

There's a first time
for everything ...



THE BOY NEXT DOOR



Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees

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About the Book

Is it true what they say about first loves being forever?

As the 1980s dawn in the sleepy English village of Rushton, Mickey and Fred are next-door neighbours and best friends, in and out of scrapes from the day they're born. They're convinced that nothing will ever keep them apart. But they're wrong.

Fifteen years later, Mickey is beginning a new phase of her life, with a small flower shop in London. Meanwhile, Fred's life is also changing: he's set to marry his girlfriend in just a few short weeks. Then he bumps into Mickey for the first time since their worlds fell apart.

As they pick up the threads of their friendship, Fred and Mickey relive their glory days growing up in Rushton. But can they ever really overcome the devastating events that once tore them apart?

About the Authors

Josie Lloyd and Emlyn Rees each had novels of their own published before teaming up to write bestsellers together. Their work has been translated into twenty-six languages. They are married and live in London with their three daughters.

Also by Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees

Come Again
Come Together
Love Lives
The Seven Year Itch
The Three Day Rule
We Are Family

The Boy Next Door

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees



arrow books

For our Dads, for the sunglasses ...

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Chapter I

Fred

'Action,' Eddie calls from outside, and I step through the living-room doorway and out on to the sunlit roof terrace.

Despite being up here on the top floor of what's a four-storey building, there's not a breath of wind. I peer across the undulating cityscape of chimney pots and roof tiles and tower blocks. Shimmering in the distance, the slow-moving traffic snaking over the raised bulk of the Westway sounds strangely muffled, as if I'm observing it from behind a giant Perspex screen. My London: a city where you can be whoever you want to be, a city where thousands of lives are started and finished every day.

Careful not to look at Eddie (he's already told me twice not to), I sit down and face the lens of the camcorder he's holding. 'Hello,' I say, 'my name is Fred Wilson and I am -'
'Cut.'

This time I do look up at Eddie. Like me, he's perched on a white plastic garden chair and is stripped from the waist up. A thin band of shadow cast by a telephone wire rings the biceps of his left arm like a tattoo. He's a few years younger than me and his skin is slick with high-factor sun cream (Eddie doesn't do tans; they'd clash with his black leather jacket).

A gurgle of frustration rises to a growl at the back of my throat. This is the fifth cut I've sustained in as many minutes. Another, I fear, could well prove fatal.

‘What now?’ I explode, beginning to wish I’d refused his request to help him with this, his inaugural (and consequently slightly cringe-worthy) film-school project.

Eddie screws up his face, embarrassed and trying not to laugh. It’s the kind of expression I’ve seen him use on girls in bars, the kind that melts away their defences and leaves them staring at him with helpless, adoring eyes.

His own eyes are a dark denim blue, although more often than not their wide-awake glory remains concealed behind his scrunched-up eyelids. This is a result of his refusal to wear his prescription glasses for anything other than watching television and this, in turn, is a result of his assumption that he’s more attractive to women without them.

‘Only if they’re into squinty-looking weirdos,’ I told him a few months ago, an accusation which (unsurprisingly, in hindsight) he was quick to deny.

And he was right to. Laid-back and sleazy works for Eddie. (Even Rebecca, my own beloved, has admitted as much.) His love life is spectacularly varied – particularly in comparison with my own – leading me to have wondered on several occasions whether it’s my general lack of squintiness which has tethered me to a far more stable existence.

‘I’m sorry,’ he finally says. ‘It’s just ...’

‘Just *what*?’ I demand as his words peter out and this latter-day Lou Reed pushes his dark hair back from his face. ‘No, no,’ I continue before he has time to speak. ‘Let me guess. It’s my fingernails, right?’ I hold them up before my face. ‘They’re ... too long?’ I hazard. ‘Or too grubby?’ But Eddie shakes his head to both suggestions. ‘Too *naily*?’ I suggest.

He smiles, lopsided and knowing. ‘Your nails are just fine.’

‘What, then? Still my walk? My posture? My smile? The way I cross my legs?’ His brow furrows awkwardly. ‘Come

on, Mister Scorsese,' I tell him, leaning back in my seat, 'give it to me straight. I can take it.'

Eddie sighs. 'You're being too stilted,' he says. 'It sounds like ... like you're acting. And it's not meant to.'

This criticism comes as no surprise to me: I hate being scrutinised too closely, have done ever since I was a teenager. 'I warned you I'd be no good,' I say with a shrug.

'You're not ... no good,' he tells me. 'You're ...' But his words run out. 'It's just,' he tries again, 'that the words, "*Hello, my name is Fred Wilson and I am ...*" ... they're coming out all wrong.'

'Why?'

'Because people don't talk like that.'

'What people?'

'People like us.'

'People like *us*?'

'Yes. You know, real people ... people on the street.'

'But we're on a roof terrace,' I point out.

'I was speaking metaphorically.'

'Ah.'

'Just try sounding a little bit less like you're reading the national news on the TV and a little bit more like yourself,' he advises. 'Like, "*Hi, my name's Fred Wilson and I'm ...*" Basically,' he continues, 'relax. It's only a dopey college assignment. No one outside my tutorial group's ever going to see it.'

'Relax?' I counter. 'That's easy enough for you to say. You went to acting school.'

'And my agent hasn't called me for six months,' he reminds me grimly.

Which is why he's working nights as a bar manager at a club called Nitrogene in King's Cross, I remind myself, and why getting something positive out of this film course is so important to him, and why, in turn, I agreed to help him out in the first place. 'OK,' I say. 'I'll give it one more try.'

He mumbles something about adjusting the camcorder's audio mix and I duck back into the living room, and lean idly up against the wall by the door and wait for my cue.

Lime-green curtains are drawn across the two open sash windows, which face out across the street. To my right, a couple of bookcases stretch from bare-boarded floor to white-plastered ceiling. They're stacked with CDs, books and magazines. Between the bookcases are the wide-screen television, video, DVD, satellite and cable hardware, as well as Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo and Sega's latest offerings. Games, in and out of boxes, lie ensnared in a tangle of wires. The furniture, what little there is, is mostly utilitarian. There's a small pine table and matching chairs over by the kitchen doorway and in the centre of the room is a three-seater sofa, deliberately angled towards the television.

Rebecca doesn't like it here. The air of impermanence bothers her. 'You are where you live,' she once commented, somewhat cryptically, leaving me confused over whether she meant I smelt vaguely of mould and could do with a quick vac, or simply that I lived in a less than salubrious part of town. Not wanting to deal with either possibility, I did what I often do during our exchanges where I know I'm on a hiding to nothing: I kept quiet.

Flat 3, number 9 St Thomas's Gardens is the only property I've ever owned. I've lived here for four years now and, were it not for Rebecca, I'd be planning on sticking with it for another forty. It's big enough for two (Eddie and myself), but too small for three (Eddie, myself and Rebecca). I don't know why I've never made more of an effort with its decor, except that perhaps its very existence as a place to call my own is enough for me and that its appearance could never be anything other than secondary to that.

I moved in here a few months before I started going out with Rebecca and, up until recently, its presence has been

tolerated by her in the same way that other people's partners might tolerate their more obnoxious old friends. It's here for now, in other words, but sooner or later it will be nudged aside for the good of the relationship.

I still sleep alone here a couple of nights each week (the rest of the time being spent at Rebecca's altogether more bijou residence over in Maida Vale). This arrangement is a hangover from our early days, a part of the pattern of our fledgling relationship that I've never openly questioned and, up until recently, Rebecca has never seen fit to challenge.

Truth be told, I think it probably suited us both to begin with, having some time and space to ourselves until we fully made up our minds about each other. All that ended with our engagement, of course. Ever since then, who sleeps where and why has been fully up for discussion, and I've found myself fighting an almost continuous rearguard action against Rebecca's repeated attempts to persuade me to sell up and move out, and move in with her.

A part of me, however, in spite of its inevitability, still resists this blending of our two universes into one. This place may not be much, is my reasoning, but it's mine and I worked hard to get it. It's my safety zone, my security and independence rolled into one. Rebecca doesn't see it this way. She sees my flat as an asset, a means - when combined with the sale of her own flat - to a better and brighter future for us both. Her mind is made up and, if there's one thing I've learnt over the past few years, what Rebecca wants she generally gets.

I stare for a moment at my reflection in the mirror on the wall. My eyes are grey and my hair, cropped close against my skull, is hazelnut brown. That I look shattered comes as no surprise. I was up at the crack of dawn, on this my first day off in months, to drop Rebecca at Heathrow Airport.

‘Action,’ Eddie calls again, and I step outside and take my seat once more. ‘Er, hi,’ I say to the camera, feeling no less self-conscious than before, ‘my name’s Fred Wilson and ... and Eddie here wants me to talk about myself, which has to be a first in all the time I’ve known him. So ... so here goes.’

Only it goes precisely nowhere. Instead, I find myself hesitating, pondering the basics of my existence. Explaining myself – the hows and whys of who I am and what made me this way – is hardly my special subject. I’m not into gazing at navels, horizons being more my thing. Give me the future over the past any day.

My gaze falls to my knee and I wave away a wasp that’s crawling there.

‘I’m a marketing manager for news as it breaks dot.com,’ I say, giving the camera a great big marketing grin and slapping on an American accent for effect, as I launch into the rather feeble script that accompanied our last television commercial. ‘You’ve probably heard of us,’ I continue. ‘If not, you should look us up. We’re a twenty-four seven on-line outfit, straight down the wire, into your home or your phone, tailoring up-to-the-minute news and a range of other top-quality services to your needs.’ I grin, breathless, and suck in air before concluding, ‘Trust me: you’ll never read a newspaper again.’

My smile fades and, leaning forward, I dig out today’s edition of *The Times* from where I dropped it beneath my seat earlier. Opening it up before me, I peer conspiratorially over the top at the camera. ‘That last statement was, of course, a lie. But the rest of it’s pretty true, for an advert. My actual job’s not quite as slick and smooth as it sounds either,’ I admit. ‘Like the hours can be pretty hideous and we’re reliant on American investors who might pull out at any time ... But it’s OK, you know? Nothing to write home about, or anything, but it’s a job.’

It's actually significantly better than that, but I don't want to harp on about it in front of Eddie, whose own career has recently run into something of a brick wall. Truth be told, I actually enjoy what I do for a living. I mean, sure, the products and services we provide aren't perfect, but that's why it's a challenge working there: to make things better, to make things happen. And that's what they're letting me do, bit by bit: expand our market into the youth sector, by providing access to on-line games and shopping via the site, as well as the news and current affairs that we already do pretty well.

I lower the paper on to my lap. 'Er, what else?' I ask, drumming my fingers absent-mindedly on the paper, as I set about racking my brains for something to say. A few seconds later, still drawing a blank, I shoot Eddie a look of exasperation and he mouths 'Rebecca' at me.

'Oh, yes,' I say, blushing involuntarily over this shocking oversight. 'Rebecca. She's the girl I'm going to marry in a month. Eddie here's going to be my best man. She's in Oslo at the moment on a business trip. She works in marketing as well ... a magazine publishing company ... that's where we met ... and ... and she's wonderful ... my best friend and, er, soulmate ... Soulmate? God, that sounds cheesy ... Eddie?' I feel the skin on my cheeks burning up. 'Eddie, can we edit that bit?'

But Eddie's ignoring me.

'Thanks a bunch,' I grumble. 'Now where was I? Work ... Rebecca ... cheesy comments ... what next?'

'Cut.'

'What now?' I ask, watching as Eddie lifts his finger from the camcorder's red record switch. 'I thought that was going quite well.'

But Eddie's smiling. 'It wasn't bad,' he says coolly, flicking another switch which causes a shutter to slide smoothly across the camcorder's lens, 'but I need a leak.'

He puts the camcorder down and gets to his feet. 'I'll be back in two ticks,' he tells me.

I watch him duck inside, the shady doorway acting like a mystical portal, swallowing him up. Then, tilting back in my chair, I close my eyes against the glare of the sun.

Rebecca ...

*

Rebecca's from an incredibly stable, loving and secure background, so different in every way from my own. It's something she takes for granted, of course, but something which I'm drawn towards, with a mixture of envy and desire in my heart.

Thorn House, her parents' country home, stands on the summit of a flat-topped hill overlooking the small Oxfordshire village of Shotbury. It's a vast Georgian mansion, boasting eight bedrooms, a hard tennis court and a converted stable block. In addition to all this there are about forty acres of land, most of which are rented out to a local dairy farmer for pasture, but some of which are taken up by the array of walled gardens and lawns which surround the main house.

I was in the largest of the gardens not so long ago. It's a flat area of at least two acres, surrounded by towering grey stone walls, and was heavy with the scent of lavender. From where I was lying - at the back, on the cool flagstones of the perimeter path - I could see apple and plum trees, runner beans, the glint of greenhouse glass and, perhaps more unusually for the time of year, Rebecca's small bare breasts, pale against the late afternoon sun, moving gently up and down as she sat astride me.

'God, I've been looking forward to this,' she was telling me, scraping her auburn fringe back from her face with one hand. 'I thought lunch was never going to finish.'

'Tell me about it,' I mumbled.

‘Did you notice?’ she asked, beginning to buck. ‘The vicar kept looking at my cleavage. Even’, she continued, moving faster now, ‘when he was humming the opening bars to “Jerusalem”. It – got – me – all – horny,’ she grunted.

‘But he’s about seventy,’ I pointed out, picturing the kind, grey-haired old man, nibbling at his biscuits and sipping his tea.

‘I – don’t – mean – *he* – got – me – horny,’ Rebecca explained. ‘I – mean – the – thought – of – doing – it – with – a – priest.’

‘I see,’ I said, although – strictly speaking – I didn’t.

Suddenly she slowed and leant forward, until her face was directly above mine. Drops of sweat fell from her brow on to my lips. ‘You’d wear a priest’s dog collar for me, wouldn’t you, if I bought you one?’

‘Uh, sure,’ I said, not wishing to derail her momentum.

A smile crossed her face, momentarily accentuating her cheekbones. Combined with the emerald-green glint of her eyes, it brought out the feline in her oval-shaped face, leaving me feeling strangely at her mercy.

‘I knew you would,’ she said.

She closed her eyes and I continued to lie beneath her, watching her enjoy herself. This isn’t to say that I wasn’t enjoying myself as well. I most certainly was. But still – putting my own pleasure aside for a moment – this was (and, indeed, still is) very much how I saw Rebecca during sex: *her* enjoying *herself*. Wherever her closed eyes had just transported her was somewhere I wasn’t invited and somewhere my presence wasn’t *required*.

It had taken me a while to realise this. When I’d started having sex with her I’d (rather naively, in retrospect) assumed that I – either through sheer animal magnetism or a fortunate combination of pheromones – had been the catalyst behind her insatiable sexual appetite and ensuing ecstatic delights. It hadn’t been until months later that I’d

come to understand quite how incidental I was to the whole process. I was a witness to her fantasies, an accessory to the fact of her libido, a personal personal assistant, but nothing more integral than that.

‘Oh, God,’ she suddenly moaned. ‘I – think – I’m – going – to –’

But before she got the chance, a man’s voice boomed her name out across the garden.

‘Oh, fuck,’ she growled through gritted teeth, hurriedly rolling off me. ‘Dad.’

A minute later we were sitting peacefully, both now fully dressed, on a cast-iron garden bench, just as her father came into sight.

George Dickenson is a lean man, at least six foot three in height, with a youthful, upright stance and a wide, square jaw. He’s always been good to me, ever since the first time we met. He treats me like a son, knowing that I no longer have a father of my own, and I, in turn, am always careful to show him the respect a father should deserve.

‘Ah,’ he said, putting his arm round Rebecca’s shoulders and giving her a hug, ‘there you both are. I’ve been looking for you everywhere.’

Rebecca picked at a thread of cotton hanging from the pocket of his striped, short-sleeved shirt. Like George, she’s slim, well-proportioned and, at five foot nine, just a few inches shorter than me.

‘I’ve been showing off the gardens to Fred,’ she told him. ‘They’re so pretty at this time of year.’

‘Been over to the pond yet?’ George asked me.

‘No.’

‘I’ve stocked it up with trout since your last visit,’ he went on to announce. He looked up, surveying the state of the sky, before raising a hand to smooth down his thinning grey hair. ‘Still plenty of light,’ he concluded, smiling first at Rebecca and then at me. ‘Mike’s feeding them at six

thirty. We could go over and watch, if you like ...' he suggested.

'Sure,' I said.

He turned to Rebecca and asked, 'How about you?'

'Fish,' she said with a grimace. 'Gross. No, I'll head back to the house for a shower.'

'As you like,' George told her, before kissing her on the forehead and setting off with me down the path.

A low stone wall separated the pond from the tennis court and, following George's lead, I sat down on it. Together we watched Mike, a middle-aged man from the village who helps George around the place, as he threw handfuls of feed into the wide round pond. Rainbow trout broke the surface instantaneously, causing it to boil like a pot of water on a stove.

George had just finished telling me about how he and his sister, Julia (who'd broken her neck falling off a horse when she'd been sixteen), had always come down here to cool off during the summer when they'd been kids. 'Childhood's a magical thing,' he said. 'Everything you learn about the world starts there. It's like being given a blank sheet and being told you can draw anything you want on it. It's up to you.' He looked up at me. 'You and Becky ...' he probed. 'Children ... are they something you're considering?'

'Children?' I teased him affectionately. 'Shouldn't we just start with one?'

'You're right, of course,' he conceded with a chuckle, digging out a cigar and lighter from his shirt pocket. 'It's none of my business.' But nevertheless he continued to stare at me as he lit his cigar.

'We've never talked about it,' I told him in deference to the lingering curiosity in his eyes. 'We've both been so busy since we met, you know, what with our careers taking up so much of our time and now the wedding as well.'

He nodded with understanding, but I knew that he wasn't satisfied.

‘We’re still young,’ I added weakly, suddenly seeing how important all this was to him.

‘Yes,’ he said, finally looking away and drawing reflectively on his cigar, ‘and you’ve got a whole future to build together. Why should you rush?’

We remained in silence for a minute or two and I stared across, over the walls and trees which lay between here and Thorn House.

Then George said, ‘I was thinking of putting up a marquee on the front lawn for the wedding, if the weather’s good.’

‘That’d be lovely,’ I agreed.

Mike threw a final handful into the pond and called over, ‘Till the morning, then, George.’

‘Right you are, Mike,’ George called back. ‘Six weeks,’ he then said, turning to face me. ‘Not long. It’s going to be a good day, eh? When our Becky transforms from Miss Dickenson into Mrs Wilson.’

Even after all these years Wilson, my own surname, still sounded to me like notes played on an out-of-tune piano. ‘Yes,’ I said, picturing myself out in the marquee, dancing with Rebecca. ‘I’m a lucky man.’

‘And so am I,’ said George. ‘I couldn’t have chosen a better husband for her myself.’

I nodded my head in appreciation of this comment and George looked away. ‘We should get going,’ he said, consulting his watch.

Following his lead, I rose and turned to face the house. The gardens were in full bloom and swallows circled above the chimneys. The sun hung low and shadows were beginning to creep across the ground. It was a perfect moment and I made a conscious effort of freeze-framing it, saving it up in its entirety for posterity, fearful, as I always am when anything gets too good, that it might not last, that every moment from here on would be downhill.

I heard George sigh beside me. 'I hope you and Becky will be as happy here one day as Mary and I are now,' he said, starting off down the path. 'I'm very proud, you know, very proud of you both, and very pleased indeed.'

I fell into step alongside him and, saying nothing, walked on, breathing in the smell of his cigar and listening to the sound of our shoes crunching along the gravel path. Maybe George was right and one day Rebecca and I would grow into the vacant roles he and Mary would leave behind. Maybe, I considered, that was where I'd find my comfort and my peace.

That was two weeks ago. Now - here on the roof terrace, waiting for Eddie to reappear - it's just gone one o'clock on a Friday afternoon in the middle of June in the year two thousand - or Y2K, depending on whether or not you bought into the whole millennium marketing deal.

I didn't. This was, I admit, partly due to an aversion on my behalf to commemorative merchandising of any sort - a psychosis which stems largely from being surrounded by the stuff at work. But mainly, my lack of Y2K jingoism can be put down to an innate dread of the actual event itself.

I don't mean the getting drunk and watching fireworks illuminate the recently refurbished London skyline side of it. I was there for that, part of the two-million-strong human concertina that squeezed and cheered its way up and down the banks of the River Thames. I got rained on with the best of them. I ate armpit and swapped sweat. No, I did all that and loved every second of it, and wouldn't have missed it for the world. When I say I'd been dreading the actual event itself, I mean just that. I mean the very moment when the twentieth century slid inexorably into the past.

From across the river I watched as Big Ben, like a referee at a boxing match, counted out the old millennium to the rising cheers of the crowd and introduced the new.

And it was then and only then – once I'd seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears – that I finally accepted the horrid truth: the future, *my* future – the part of my life that, up until this moment, had always seemed impossibly distant – had suddenly arrived.

'I love you, sweetie,' Rebecca told me.

'And I love you too,' I replied.

I held her in my drunken arms and kissed her rain-soaked face, and gazed up at the myriad of fireworks bursting across the inky depths of the night sky. Inside me, though, darkness remained. I felt the cold finger of death scraping his jagged fingernails across the sinews of my heart.

Surely, I told myself, this couldn't be true. The year two thousand couldn't really have arrived already, could it? But everywhere I looked, the answer came back 'yes'. In the tiny, almost imperceptible, wrinkles at the corners of Rebecca's eyes as she excitedly reminded me that this was the fourth new year we'd seen in together: yes. In her shoulder-length haircut that I still regarded as new, even though, I now realised, she'd first had the old auburn Rapunzel locks lopped off over two years ago: yes. In the familiar touch of her hands in mine, the segments of our fingers perfectly intertwined, as if they'd grown together that way like vines: yes. And there, in the miniature instamatic picture that Eddie thrust at me: the skin on my face somehow greyer than I remembered, the line of my hair somehow further back than I would have imagined, and the look of the cigarette hanging from my mouth somehow less James Dean than I would have wished for. Yes, yes and yes again.

It was, then, with a heavy heart that I, along with Rebecca, Eddie and the rest of our gang, set out on the slow trudge homewards across Westminster Bridge. Two thousand years of civilisation, I pondered, and what world-trembling contributions had I made? Had I invented the

wheel? No, I hadn't. Had I propounded the theory of relativity? Nope, not that either. Had I dreamt up the idea of a World Wide Web. Uh-huh, not me. So what *had* I accomplished with my allotted time? A job I was good at? Yes, I was lucky there. A woman I had fallen in love with and still loved? Yes, I was fortunate there, too.

There was little security in any of this, though. I could get fired from my job. I could get dumped from my relationship. I drank too much ... I smoked too much ... and I could therefore die. Even now, the walls of my blood vessels could be dilating, forming sacs ... An aneurysm could be but a blink away. And if that was indeed to be my fate, then who would remember me? What epitaph would they carve on my grave? *Here Lies Fred Wilson, Who Never Really Did That Much?* What else *could* they write? I wasn't religious. I wasn't political. I hadn't reproduced. Here I was, ageing by the second, moving closer to death with every breath I took, and what efforts had I made to sink my grip into life? None, came back the answer. None at all. I'd coasted. I'd procrastinated. I'd put off living till later.

Well, now was the time to do something about it. Now was the time for some New Year resolutions. Only this was no ordinary New Year and these would be no ordinary resolutions. These would be New Millennium resolutions, built to last a thousand years and capable of changing the course of a life – *my* life – for ever.

The cigarettes went first. I took one final drag of the Marlboro Light I was smoking, before sending it spinning and sparkling like a miniature Catherine wheel up into the sky. I then pulled the packet from my pocket, crushed it in my fist, and struggled away from Rebecca and the others. Breaking free from the flow of the crowd at the side of the road, I clambered over an unguarded police barrier and dropped down on to a patch of unlit wasteland at the edge of the river bank.

The noise of the crowd diminished immediately and, walking forward, I cast my cigarette packet down into the black and swirling waters of the Thames below. Standing there, with the suitably austere backdrop of the Houses of Parliament before me, I solemnly swore that I would smoke no more. I didn't want another bout of bronchitis like the one that had choked my throat down to the width of a pipe-cleaner the previous November. I'd smoked enough of my future years away already.

'What are you doing?' a voice – Rebecca's – called out.

I spun round from my reverie to see her peering over the police barrier. Her jacket collars were turned up and her ski hat was pulled down low over her brow. I didn't give myself time to think. Now was the time for action. If the cigarettes had been my first resolution, then Rebecca would be my second. 'Come here,' I shouted.

She screwed up her face in distaste. 'But it's filthy.'

I walked over to the barrier and stood beneath her. Reaching out my arms, I told her, 'Drop. I'll catch you. You'll be fine.'

'But why?' she asked, peering at me with suspicion.

'Because.'

'Because what?'

'Because I've got something to say and I need to say it in private.'

She lurched slightly, drunkenly, to the left. 'Can't it wait till we get home?' she asked. 'I'm freezing.'

'No, it can't,' I replied firmly. 'Just trust me. It'll be worth it. You'll see.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'It better be,' she said, unsmiling, before reluctantly climbing over the barrier and swinging down into my arms.

Gently, I lowered her to the ground. 'Don't move,' I told her, quickly taking a couple of steps back.

Her eyes flickered as she scanned the surrounding area for signs of danger. 'Hurry up,' she said. 'This place is

giving me the creeps.'

'What I want to know ...' I began.

But before I could say any more, my voice trailed off like a car radio in a tunnel. I opened my mouth to speak once more, but again with no success. It was like all the saliva had been drained from me, leaving my tongue as rough and as speechless as a cat's.

Rebecca looked me over as she might a collapsed drunk on the doorstep of her favourite designer boutique. 'If this is meant to be some kind of a joke ...' she warned.

I shook my head furiously, but still I couldn't speak. What was going on? I railed internally. Why had I dried up like this? Was it *me*? I'd made up my mind, hadn't I? This *was* what I wanted, wasn't it? She was my girlfriend of four years. She was beautiful and she was bright. We made each other laugh and the sex was fantastic. And I loved her. Of course I did.

Was it the thought of starting a family of my own, of finally stepping out from the debilitating shadow of my parents, then? No, security was something that I craved. Or was I simply afraid that Rebecca would say no, then? Was that what my tongue-tied state was all about? Of course, this was something I'd considered. God knew I wasn't perfect, and if God knew, then I sincerely doubted that Rebecca was going to be very far behind. But if she declined my offer, she declined... . There was nothing I could do about it, and there was certainly no point in letting it put me off asking her in the first place.

I lowered myself to my knees and knelt down on the ground.

Rebecca peered at me through the urban twilight. 'You're not going to puke, are you?' she asked.

Dumbly, I shook my head and watched as she heaved out a sigh of relief. I patted the rough earth before me.

'What?' she queried, cocking her head to one side as she picked at a fleck of dirt on her jeans. 'You don't expect me

to get down there with you, do you?’

I nodded my head.

She folded her arms across her chest. ‘Forget it. You’re pissed. Now get up before you get bitten by a rat.’

I sucked air into my lungs. ‘Please,’ I hissed. ‘Please ... for me ...’

‘I must be mad,’ she said, riffling through her bag and pulling out a curled-up copy of *Time Out*. She leant down and spread it out in front of me, telling me, ‘This had better be good,’ as she knelt down on top of it.

‘It is,’ I hissed, seizing her hands in mine. I don’t think I’d ever seen anyone looking so beautiful. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone looking so beautiful,’ I told her, tears welling up in my eyes.

‘And that’s it?’ she asked, failing to conceal her disappointment. ‘That’s what you wanted to tell me?’

Solemnly shaking my head, I took a deep breath. ‘I want ...’ I started to croak. Then, sliding my hands down over her thighs, I filled my lungs and blurted out: ‘You, Rebecca. I want you ...’

She stared at me with mounting disbelief. Then she stared down at my hands on her thighs. ‘Here?’ she queried. ‘Now?’

‘Yes,’ I wheezed at her. ‘Right here. Right now.’ My God, this was the biggest thing I’d ever said in my life.

I waited with bated breath for her answer and – there – something in my face must have touched her, because suddenly her expression softened.

‘Well,’ she said, a twinkle in her eyes, ‘I must admit ... the thought of all those people being so close ...’

‘What?’

‘... and those policemen ... on their big black stallions ... who could catch us at any second ...’

‘Sorry?’

But she wasn’t listening. ‘Not to mention the possibility of arrest and incarceration ... and ...’ – her eyes rolled

momentarily backwards – ‘... mmm ... handcuffs ...’ Lost, I watched in silence as she bit down on her lip in consideration for a couple of seconds. ‘OK,’ she finally decided. ‘You’re on.’

‘OK?’ I checked. This was hardly the outright embrace or denial of my proposal that I’d been expecting.

‘But it’ll have to be quick,’ she added.

‘Quick?’ We were talking about a lifetime of commitment here.

Then she stood up. ‘Lucky I’m not wearing any knickers,’ she said with a wink, before glancing around excitedly. ‘Where do you want me?’ she hissed. ‘Up against the barrier? Or how about over that mooring post?’ Then, catching my expression, she chastised, ‘Don’t tell me you’re going to chicken out now ...’

Comprehension struck me and, hurriedly, I pulled her back down.

‘No,’ I blurted out, ‘you don’t understand. I ... I don’t *want* you ...’

I felt her whole being tense. ‘But –’

‘No, I do, but I mean more than that ... I mean I want *you* ...’ I explained. ‘I mean now ... for ever ...’ I hesitated, desperate. ‘Do you understand?’

‘I thought ...’ She shoved her face up close to mine, staring hard into my eyes, as what I was saying finally began to dawn on her. ‘You don’t mean ... ?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered. ‘Yes, I do. I want you to marry me.’

There! It was out. My eyes locked on hers and I awaited her response.

For a moment she said nothing and instead simply stared at me agog. Then, slowly but surely, a smile spread across her face. ‘Oh, my God!’ she gasped, looking dizzily about and starting to laugh. ‘I thought you wanted to ...’ Her voice pitched upwards. ‘Oh, my God!’ she shrieked, throwing her arms round my neck. She squeezed me so hard that I thought my ribs would crack. ‘Of course I will,

Fred.' She sighed, breathing warm air on to the side of my face. 'Of course I'll marry you.'

Opening my eyes now, the first thing they settle on is Eddie's pack of Marlboro reds on the window box beside his empty chair. A momentary pang of envy cuts deep as, above me, the sun continues to beat down. They're the same brand that got me started as a teenager and, on this perfect day, I remember other perfect days from my youth, hours wasted chatting and smoking out in the woods near the village I grew up in, careless of the passing of time.

'OK,' Eddie tells me, re-emerging. He sits down, picks up the camcorder and points it at me. The lens cover slides silently open. 'Give me some background and then we can call it a day.'

'What kind of thing?' I ask, weary now, hoping we're nearly done.

'I don't know.' He ponders before deciding, 'Family. Tell me about them.'

Eddie's heard all this before, of course, but I repeat it anyway, for the camera's sake. 'My father's dead,' I say. 'And my mother lives in Scotland.'

Eddie beckons me with his hand, signalling, I assume, that this is not enough.

'Mum never remarried,' I say, 'but she's got a boyfriend.' I picture Alan, the fifty-five-year-old schoolteacher she now lives with. 'She met him through the church. He's nice enough in a quiet sort of way, but I've never really got to know him. He's got grown-up kids of his own.'

I think of Mum and how we grew apart in the years following my father's death, and how, instead of being pushed closer together by our mutual loss, we were driven further apart. And I think about how glad I was when she got it together with Alan, because it meant she was no longer my exclusive responsibility.

'I don't see her as much as I should,' I say. 'You grow up, you grow apart, you know?'

Eddie says nothing; he knows Mum hardly ever phones me.

'I think she's happy,' I conclude, 'and that's what matters ...'

Eddie still seems to be waiting, so – a little reluctantly – I go on: 'My father died of a heart attack when I was fifteen years old.'

Again, the hand signal from Eddie

I shrug. 'I try not to think about him,' I say. 'It's easier that way.'

I'm not intending to say any more, but then I suddenly remember how my father used to sit on the edge of my bed and sing me to sleep.

'I used to wish that he'd come back,' I admit. 'I used to hope that' – I search the sky for words, then lower my eyes – 'he'd somehow *stop* being dead. I don't know ... that probably sounds crazy, but I don't mean it that way ... What I mean is, I had so many questions for him, *about* him, and then, well, then he wasn't there any more and I suddenly realised I'd never get any answers. It's the same for everyone, I suppose,' I say, beginning to wish I hadn't started getting into this and deciding to bring it all to a close. 'There are always going to be regrets.'

There's silence for a second or two, then Eddie switches off the camera and rests it on his thigh. 'Thanks,' he says, 'that's plenty for me to be getting on with.' Leaning forward, he peers at me. 'Are you all right,' he asks.

'Yeah,' I say. 'Why shouldn't I be?'

'Your face,' he explains. 'You look flushed. I think you've caught a bit too much sun.'

I touch my brow with my fingertips and then stare at them: they're shiny with sweat. 'I'm fine,' I say, managing a smile. 'Just dehydrated,' I guess.

In the kitchen, I down a pint of water over the sink, but I still can't shake the heat that's built up inside me. Refilling my glass, I head for my bedroom and pull the door closed behind me. I lie down on the bed and stare up at the ceiling, wishing there were a fan in here to cool my skin.

I close my eyes and try to sleep. But I can't. Instead, memories rise unbidden. Too tired to do otherwise, I succumb to it all, watching as scenes from my childhood and adolescence flicker like a silent movie through my mind. They come as a shuffled chain of facts and scenes to begin with: the games I played with my friends at lunchtimes, the way we used magnifying glasses to write our names on the soles of our shoes in the summers and the cold days we spent pummelling one another with snowballs in the winters. Then come other days, from even further back, days I haven't thought about in years.

My father's Christian name was Miles and I don't remember ever calling him anything else. He was an endless source of mystery to me when I was a child. He was six foot one, the same height as I am now, and his eyes lay narrow and deep in their sockets, like those of a wolf.

Other than that, his appearance was forever changing. Moustaches, beards and sideburns came and went. Trouser widths straightened and flared. One week he was in polka-dots, the next week it was stripes. It seemed to me, growing up, that every time I came close to knowing who he was, he promptly changed into someone else.

Only his absences from home remained a constant. He worked uptown in the West End of London, sometimes for what felt like weeks on end without a break, the same as he had done ever since Mum had given birth to me, his only son.

My mother, Louisa, used to tell me a story about him coming into my room to kiss me goodnight on my seventh birthday. Most of it, though, I remember clearly myself.