

Laura
the
Explorer



S A R A H B E G G

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To Mum, who inspired my love of reading.

And to Dad, the best storyteller I know.

1

“Don’t forget you always have a room at home, darling,” Mum said, her concerned face peering around the side of the passenger seat at me.

“She’s fine, Cath,” Dad scolded, but I saw his eyes crinkle with worry as he studied me in the rear-view mirror.

I sat up straighter and rolled my eyes at them. “Thanks, Mum, I know. And don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I *have* lived out of home before, remember?”

Mum shot Dad a look before turning back to face me. I was actually surprised she was able to swivel so far around in her seat with the seatbelt clutched to her chest like a life vest.

“Yes, darling, but you know—you were married then,” she said in that soft and caring voice that made tears spring to my eyes all over again. I didn’t need to be reminded that I was twenty-seven and already getting a divorce. Nor did I need to be reminded of the past six months living back at my parents’ house, the first few of which were spent holed up in my old bedroom, with its pink wallpaper and unicorn feature wall, hugging Starlight, my old My Little Pony toy, while watching *The Notebook* on repeat and going through mountains of tissues and green tea.

On the plus side, I did lose about five kilos. But anyway, I was determined to put that in the past and move on. It was time to get my life back together

and stop dwelling on my failed relationship.

“The apartment is really nice!” I said brightly. “And it’ll be good for me to have roommates.”

“What are they like?” Dad asked.

“Well, Ben is really nice, he’s the one I met the other day when I went to see the place.”

“Ben?” Mum sounded intrigued. “You didn’t mention you were living with boys!”

“Only one boy,” I said hurriedly. Knowing Mum, she’d probably romanticise this whole situation and convince herself Ben and I would become an item. “Plus, Ben is way younger than I am—I think he’s only twenty-three. So it’ll be like living with a little brother.”

“And the other roommate—she’s a girl, isn’t she?” Mum asked hopefully.

“What’s she like?” Dad piped in.

“Erm, I haven’t actually met her yet,” I said.

That was probably a mistake, because Mum swivelled around and eyed me again. “You haven’t met someone you’re going to live with?” she demanded. “What if she’s a fruitcake! She might go into your room when you’re not home and put on all of your underwear!”

“Muum.” I shook my head. “I’m sure she’ll be great. She’s British, apparently.”

Mum and Dad glanced at each other in alarm.

“This is the street, isn’t it?” Dad asked as we turned down a narrow road lined with low-rise apartment buildings.

“Yes—this is it!” I leaned forward, eagerly trying to see out the front window. “That’s the building over there!”

“Are you sure?” Mum asked, peering out the window with a new look of concern on her face. “It looks a bit ... old.”

“Well, yes. But you know what they say—go for the worst house on the nicest street and all that.”

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“I think that’s buying a place, love, not renting,” Dad said.

“We’re here now,” I said positively. “Come on, wait until you see the actual apartment, it’s really nice on the inside.”

Dad pulled in to the visitors’ parking space and we all clambered out of the car. I hurried over to the front door and pressed the intercom button for unit three.

“Hello?” said a male voice.

“Ben? It’s Laura.”

“Come on up!”

There was a loud buzzing sound and I pulled open the front door.

“Don’t worry about that yet!” I shouted at my parents, who already had the boot open and were starting to pull out my quilt and table lamp. “Come up first and have a look.”

We filed up the stairs, Dad carrying the table lamp, anyway. As we reached the landing, the door swung open and a young friendly guy with shaggy blond hair grinned at us.

“Hey, Laura!” He stood back and let us file through. “You must be the parents, nice to meet you!”

Dad seemed pleasantly surprised as Ben shook his hand enthusiastically, and Mum even giggled and blushed as Ben gave her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

The apartment was warm and cosy—not too big, but not small, either. There were surf boards decorating one wall, a funky driftwood coffee table surrounded by two lived-in couches and two beanbags, plus a big TV on one side.

“He’s a bit young, isn’t he?” Mum whispered to me, as Ben headed over to the other side of the room.

“Young for what?” I looked at her quizzically. She was eyeing Ben with a distinct look of disappointment on her face.

Mum sighed. “Oh, I don’t know. I guess I hoped he might be more ...

your type.”

“Mum!” I managed to make my whisper convey a decent amount of outrage. “He’s my new flatmate, not my boyfriend!”

She huffed quietly again. “Well, at least this building is in a nice spot. There are lots of good-looking boys that live on the northern beaches, you know.”

Ben started walking back towards us and I felt my face flush. Oh God, trust my mother to make things awkward straightaway.

“Come and look at the view!” I said loudly, drawing my parents over to the best part of the apartment. I shuffled them out onto the small balcony and indicated the spot, in between the two apartment buildings shadowing ours, where you could see a glimpse of the ocean beyond.

“It’s the beach, Mum!” I clarified, in case she didn’t spot it.

Mum wasn’t admiring the view, though—she was looking towards one of the other apartment buildings instead. “There’s a naked man walking around in there!”

“What? Where?” I peered eagerly and—okay, wow. There was definitely a naked man in there. He was quite fit for an old guy.

“We call him Fabio!” Ben said happily, joining us on the balcony. “He likes to do naked yoga in front of the living-room window in the mornings.”

Mum’s eyes had turned into saucers.

“Come see my room!” I herded my parents back inside and away from the view of Fabio, who was now doing lunges across his apartment. Honestly, I know you need to try to get your knee on the ground when lunging, but he was likely to end up with carpet burn on a different appendage doing that.

We made it inside and crammed into my new small room. My parents looked around and made some polite murmuring noises, and did the same thing when I gave them a quick tour of the bathroom.

“Okay, let’s bring my stuff up,” I said.

Dad sprang into action, taking charge of the move, and Ben chipped in eagerly, chattering away to my dad about cars and suspension. Mum

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flittered around, trying to help but mostly getting in the way.

I'd just dumped a bag of clothes on the floor when I found myself alone in the apartment, everyone else down at the car. It seemed eerily quiet in there, and I walked into the living room, surveying my new home.

Well, here I am. A new, fresh start. In a weird *deja-vu* moment, I remembered a similar time, barely more than a year ago when Jack and I stood on the verandah of our brand-new cottage. Well, the cottage wasn't new—it was an old, practically falling-down shack. But to us it was new.

Newlyweds. High-school sweethearts. *How sweet it is, Laura, how romantic, that you married your first and only boyfriend*, everyone had said. *Such a fairytale, how rare.*

Eleven years we'd been together. Eleven years! That made me sound so ancient. But when you start "going out" when you are fifteen, the time quickly adds up. When we got engaged at twenty-four, everyone said it was "about time". We'd been together for almost a decade by that point, after all.

And then the wedding. Oh God, the *wedding*. I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing the tears away. It was such a beautiful day. I remembered Mum and Dad's proud, shining faces, and the faces of all our family and friends. They all saw it. They were all witness to us pledging our lives to each other, vowing to love, honour and respect each other for the rest of our lives.

What a joke that was.

I walked over to the balcony and took a few deep breaths of fresh air, wrapping my arms around my chest as if I could squeeze the memory into non-existence. Because that was the most embarrassing part of all this. The fact that we were married. It was such a public statement, a huge announcement that you know each other best in the world and want to spend the rest of your lives together.

Only as it turned out, I didn't know Jack best. I was his partner for eleven years and I didn't know. And now, when people looked at me—people who knew why we were no longer together—I felt the shame and humiliation burning in me every time.

2

I cracked the top off my beer with a wooden penis bottle opener. “It’s Kalina’s, honestly!” Ben said when I raised my eyebrows at him. “All the other ones keep disappearing.”

My parents had finally gone home. It had been a mission trying to get them out the door. Dad and Ben wouldn’t stop chatting, and Mum kept trying to steal glances out the windows at Fabio and asking for more cups of tea.

“So, where’s Kalina?” I asked, slumping down onto one of the couches. My other new flatmate had been conspicuously absent all afternoon.

“She’s at work,” Ben replied, flopping onto the other couch. “At least I think she’s at work.”

“On a Saturday?”

“Yeah—she works down at The Pony.”

“What’s that?”

“The Blonde Pony? Haven’t you ever been there? It’s one of the bars down in Manly.”

“Oh, right. No, I haven’t been there. I haven’t really had a social life for the last ... well, for a while. And there weren’t many bars around where I used to live.”

“You lived somewhere out west, didn’t you?” Ben asked, crinkling his

forehead thoughtfully.

“Yeah—sort of near Windsor.” I smiled, knowing he’d have no idea where the tiny suburb was. “But I’ve been at my parents’ place for the last six months.”

“Right. So not many bars around there, then?” he asked.

“There are a few. Just not any people around that I wanted to go out with.”

“Don’t you have a sister?”

“Yeah. But she’s been overseas ever since I moved back home—trekking around South America with some friends.” I smiled wistfully, imagining letting Elle take me out with all her 21-year-old mates. While she’d skyped me from overseas as much as she could, the age gap between us was pretty big and I didn’t think Elle really understood how devastating the whole Jack-thing was for me.

“That sucks,” Ben said, taking a swig of his beer. “Well, The Pony’s a pretty weird place. You get some interesting people down there, which is why I think Kal likes it—she loves talking to weirdos.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And how would you define a weirdo?”

“Oh, there’re all sorts. Anyone you’d normally steer clear of in a bar, she’ll walk right up to them and start a conversation.”

“And that’s not your idea of fun?”

“It’s certainly entertaining to watch.”

I squished myself further down into the couch as Ben turned on the TV. The Food Network came on and we watched for a few minutes as an American chef tried to cut up vegetables with his arms tied to a giant wooden pole across his back, his competitor attempting to cook chicken in a jaffle maker.

For a while, I was totally engrossed in just how nice the moment was. Sitting on a couch, drinking a beer on a Saturday afternoon without having my parents flapping around telling me to get up and do something. I’d really

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missed living out of home. Though in the previous scenario, I would have been snuggled up on the couch with my husband. Me blissfully happy, Jack obviously hiding how unhappy he was.

My stomach gave a little violent twist. It had been doing that a bit lately. It was like every time I thought I was doing well, and really getting over Jack, a new memory would surface and then the pain would jump out at me again and shout, “Surprise! You’re not over him yet!”

I once read that it took half as long as you were together with someone to get over them. If that was true, then I still had five years left to get over Jack.

Ha. Ha. Ha.

“What do you normally do for dinner around here?” I asked, trying to distract myself. “Is it communal cooking or an every-man-for-himself type thing?”

“Lately, it’s been just me cooking,” Ben said with a laugh. “Kalina refuses. Or maybe I banned her.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Anyway, whatever you do, don’t let Kalina cook for you. She’s terrible at it.”

“Noted.”

“One time she cooked for us—we had Dave living in your room then—and it was this thing that she called a ‘fish pie’. But it turned out to be frozen fish fingers and cheese wrapped up in puff pastry with tomato sauce and scrambled eggs on top. I think it was the first and only time I ever saw Dave not finish a meal.”

“Wow. But with all that egg-and-fish goodness?”

“I know. How could those flavours *not* go together?”

“Okay. So no cooking by Kalina. I’m guessing there are lots of takeaway nights, then?”

Ben shrugged. “I’ve always done a lot of cooking. I have a pretty big family and my mum’s always been a bit laidback in the kitchen. She thinks most things come from jars and packets. I started cooking a few years ago

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when I lived at home, and I cook most nights here now. Kalina normally just chips in for groceries, and I get to pick what we eat.”

“Well, I’m also happy to buy groceries.” I smiled hopefully. Not that I couldn’t cook. Of course I could. But I was more of a “Ben’s Mum” type of cook. I mean, weren’t Patak’s and Old El Paso mixes dietary staples?

“Sure, if you want.” Ben shrugged, not seeming bothered. “Though I’ll be honest—Saturday nights are takeaway nights.”

“Excellent—I’m starving!”



The next morning, I woke early and saw sunlight peeking in around unfamiliar blinds. *Oh God, where was I?* But then—oh, right! I was in my new bedroom, in my new apartment, on the other side of Sydney from where I used to live.

I took a moment to peer around at the room while holding the quilt up under my chin. I’d unpacked and set up all my things the night before, so aside from the fact that I was somewhere completely new, the place had a nice, homey feel.

I was half tempted to scrunch down in the bed again and go back to sleep for a few hours, but I mentally shook myself and pushed away that idea. The last few months had been filled with long sleep-ins and depressive afternoon naps. So much sleeping, in fact, that my parents had started to entertain the idea that I’d somehow developed chronic fatigue. I could have been a polar bear in hibernation, except that instead of trying to survive I appeared to have given up the will to live.

But anyway. This, now, was supposed to be my fresh start. I’d already promised myself that it was time to get my life back together, time to start “seizing each day” so to speak.

After determinedly throwing off the blankets, I went across to the

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window and the beautiful, welcoming view made me smile. Sure, I was mostly looking directly into another apartment building (in fact, I was looking right into Fabio's place), but just like from the balcony, I could also see a tiny glimpse of the sea.

I gazed at the view for a few minutes but then felt at a loss regarding what to do next. The whole day was stretching in front of me, long and empty, with nothing planned. It was weird no longer having that partner there that I could do everything with. My parents had helped fill that gap over the last six months with an almost manic need to get me doing things. Most Sundays they'd be up early knocking on my bedroom door, offering eggs or pancakes or French toast or whatever they thought would make me feel better that morning, and then dragging me off to some flower nursery, or boat expo (they've never been able to afford a boat, but they liked to pretend they would one day).

But I wasn't at their house anymore. No one was going to come barging into my room with a bright idea of what we should be doing for the day. I was now independent. Alone. Well, sort of. I'd chickened out a bit on the whole "living on my own" thing by moving into a share house. Plus, I'd made sure my two potential flatmates were both single before handing over the bond. I actually had a look at a different share house with two other girls, but they both had boyfriends and the thought of sitting on a couch next to some happily cosy, cuddling couples made me want to retch.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back and surveyed my tidy room again and then realised that I did have a lot to do that day. First up, I needed to go and buy myself some food. Because that's what people did when they shared flats with others. They contributed to the household.

I started rummaging through my drawers and wardrobe until I located my workout clothes and runners. They weren't what I'd usually go to the supermarket in, but hey, this was Manly! Maybe I'd go for a quick run along the beach while I was at it. Pulling the garments on and sweeping my hair

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back into a ponytail, I made a quick trip to the bathroom.

My reflection looked back at me from the mirror. A bit too pale, eyes a bit too sunken. At least I no longer had that exhausted, slightly ill look that had become very familiar after my marriage meltdown. For a good month there, I'd barely even washed my hair. I think I went three whole weeks before my mum had a fit and insisted on literally washing me herself, scrubbing brush and all. That humiliation had snapped me back into a regular bathing routine. And now, I had started thinking about that phase in my life as the Black Period; a sinkhole in time that just sucked everything away and morphed it into a lump of memories that was best forgotten.

As I brushed my teeth, I surveyed the seemingly hundreds of products lining the sink, windowsill and just about every available surface. There were hair products, skin products and makeup everywhere. Ben had his own en suite bathroom, so everything in here (aside from the small section of space I had commandeered last night for my things) was Kalina's. My eyes shifted to the shower and I paused, mid-tooth brush.

A Tupperware container sat in the shower caddy with ... butter chicken? I sniffed at it dubiously, and yes, that was definitely butter chicken with rice sitting there in the shower. Interesting. Come to think of it, I had woken up at some point in the night and heard a lot of banging around in the kitchen—obviously Kalina arriving home.

I rinsed my mouth and vacated the Indian-dinner crime scene, quietly exiting the apartment amidst snores coming from one of the other two bedrooms.

The air was fresh and crisp when I stepped outside, and as I took a few deep breaths of the pine-scented breeze, I felt my mood start to lift. I took a few wrong turns in the back streets of Manly, but eventually I found my way down to a gorgeous sunny walkway that ran all along the beach.

And wow—there were so many people already down there! I thought I was doing really well getting up so early, but there were people everywhere—

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women power-walking together, others running along with their prams, couples walking dogs, and some just strolling along with coffee in hand. Down on the sand, people were already sunbaking in the early-morning sun, their bags full of supplies for the whole day sitting next to them. Out in the water, surfers bobbed along, waiting for a decent wave.

And everyone was wearing super-trendy clothes. There were girls in patterned leggings with matching crop tops, fluoro visors and delicate silver jewellery. Guys jogged along in brightly coloured sneakers and black shorts, most of them sans shirts, which I didn't mind.

I didn't mind that at all.

Gawd—look at that one! Dark, Mediterranean skin, small chest tattoo. Broody eyes and dark hair. Oh shit, he started looking at me.

Awkward.

But anyway, there was something strange going on down there. Something ... unusual. I couldn't quite put my finger on it until ... yes! I knew what it was: everywhere I looked, no matter what people were doing, they all seemed to have one thing in common—they were all really fit. It was different to where Jack and I used to live. I mean, in the western suburbs' defence, it was a totally growing, cosmopolitan area. Sure, there may not be a nice beach-front walkway to jog along and show off your new workout wear, but there were loads of restaurants, cafes, shopping centres and superstores. Plus, far more paddocks and wildlife. In fact, you could probably go do some horse wrangling if you really wanted to give your activewear a go.

I glanced down at my own clothes—semi-worn-out leggings and an orange top that I only just realised had totally faded in the washing machine. Hmm. Note to self: get down to Lorna Jane and update fitness clothes.

Second note to self: get fit. And buy some fake-tan spray.

I picked up my pace and got into a power-walking swing. I even smiled wanly at a few people that I passed, but they gave me weird looks, so I

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stopped smiling and tried to swing my arms marginally less.

Up ahead, I could see a big cluster of volleyball nets along part of the beach with heaps of people playing. As I passed, I slowed to take a better look, and they were pretty good!

It didn't seem possible, but the girls playing volleyball were even more fit-looking than the ones I had already seen. They had ripped stomachs, toned arms and powerful-looking legs, all of which were being shown off in tiny sports bikinis.

And the guys. Oh wow.

My eyes were drawn to one guy in particular—a tall, tanned, well-muscled guy who looked to be about thirty. He was wearing nothing but board shorts and he'd certainly be described as fit. Super fit. Seriously, I didn't know abs could actually look like that. He also had that longish, shaggy hair that seemed to be popular with surfers, which he kept flicking back off his face as he waited for the ball to be served.

My eyes slid down over his lean chest and stomach and my steps started to falter of their own accord. The sunlight caught on his eyes, which were a brilliantly vibrant blue.

He looked up at me.

Our eyes locked and I felt my breath catch. *God, his eyes are amazing.* It was like staring up at the sky on a cloudless day and admiring the beautiful, crystal blue that was stretched out above you. I was becoming lost in them, drawn in like Narcissus.

And then he frowned.

Oh shit, what was I doing? Heat rushed into my face as I realised that I'd just completely stopped walking and was staring at him, no doubt with a weird kind of drugged-out grin on my face. *Stop being creepy, Laura. You can't just stand around staring at people!* And then he was looking at me quizzically, as if trying to work out if he knew me.

I broke contact and turned away, my face burning. Argh! How super

awkward.

Luckily, a running group suddenly engulfed me, with people jogging past and blocking his view of me. I made a split-second decision and started running with them, caught up in their midst. I was like David Copperfield, doing a great disappearing act.

The group was moving really fast and some of them gave me annoyed looks, so I dropped out again, breathing heavily. Looking back, I was a good fifty metres away from the volleyball nets. I could still see the hot guy, but he'd returned to the game, his back to me.

Ahh ... what a back! It was all lean and muscled, with sweat running down the middle ...

I forced myself to turn away and keep walking, though I couldn't help a smile cracking over my face. Spotting a supermarket along the next street, I remembered the reason I'd come out walking in the first place.

Picking up a basket at the entry, I started strolling around the aisles and grabbing random items. But I was having trouble concentrating on what I needed, my thoughts absorbed by the shirtless, golden-skinned volleyball guy with the shaggy hair and sky-blue eyes that seemed to have imprinted themselves on my mind.

The thought sent a warm glow through me and I shivered, surprising myself. Obviously, dating and sleeping with new people was going to be part and parcel of being single, and of course it had crossed my mind. But this was the first time since Jack and I had split that I'd actually looked at another person (i.e. a real person, not Ryan Gosling or Chris Hemsworth's on-screen characters) and *felt* something. As in, felt that I wouldn't mind getting all naked and pressing up against another person again.

Huh. Maybe I really was ready for this new beginning—in every way.

3

It was mid-morning when I got back to the apartment. Ben was sitting on the couch, bleary-eyed and messy-looking, eating a bowl of cereal and watching TV.

“Morning!” I said cheerily as I walked in with my armful of groceries.

“Mor-fing,” he replied zombie-like. He was even chewing his cereal as if in a trance.

I left him be and started unpacking my things. Just as I was finishing up, I heard Kalina’s bedroom door open, and a moment later a girl wearing an oversized *Sesame Street* t-shirt appeared in the kitchen yawning loudly and stretching her arms dramatically.

“You must be the new flatmate!” Kalina said brightly in a London accent.

“Yes.” I smiled. “Laura.”

“I’m so glad you’re a girl!” she said, walking past me to the fridge and pulling out a bottle of orange juice. “It’s been a total man-cave around here for too long.”

“It wasn’t a man-cave!” Ben called out from the couch.

Kalina rolled her eyes at me before opening the juice and drinking it straight from the bottle. “Ben’s not so bad,” she whispered conspiratorially. “That Dave, though—hopefully, he hasn’t left any residual man-smell in

your room.”

“I haven’t noticed anything,” I said, scrunching my nose up. “But I’ll double-check later.”

“Good idea. So, Laura, you’re single, aren’t you?”

My stomach clenched involuntarily.

Single. I hated that word.

But yes. Yes of course I was. At least “single” sounded better than “separated”. And soon it would be “divorced”.

“Yeah, I am,” I said, trying to make it sound like a positive thing. “You are too, right?”

“Yep.” Kalina grinned, putting away the orange juice. “Ben and I both are. It makes things a lot more fun around here.”

A sudden image of bizarre naked orgies appeared in my mind, and for a second I wondered if I’d made a terrible decision. What did she mean by that comment? Do Ben and Kalina sleep together? And would *I* be expected to participate?

“I’m working at The Pony again tonight,” Kalina continued, not noticing my startled expression. “You should come down for some drinks. You too, Ben,” she added. “It’s a great place to hang out in—loads of awesome people there. What do you say, Laura?”

I hesitated, frowning briefly. “I have work tomorrow.”

“So what?” Kalina replied. “Sunday sessions are the best! You don’t have to stay out long. And it really is just around the corner from here.”

Okay, I wasn’t really expecting that. I mean, of course I was sort of hoping that my new flatmates might want to go out drinking together (God knew I certainly needed to go out with people my age, having had my parents act as my “best friends” for six months). But I’d only just met Kalina and was still feeling drained after the move.

“Go on—I’ll come down too if you want,” Ben called from the couch. “It can be a ‘welcome to the flat’ sort of thing.”

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“Yes, perfect!” Kalina said, looking at me as if I was a new and exciting pet. “What do you say? I’ll even make drinks on the house. Well, so long as my boss is out,” she added with a wink.

“Well ... okay, yes!” I said, smiling.

Work tomorrow? Fuck it. This was operation “fresh start” after all, and sitting on the couch watching TV all night wasn’t conducive to that plan.

“Wicked! We’ll have a great time.” Kalina grinned again as she walked past me and headed into the bathroom. “Oh!” I heard her exclaim loudly from inside. “There’s my curry!”



God, was I ready to be going out to a bar? I mean honestly, I’d only just moved in yesterday and that was a huge step in itself. My body imprint was probably still sitting there on my parents’ couch. Was I ready to start acting like a single person?

But obviously, yes, this was one of the objectives of moving into a shared flat in a trendy area—to go out and make new friends, far away from my old disaster of a life. To help me to move forward. Plus, it was a “Sunday session” as Kalina called it. Just a small group of new friends, sitting in a bar drinking casually together. Nothing to worry about.

The “interesting patronage” description that Ben used for the clientele at the Blonde Pony was pretty spot on. The place was half-full with a mix of uni students, musicians or couples out on their second date.

The decor was fabulous—all vintage-style posters and shelves of trinkets reminiscent of an old British pub. There was a long bar with stools for individuals or couples to chat or watch the bartenders, and Ben and I commandeered two of said stools so Kalina could entertain us.

“That guy over there,” she said, indicating with her eyes a middle-aged man wearing chinos and a Bintang t-shirt. “He keeps offering to take me

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out on his boat one weekend. He's loaded, he reckons, just got rid of an ex-wife, too."

"What's stopping you, then?" Ben asked, eyes twinkling.

"Hey, I'm not that bad!" Kalina said. "Besides, if I wanted a sugar daddy I wouldn't just take up the first offer that came along."

"So she says." Ben winked at me.

An ice cube sailed across from behind the bar and whacked Ben on the shoulder.

"You're too young to even know about such things, little Benny," Kalina cooed patronisingly.

"Hey, just don't get any cougar ideas on my friends," Ben shot back.

I happily watched the banter between Kalina and Ben, already feeling the effects of—what was it, my third beer? They'd shared the flat for over a year and had obviously become really good friends in that time. I'd also dismissed my earlier fear that they hooked up every now and then; they acted more like brother and sister than anything else.

"How about you, Laura?" Kalina asked, and I realised I'd tuned out of the conversation.

"Hmm?"

"Worst first date you've ever been on," Ben repeated.

"Oh."

Well, this was embarrassing. I should have expected it. I mean, isn't that what single people do—sit around and compare dating stories? But Jack and I were high-school sweethearts; we didn't even really have a first date as such, we just started hooking up behind the music hall. And since then—well, apart from my mother's attempts to set me up with Eric, the guy who works at the RSL bistro we'd been frequenting every Friday night for the past six months—there'd been no movement on the dating front. In fact, up until very recently, the very thought of dating had me bursting into tears.

"Actually, I haven't been out with anyone since I split up with my ex. I

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mean, we're still technically married." I gave a phony kind of laugh, which I was sure neither of them bought.

"That's right, Ben mentioned you were recently separated," Kalina said, frowning. "But what about your first date with him? Or before him?"

I could barely meet their eyes as I mumbled my response. "Well, Jack and I never really had a first date, we just sort of started seeing each other. And there wasn't anyone before. I mean, we were fifteen when we first got together."

I looked up, giving a weak smile as if this was all just a funny story. But their reactions were far from delighted. Instead, it was like I'd just dropped a grenade right there, in the middle of the table. There was a moment of confusion when I could see their minds working—doing the maths. And then that tiny recoil, that look of shock as they figured it out.

"Noo!" Ben said, right as Kalina gasped, "What?!"

"Yeah." I gave that weak, forced smile again, dropping my eyes to my beer glass. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Hang on, hang on, hang on!" Kalina shook her head. "How long were the two of you together for?"

"Eleven years." I stared morosely into my beer.

Ben pressed his hands onto his head as if his mind was going to explode out of it. "Eleven years ago I was only twelve!"

"Wow, you *are* a baby," I said, trying to make a joke.

"So, let me get this straight." Kalina looked at me intently. "You've only ever dated the one guy?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"Does that mean that you've only ever *slept* with one person?" Kalina asked, leaning in conspiratorially with a look of fascination on her face.

I glared at her. "Well yes, obviously!"

"That must be *so* strange! I mean, how do you even know if he was any good in bed? You'd have nothing to gauge it by. I mean, you might have been

putting up with really awful sex all these years and you'd never even know!"

If only she knew the real story, it would be funny how accurate she probably was.

I shrugged. "Plenty of people marry their high-school sweethearts or first boyfriends. It's not that unusual."

Ben and Kalina shared a wide-eyed look.

"So, if you were together for that long, then you must have done loads of experimenting in the bedroom, right? Like, kinky stuff with toys and costumes and—"

"Okay, way too much info!" Ben stood up abruptly and walked off towards the bathroom.

Kalina turned back to me with delighted anticipation. "Come on, the longer you're together the kinkier things get, right?"

Oh God. I could feel it. This was the moment it was all going to come out. Kinky? The absurdity of that suggestion made me unsure whether I was about to start laughing hysterically or crying.

"Things didn't get ... I mean ..." I shook my head. "Kinky is not really how I'd describe the situation." My voice sounded hollow, dead.

"What happened?" Kalina asked softly, leaning even closer. The atmosphere had suddenly shifted, and I knew Kalina realised it, too.

What happened? That one question was enough to make the memory of that day come flooding back to me, like a blinding light suddenly flashing across my eyes, completely unavoidable and just as painful ...

It was a normal Saturday morning, just like every other Saturday morning since we'd moved into our cottage. The mortgage payments were a killer—neither of us had really anticipated just how much we'd miss those extra few hundred dollars each week. But that didn't matter. We were working through things. I was sure I'd be able to get a pay rise, maybe even a promotion at work soon. And Jack was on the up at his law firm. Soon he'd

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be earning a great income. Which was good, because I was already doing the research into maternity leave. I mean, imagine! Nine, maybe twelve months off work! It was what dreams were made of, wasn't it? No longer going into the office, no longer doing the nine-to-five (Or the eight-to-six as it more often was). I'd almost entirely convinced myself I was ready for kids (was anyone ever *really* sure?) and one of my best friends, Louise, was also talking about starting a family with Simon. Plus, Mum had already offered to come round all the time to babysit once we needed it, which would be good, because then Louise and I could go shopping or go get our nails done or whatever it was that new mums did.

I pulled on my oversized fleecy dressing gown and padded my way out into the kitchen. Jack was already sitting on the couch in the living room eating cereal, watching *Weekend Sunrise*. As I put the bread in the toaster and put the kettle on to boil, I wasn't really thinking about anything important. Probably imagining what we could have for dinner that night. Picturing the drive to Woollies, where I'd park so I could pop into Priceline at the same time.

I didn't even notice Jack appear in the kitchen. Didn't realise the TV had been turned off and that Jack was standing there quietly at the end of the kitchen bench.

"Morning," I said with a yawn, barely even looking at him as I started spreading peanut butter on my toast. I mean, why should I look at him closely? Why should I expect that this was not a normal morning? Maybe if I had paid more attention, I might have noticed the way he was standing, a certain stiffness to him.

"Laura, there's something we need to talk about," he said.

"Okay," I replied easily. Closed the peanut butter jar. Finished making my tea. Walked past Jack, nodding at him to follow, as I walked to the lounge. That's when I noticed the TV wasn't on anymore. Funnily enough, that's probably the first moment I realised something was wrong.

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“Everything okay?” I asked, taking a seat and biting a huge chunk of toast into my mouth. And then I looked at him properly.

There was something strange about his posture. He seemed nervous, restless. Skittish, even. For a moment he couldn’t meet my eyes. He just stared down at his hands. What I remembered best of that moment was my eyebrows creasing in concern. Funny, that of all things, I really strongly remembered my own eyebrows.

“There’s ...” Jack paused, took a deep breath. Looked up at me finally. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Still, at this point, I wasn’t overly worried by this conversation. “Yes?” I said magnanimously, patiently. I took another bite of toast.

“We can’t have kids together,” he said quietly.

I frowned, trying to comprehend. What did he mean? Of course we could have kids. Or, did he have something medically wrong with him? Was he not able to have kids?

Jack took a deep breath. “We can’t have kids together because I’m gay,” he said in a rush, his voice louder this time.

Gay? That’s not a reason to not be able to have kids. Gay people could have kids. But what did Jack mean? He wasn’t gay. He was married to me, a woman, so of course he couldn’t be gay.

“I’m sorry, Laura.” His voice became anguished, his posture introverted and defensive. “I’m so, so sorry. I’ve ... I’ve been trying to ignore this for so long. Trying to pretend I’m not, trying to *make* myself not be. But I can’t, I just can’t bring children into this.”

The other thing I remembered about that morning was that I had a chunk of toast in my mouth still. It suddenly felt like dry cardboard, as if my mouth was the first part of my body to comprehend just what Jack was saying, turning itself dry, retreating from regular function in horror. And I also remembered suddenly feeling really self-conscious that I was wearing my big, ugly, oversized fleecy dressing gown. The one that I knew looked

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awful but was just so warm and cuddly. Because you shouldn't be wearing ugly clothes when your husband tells you he's gay and that he doesn't want to have children with you, should you? That just wasn't fair.

"What ... what?" It was the only thing I could say.

"I can't do this anymore. I can't keep doing this to you. You deserve a better life. You deserve someone who ... someone better than me."

"What ... are you saying?" I remembered the weight of the little bread plate in my hand. The half-eaten toast sitting on it. I was gripping that plate really hard. And my eyes felt watery. I blinked a few times.

"We need to break up. Get a divorce," Jack said, his voice sounding rough but firm.

And then, because I couldn't even process it, didn't want to face it, I did the one thing that could turn my morning back to normal.

I picked up the TV remote and turned *Weekend Sunrise* back on.

Jack quietly left the room as the tears started running down my face. And the rest of that toast just sat there on my lap until it was cold. I stared down at it and thought, *What a waste.*

Kalina was still looking at me expectantly, a concerned look on her face. But of course, that memory had flashed through my mind in no more than a nanosecond. It was the kind of thing that could now be delivered in one great walloping packet—bam! And I was left feeling completely gutted and mortified all over again.

As if surfacing from a swimming pool, the buzz of the bar—the music, the laughter—all washed over me again, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. Normally, I'd make up something to answer Kalina's question, or I'd mumble a dismissive and generic response. But maybe because I'd had a few drinks and I was feeling brave, or reckless, or maybe it was because Kalina seemed so open and generous and somehow, weirdly, caring, I decided to tell her the truth; to lay out the ugly reality right there on the bar.

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“It turned out Jack was gay,” I said quietly, managing a weak smile, as if somehow that would show I was okay with the situation.

“Fuck no!” Kalina said, her eyes going wide. “Are you serious?”

I laughed, just once. “I’m serious.”

“Holy shit! And you ... I mean ...” Kalina trailed off, watching me as my face heated up. I knew all the questions she wanted to ask; wondered which one she would pick first. How did I not know? Weren’t there any indications? How did he pretend to be straight for eleven years and how did I not notice?

“Shit,” she repeated in a kind of awed voice. Then she reached over for a bottle from the back shelf of the bar. “Whisky?”

A genuine laugh actually bubbled up.

“What a fucker.” Kalina shook her head.

“Yep,” I agreed. “What. A. Fucker.” I couldn’t really muster any enthusiasm for this statement, though.

Kalina was silent for a moment, then suddenly her face lit up like she’d just had a brilliant thought. “So, if we go back to discussing what we were talking about before, am I safe to assume that your sex life has been a bit ... lacking, then?”

I snorted. “Well, I assume so. But, I mean, how would I even know?”

“Exactly!” Kalina smiled excitedly. “You don’t know! If you’ve only ever slept with a gay man, then it’s like you’ve never really slept with anyone at all, isn’t it!”

“Hey!” I protested. “We had sex. I’m pretty sure it still counts.”

“But does it, though?” Kalina asked slowly, as if she’d just stumbled upon a great loophole in the fabric of world sexuality. “You haven’t slept with a straight man before. So really, it’s like you’ve almost been with no one. Like you can go out and have sex with a man—a straight man—for the first time.”

“I’m not sure Jack’s being gay is really going to negate my non-virgin

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status,” I argued, though I could feel something start to lift off my chest, as if even just joking about this was helping alleviate the pain. Plus, Kalina’s face was alight with anticipation, and her enthusiasm was kind of contagious in an unavoidable way.

“Just think about how much time you’ve wasted—or rather, how much you’ve got to look forward to!” Kalina was on a roll now. “I mean, look, I can’t imagine what it was like sleeping with a gay man, but I’m guessing things weren’t too hot and steamy in bed. And yet there are so many hot, amazing guys out there. And you are now single and able to experience them all! Like seriously—the things guys can do with their hands now, or with their *tongues*—”

“Oh my God! I’m not ready to even think about this!” I exclaimed, my eyes wide.

“Of course you are! Seriously, Laura—being single is so much fun! You’re going to have such a good time!”

I watched her glee, the way she was kind of bobbing up and down on her toes. *Could* it be fun to be single? Could I be one of those people who enjoyed dating randoms?

Kalina reached for two shot glasses. “This calls for a toast.”

She expertly created two cowboy shooters and then held hers up. I did the same, slightly alarmed, and tried to ignore the little voice in my head saying shots on a Sunday night were really not a good idea.

“What are we toasting?” I asked, incredulous yet strangely hooked.

“We’re toasting the dawn of your new life. You have been deprived of variety and experimentation—”

“Hey!” I protested.

“Your life until now has been consumed only with one man—someone I shall henceforth refer to as ‘the deceiver.’”

“He wasn’t—”

“And yet here you find yourself, living with a totally amazing, awesome

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flatmate. Oh, and Ben. Plus, a whole world of fun, delicious men and sex just waiting for you.”

“I can’t toast to that!”

“Cheers!” Kalina determinedly clinked my glass.

Rolling my eyes in defeat, I drank the shot, too.

“What are we toasting?” Ben asked, sliding back into his seat.

“Laura’s newfound independence—no wait—*sexual* independence!”

Kalina said.

“No!” I objected, though I was starting to laugh.

“To the exploration of her new self!” Kalina placed a shot down in front of Ben, and refilled our glasses.

“To Laura, the explorer!” Ben said, raising his shot glass.

“Laura—the man explorer!” Kalina echoed, raising hers.

Well, there was no point protesting now. Plus, I was already tipsy.

I raised my glass, clinked it with theirs and we all downed our shots.

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