by Easter," she broke in, "and I'm her personal pep-talker."

"Lose weight?" Mickey looked genuinely surprised and I wanted to hug him. "What on earth for?" He sounded amused and not in the least bit patronising, and again I wished it was him that I was attracted to.

"To entice James Bradley into her lair, nevermore to set him free," Jenny intoned solemnly, and I laughed, but all the humour had suddenly gone out of Mickey. His green eyes went dark and he stood up abruptly.

"Good luck," he said shortly, "I'll catch you later, Maddy, got to return some phone calls."

"Funny, none of the guys like James." Jenny mused as she watched Mickey walk quickly back down to his own desk. "A bit of healthy competition, you'd think they'd welcome it."

"It's probably because James is quite new," I said, not sure if that was true. "They just don't know him yet."

"Plus, they all fancy Sharon McFee, and it's common knowledge that she's only got eyes for him," replied Jenny, "I know Mickey likes her anyhow."

I was surprised to discover that this revelation hurt a little, and realised that it was because Mick hadn't told me himself. We'd become instant friends when we'd both started work here on the same day almost eleven years ago, and although our love lives weren't something that we opened up to each other about as a rule, it was strange to hear from someone else that he yearned for Sharon McFee as much as most of the other men seemed to. For some reason I'd thought he was different.

I finally made contact with Rosemary. Despite the gentle smile and calm exterior, I was soon to discover that the woman had muscles of steel and a heart to match.

We had begun with some bends and twists, a few stretches, some stepping back and forwards ... I was blissfully happy; I was doing so well and with so little effort, I must have been fitter than I'd thought. Then we did some jogging which left me less pleased; it made my chest hurt as I bounced, and I decided to wear a tighter top the next time.

I was surprised at how hot and tired I became after a few minutes of this jogging stuff, but I was still glad I was able to keep up. Before very long, however, I was beginning to dislike Rosemary intensely. I tried to growl at her as I jogged, but somehow my voice wouldn't make the sounds I wanted it to, and I wondered how she managed to keep her tone level and clear, whilst doing the same exercise as I was. She had to have been miming.

I put one hand across my chest to keep myself from bouncing up in front of the screen and obscuring my view. Thank God it was nearly over! I was hot, sweating, aching and desperate to lie down, but finally Rosemary smiled and said,

"And ... rest!" With an audible grunt of relief I collapsed onto the sofa and grabbed the bottle of water I'd filled earlier. I raised it to the TV and saluted her, forgetting for a moment, how she'd made me feel just a few minutes ago. Those feelings returned, along with a sweeping sense of disbelief as she spoke again.

"After that warmup, your muscles will be ready to..." but the rest of her sentence was lost as I exploded the breath I'd been holding in an attempt to lower my heart rate a little.

"WHAT?" Did she say 'warmup?' I watched in horror as she began a 'gentle' marching on the spot routine, alternating it with a jog, then back to 'marching it out' again. I couldn't do it, I just couldn't! I picked up the TV remote and jabbed the first button my fingers found, replacing the smiling, insane Rosemary with an equally insane looking weatherman, telling me the temperatures were going to be low in my area. Wiping an arm across my soaking face, I told him he was talking bollocks and the temperature would never get below 80 degrees ever again. Then I lay back on the sofa and waited until my limbs had stopped trembling before stumbling up to the shower.

The next time was actually a little better. Prepared for the ordeal to come, I wore my tightest fitting swimsuit which pinned my breasts to my ribs, and trainers to stop my bare feet getting carpet burned. I made it through the warmup, and once into the routine itself it wasn't nearly as bad as I had thought, although some of the stretches made me wobble alarmingly. I even enjoyed some of the scrunches because they actually felt as if they might be doing me some good.

After the session I lay panting on the floor, listening to her congratulating me on a good job, tempering her praise with the cautionary note that if I continued to work out, and 'kept to a sensible, low fat diet,' I would 'lose the pounds and tone my body as well.' I blanked out the bits I didn't want to hear, and smiled back at her through the sweat dripping off my nose.

"Thanks, Rosemary." I switched off the TV and went to my shower feeling as if I must have already lost half a stone.

Over the next month or so, Mickey was his old, cheerful self with me again ...until I mentioned James. Not that I did often; I didn't want to cheapen it, somehow. I looked at James and felt as if we were connected, as if I understood him a little better than everyone else. He would offer me his smile and I would look at it and imagine it was a little deeper, more searching than the ones he gave the others. I enjoyed the feeling of being special but learned quickly that speaking of it aloud made Mick prickly.

"And you really can't understand why?" Jenny said in exasperation when I mentioned it.

"Because he doesn't like James. And because he does like Sharon," I reminded her.

"You really are an idiot aren't you? Maddy, *you're* the one Mickey likes!" she almost yelled, but just kept her voice in check as we stood by the notice board pretending to read the latest Union publication. She smiled brightly at two passing colleagues, and then turned back to me just in time to see me close my mouth. I had been gaping at her, barely realising it, as I replayed conversations I'd had with Mickey lately, looking for evidence that she might be right. Finally I nodded slowly.

"I can't understand why, we've known each other for a gazillion years and he's never said anything," I muttered, but I'm actually prepared to believe you may have something there!"

"Of course I have, you just need to be more distanced to see it."

"So what do I do about it?"

"Well, is there the slightest chance you could fancy him?"

"No!"

"Come on, he's nice enough looking, he's got lovely eyes"

"He's just ... not my type." I felt bad saying it, but it was true. He was too short, for one thing, and although Jenny was right about his eyes, a beautiful and unusual shade

of green, I just couldn't imagine staring into them and wanting to fall forward and lose myself in their depths as I did with James's swirling, ever-changing grey ones. There was simply no contest.

"Anyway, change of subject - sort of," Jenny went on as we walked back to our office. "How's the diet coming? You're still wearing those ridiculously huge shirts."

"It's coming okay," I told her, reluctant to tell even my best friend how well I was doing in case it suddenly wasn't true. I'd been good with the video, I just had the worst problem with the sensible eating side of things. It'd be easier if I didn't feel the need to grill cheese on top of just about every meal I cooked. And if Luke finished up his own food and didn't leave it to me to 'tidy away' the last couple of chips or bits of sausage, it'd be even easier.

Still, at least I was getting the exercise, and that was better than I'd been doing before, so it had to be making a bit of a difference despite the cheese. And it was, I thought. I tried not to think about it too much, just kept my morning appointments with Rosemary and tried not to leave my tea til the last half an hour before I went to bed. Every little helps.

But now I had this new problem to deal with. Not once in all the years I'd known Mickey had he shown any kind of interest in me, beyond that of drinking buddies and a shoulder to wail on when things had hit the inevitable skids. I started to think back to things he'd said, and tried to find something there that indicated Jenny was right. All I kept coming back to was that time just a few weeks ago when Jenny had told him I was trying to lose weight to attract James.

And yet, she'd said herself that she knew Mickey liked Sharon. God, I was starting to think like a twelve-year old all over again! How well I remembered those love-sick

days, staring after the most popular boys with an aching heart and a pleasantly sick feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever one of them glanced my way. Of course there had been a Sharon McFee at school too, only her name was Debbie Stevens.

I was musing over the fact that both had four-syllable names and wondering if that was significant when mine was only three, as I waited for Luke to come out of school. Staring into space I was unaware that anyone had arrived behind me for a moment.

"Boo!" I jumped and turned rubbing my ear where the sudden breathy shout had tickled it.

"Mickey! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Just came by to pick up my sister's sproglet, she's had to work late."

We chatted while we waited, and as we walked out of the playground, I listened to Luke's chatter with half an ear, while keeping the rest of me tuned in to Mick and Connor. I was mildly concerned to find myself adding compatibility with children to Mick's growing list of good points.

We parted company at the car park and Mick turned to give me a wave and a smile as he helped his nephew into the back seat. The smile had to have been one the sweetest, most beautiful smiles I'd ever seen from him ... except that it was exactly the same as it had always been. I couldn't believe I was seeing him in a completely different light now, simply because of something Jenny had said. It was silly.

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You know what it's like when you first meet someone who fascinates you; you're in awe of them for the longest time, and then you suddenly realise you're actually their equal and they *shouldn't* hold such a power over you? It doesn't mean you like or

respect them less, but you just see a tiny glimpse of them as real people and remember that you're just as valid as they are in the reality stakes ...you have just as important a role to play. Somebody, somewhere, is viewing you with as much awe and respect as you are your new 'acquaintance,' you can bet on it, even if you never realise it.

That's how it was with Rosemary and me. She started out as my teacher, my mentor, my ideal. Then gradually I caught up a little and began to work harder than she was doing, carrying weights while I trained, growing a little impatient with her gently encouraging tones and her slow, deliberate speech. While I knew I owed this new energy and drive to her, still I began to feel a little superior and although I hated that in myself, I loved it too.

Rosemary was now simply my training buddy. No longer did I look at her almost fearfully if I missed a session; I just chucked the DVD back on the shelf and told her I was busy and I'd do it tomorrow. Eating wise, I wasn't starving at all. I'd developed a taste for cold pasta with soy sauce and chicken, I ate copious amounts of doorstep toast with marmite and huge dollops of cottage cheese. I followed a recipe and made a very low fat sultana bran loaf which was gorgeously sweet, especially when topped with Demerara sugar before cooking. I'd never eaten so much, and yet I was losing weight steadily and loving it.

The situation with Mick was becoming less of a problem too, and more of a secret thrill. After meeting him at the school and beoming suddenly vulnerable to his charms, I had taken more notice of him and although he would never attract me as powerfully as James, I had begun to look at him as more of a possibility for something stronger than friendship. What chance did I have with James anyway? Better the devil you know, as they say, and as devils go, Mickey certainly had the wickedest smile.

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And now, Easter. The office birthday party, always celebrated over the long Easter weekend with the big party on the Saturday night. Every year we booked the downstairs room at one of the hotels on Plymouth Hoe, and took over the bar and dance floor for an event that was even bigger than the Christmas bash.

Luke had gone to his grandmother's for the night, and I stood in my bedroom, wearing my old, baggy terry-towelling bathrobe. Already made up and wearing my new lacy underwear, I bit my lip as I took down the slim-fitting black dress from my wardrobe. I had managed to keep my weight loss from my colleagues - although a couple had had commented that my face was looking thinner - and I was looking forward to showing off my new, svelte shape tonight. More than anything I was looking forward to the happiness on Mickey's face when I told him I was his for the taking. How long had he waited? If only he'd told me

I took the dress from the hanger and laid it reverently on the bed, then slid out of my tatty dressing gown. Taking a deep breath I stepped into my shoes, wanting the full effect at once, and pulled the dress on over my feet, drawing it up my legs as carefully as if it were made of tissue paper. I loved the whisper feel of the lining sliding over the bare flesh of my midriff, no longer buffered by the usual collection of tight body-suits I'd always worn before to try and tame my hips.

Turning at last to the mirror, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face; now just let Jenny tell me I was 'unfinished!' After years of feeling inferior to the glamorous girls at work, I was experiencing another one of those "you're just as good as they are" moments, and the smile kept stretching until I thought my face would split.

A knock at the door broke my reverie, and I smoothed down the dress and went to let Jenny in. The look on her face was worth every moment of those torturous hours I'd spent at Rosemary's mercy, and as we went into the front room I saw the DVD lying on the coffee table. Now the smile looked knowing, pleased, parental even, and all the irritation I'd been feeling towards her lately, all my impatience, all the negative thoughts melted away and I felt only immense gratitude. You *did* do it, I thought as I picked up the box and slid it onto the shelf. You said you would and you did. Thank you.

Jenny's eyes glowed with genuine pleasure as she looked me up and down. "Schweethaht, you're gonna blow him away!" her exaggerated American accent made me laugh out loud, despite feeling the shiver of nerves.

"Wot djoo mean, luv?" I countered in my best DelBoy cockney, "You fink I'll show that Sharon a fing or two?"

"Oh, definitely!" Jenny grinned. "So, what's the plan then?" she went on as she fluffed her hair in the mirror over the fireplace.

"Plan?"

"To nail Beautiful Bradley, Sex God of the Second Floor."

I gaped at her. It occurred to me that in all the time I'd been dressing, James had been nowhere in my thoughts and it didn't take a genius to work out why.

"I don't have the slightest chance with James, let's be honest," I pointed out. "I've only just put this dress on, only just lost this weight, only just learned how to put make up on, for God's sake! Sharon's been making herself available, and gorgeous, since the day he started."

"So?"

"So what's the point? You're right about one thing though. The more I think about it, the more I'm positive Mickey really does like me as more than a friend, and he's not bad looking either." I saw her exasperated look, and grinned apologetically. "Look, whatever the reason, I've lost the weight, I've had my hair done ... what's the big deal about James Bradley anyway? I might as well go for someone I know wants me, just like your Steve does you."

Her reply was thankfully cut short by another knock at the door.

"Taxi," I said, grabbing my jacket, "let's go!"

Arriving at the hotel, I thought my stomach would either sink so low it would be sliding out of my shoes, or else flop high enough so that I'd be sick all over the first person I saw. The trouble was I couldn't work out who I was more nervous of seeing, Mickey, James or the girls I worked with every day. It was nuts, what was I expecting? Some kind of special award? But analysing it was pointless; I'd made a huge effort for three solid months, and tonight I was terrified that no-one would notice. It was as simple as that.

As it turned out, the first person I saw was Sharon. She was passing the doorway as Jenny and I came in, and never have I felt so gratified as I did when I saw her mouth drop open and stay there. For once nothing was coming out of it either, and I smiled as casually as I could manage through the nerves, and said, "Hi, Sharon. You look nice as always."

"God, Maddy, you look amazing!" she said at last, and I felt guilty for every single uncharitable thought I'd ever had about her, as she suddenly threw her arms around me and hugged me, completely unselfconsciously. "I always knew you were a stunner

behind all that jeans and sweaters nonsense," she mumbled, "thanks for proving me right!"

Absurdly I felt tears start to make my nose tingle, and I hugged her back. I'd never even had any real reason to dislike her, I reminded myself, it had always been that old, defensive, rubbish me. When Sharon let me go, her smile was warm and genuine.

"Don't you dare go back to the old Maddy!" she said sternly, and squeezed my arm.

"Shit! Ever felt like a bitch?" I whispered to Jenny as Sharon disappeared. Jenny went off into peals of laughter, which drew more eyes towards us.

Among them, were a pair of smoky grey, and a pair of clear green. James and Mickey were standing close together by the bar, and both pairs of eyes were in easy view as they widened slightly, but a moment later both faces showed very different expressions. James's broke into a smile, and Mickey's closed down completely as he turned away. Panicked, I turned to Jenny, who shook her head, shrugged, and leaned in close.

"I'll be in the downstairs bar when you've made up your mind," she told me, and then she was gone. James turned back to the bar, proving me right in my assessment that he was way out of my league, but I couldn't help noticing that he was definitely dressed down for the occasion. Black jeans, a blue denim shirt, all very clean but no effort made at all to smarten himself up. Mickey, on the other hand, looked better than ever in a pristine white shirt, dark blue trousers and a dark blue tie. The whiteness of his shirt made the colour of eyes appear more vivid than ever, and I went up to him, smiling.

"Hi, Mick."

"Alright, Maddy?" God, so casual what on earth was the matter with him now?

"Don't you like the new me?" I asked, desperate for some kind of clue.

"Liked the old one better," came his short reply. So that was it; just like in all the best books and films, I should have realised; the hero always liked the messy, untidy heroine the best. After all my efforts too.

"The old one's still here," I soothed, touching his arm. I was vaguely aware that James had replaced his glass on the bar and walked away, and while the disappointment was almost physical, I looked at Mickey in front of me and saw an ache in him that made me want to hug him. Unfortunately, that was all I wanted to do, I realised with an internal groan. Why couldn't I fancy him like I did James? It would have been perfect.

"Mick, can we talk?" I asked quietly.

"You know, don't you?" he said. "You know what I've only just figured out since January?"

"Is that all it's been? Just since then?"

"Pretty much. You do then."

"Yeah, I do. It took Jenny to point it out to me though."

His head snapped up.

"Jenny? How the hell does she know?"

"Well you know her, the expert in relationships." I watched as his hand curled into a fist on the bar. He looked, not only nervous, but annoyed as well, and even a little embarrassed.

"Mickey, it's okay, it really is,"

"Oh, how can it be? You've seen how it is: you walk in here, suddenly looking a million quid and right away he gives you the eye."

"Who?" Hope flared despite my casual question.

"Oh, 'who' indeed! James of course!"

I swallowed hard. "Mickey, James is too popular. He'd never go for someone so ... ordinary."

"Who are you calling ordinary?" Mick drained his glass and stood up. He walked away, the set of his shoulders clearly showing his anger. I debated whether or not to go after him, but decided against it. His last comment sealed the truth that Jenny had suspected. I'd told him all he needed to know; that his attraction to me was no longer a secret, and therefore all barriers were down now. It was up to him.

I tried to be optimistic about the potential new relationship, telling myself that not so long ago, to have someone who wanted me was all I'd ever dreamed of. Maybe it could work. I rubbed at an itch on my thigh, and almost screeched with frustration as I felt my ring catch in my tights, the tiny tug of resistance telling me that my misery had been compounded by the fact that I now had a ladder running almost to the knee

I made my way downstairs to find Jenny and, turning the first corner in the stairwell, I felt my stomach lurch as I met James coming up. My immediate, instinctive thought was that looking down was a horribly unflattering angle and I kept going so that I was on the same stair as him before I acknowledged him. Even then I just nodded in a friendly way. Then I felt his hand on my arm, as I had touched Mickey just few minutes ago – although if my touch had scorched Mickey's flesh the way James's did mine, he hadn't shown it. I, on the other hand, was unable to keep from drawing a quick breath at the contact.

"So. You and Mick Spencer – serious is it?"

"Why?" The catch in my voice was unmissable and I wished I could be cool about this, but the warm breath on my cheek as he leaned in to talk to me was making me feel faint.

"Look, I just wanted to say, I wish we'd met a bit sooner."

"We did," I retorted a little crossly. "At work, remember? I'm the invisible colleague, or don't you recognise me under all this crap?" I jabbed my finger at my face, intending to indicate the make up I had so carefully applied earlier. Unfortunately my timing was out and all I succeeded in doing was stabbing myself just under the left eye with my long, polished nail. I let out a yelp and a sob combined, and his laugh washed over me, drawing out my humiliation to an excruciating degree.

Then, in a fuzzy moment of unreality, I felt his arm go around my shoulders and pull me against his chest. The rough material of his shirt grazed my skin as I turned my head to draw a breath, and the scent of him was enough to make me feel as if I'd been drinking all afternoon instead of the single glass of wine I'd sipped in the bath.

"Oh, for God's sake!" growled a familiar voice, and I looked up in time to see Mick pushing past us and heading down to the bar. I pulled away from James, not sure exactly what had just happened, but he put a finger under my chin and tilted my head up.

"Yeah, I recognised you, Maddy," he said quietly, the laughter gone from his face now, those amazing eyes serious and just a little sad. "I meant I wish I'd got to know you while you were still invisible. Then you'd have known it was you yourself I liked, not the wild new image." He shrugged, "left it a bit late, didn't I?"

"L...late?" I stammered, feeling despair washing over me. "No, you haven't left it –"

"He's crazy about you," James gestured at the empty stairwell where Mick had been.

"He deserves you, he's a seriously nice bloke. And I can see you care about him too, from your reaction when he saw us. I'm not going to come between you two, much as I'd like to."

I searched his expression to try and tell if this was just some line he was spinning, but I honestly didn't think it was. He reached out and brushed his finger over the sore spot under my eye, and the smile he gave me seemed, to my disbelieving gaze, to hold something close to genuine affection.

"Go on, mad Maddy," he grinned. "If the two of you ever split up, come and find me, okay?" He let me go, and the cold seemed to whistle through me as his warmth was stolen. I gaped at him, uncaring of my undignified appearance, and mentally cursed Rosemary and her bloody do-good intentions. What had she done to me?

James turned to go back up the stairs, and I watched as he headed for the cloakroom to collect his jacket. He really meant it then, otherwise he'd have stayed to pick up some other helpless female. Then again, maybe he was heading out to some bar to do exactly that.

"He's gone has he?" came Mick's voice from below. Staring down at him it occurred to me that I really didn't care if this was an unflattering angle or not, Mick had seen me at my very worst and he still wanted me. Could I have said the same for James? I decided not, even though he had just watched me nearly poke myself in the eye in an attempt to be ironic and angry. I started down the stairs, and smiled at Mick, grateful that he seemed to have forgiven me my lapse of judgement in predictably making a play for the best looking guy at the office.

"He's *really* not that nice," I lied, hoping for a smile.

"Yeah, he is. Just like Sharon McFee *really* is," he replied, arching an eyebrow at me. "Just because they're beautiful doesn't make them bad people, you should know that."

I blushed at his compliment and shook my head.

"No, with me it's just plastic coating, one night only, miss it and miss out," I admitted.

"No it's not, Maddy. Not at all. No amount of plastic can make you something you're not. And *I've* seen you leaning over a toilet throwing up an entire night's intake ... I wouldn't say it was a lovely sight, but don't do yourself down."

"You still like me after all that?" I muttered.

"Of course. I'm still your friend, aren't I?"

"No, I mean still *like* me, like me. You know, like ... *like* me."

"Huh? What, you mean like you? In the sense that I ... *like* you?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Mickey, do you fancy me or not?"

His laugh made me want to kick him extremely hard in a vulnerable spot, but at the same time I felt a sudden, wild relief.

"You don't then?"

"Oh, Maddy please don't be offended!"

"I'm not offended, but in that case, what was all that crap with James about? Weren't you jealous?"

"Of course I was jealous, you dozy mare! Of James! I mean, of you, I mean..."

My hands flew to my mouth in shocked amazement, and suddenly everything he had said slotted neatly into place with a loud click.

"Who are you calling ordinary," I repeated in a soft whisper, then I started to laugh.

"You weren't defending me, you were defending yourself! Oh, Mickey!" I stopped laughing as I remembered something else; "No wonder you couldn't work out how Jenny knew! You thought she knew you fancied James!" I went off into gales again, and somewhere in my head I suddenly realised how it must look.

"I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you for – well, you know," I tried to explain, but a look at his expression told me I didn't need to. He was smiling too, but it was a hopeless smile and I suddenly felt terribly sorry for him; knowing how deeply James affected me, and then trying to imagine what it must have been like for Mickey.

"So, if you run, you'll probably catch him up," Mick told me, giving me a gentle push upwards.

"You don't mind?"

"What would be the point? He's no more gay than you are! If you waste this chance, *then* I'll mind," he told me. "Go!"

I went.

Outside it was raining hard. Bouncing off the pavement type hard. I hadn't stopped to collect my coat, added to that my shoes were killing me by the time I got halfway up the road to the taxi rank. I looked around for James, but the driving rain was blinding me in one direction, and the spray from passing cars obliterated the view the other way. It was hopeless; if I left it 'til Tuesday when we went back to work, I'd be too late, James would have found someone else and it would be over before it was begun. If I hadn't been so successful at changing my image this would never have happened.

"Bugger you, Rosemary!" I yelled in frustration, stamping my foot for good measure. "*Bugger* you, you smug cow!" I stamped again, and a second later my foot wrenched painfully as the heel broke off my shoe and my ankle twisted under me. I stumbled and swore again, swiping at the wet hair that had blown across my face, and felt a hand under my elbow, bearing me upright again.

"Lord, you've a mouth on you, Maddy Blake!" The amused voice said. "Who on earth is Rosemary?"

"N...no-one," I managed, staring disbelievingly into the streaming face of the most popular guy at the office.

"Lucky for her, I wouldn't like to be someone if that's what you thought of me!" James took my other hand and held me steady while I balanced on one impossibly high shoe. I blew the rain off the end of my nose and treated him to a grin that no doubt looked as crazy as I felt. His answering look was one of calm, unsmiling appraisal.

"Well now. You're soaking wet, you've got mascara running down to your chin, your dress is soaked and, may I add, most unbecomingly so. You've got one broken shoe and a ladder in your tights. Your hair is a shock, you look like a crazed madwoman, and the language coming off you would shame a Navy. In short, Maddy, you're a mess."

"I know, I've been told that," I said, still grinning, "by better people than you, incidentally."

"That's alright then. Only, I wouldn't want anyone saying I was only going out with you because you're gorgeous."

"No danger of that. And likewise of course," I added, "I mean - you're pretty wretched looking yourself."

He nodded wisely, his wet hair flopping against his brow.

"You're right. Should we get a taxi or would you like to walk?"

"I'll hobble, thanks. There's a hotel up the road with a party going on. I'd quite like to go."

James held out his arm.

"Now you're talking, let's go and show them what *real* style is."

I could almost see Rosemary smiling.

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