

THE STORY OF OUR LIFE

By
Shari Low

To J, C & B,
Everything Always.

And to Rosina B. Hill,
My wonderful Godmother,
Who has given me a lifetime of love..

1

Spring 2016

At the Church

Fifteen years ago, I walked up the same church aisle.

Back then, the first person I saw was Annie, my gloriously indomitable grandmother, in dramatic purple and a hat that resembled a frisbee, disguising her tears because she was born of a stoic generation that was disdainful about crying in public.

Next to my grandmother were my parents. My father, resplendent in his best morning suit and golfing tan, no doubt keen to get the formalities over with so he could squeeze in nine holes in before dinner. Meanwhile, the woman who gave birth to me was preening, loving the attention being mother of the bride brought her, while breezily overlooking the fact that she'd shown no interest whatsoever in her daughter's wedding. When I called her to tell her we'd set a date, she'd said, 'Oh right, Shauna. Let me write that down so I don't forget it. I think we were planning to be in Spain that weekend. I'll check my diary.' Still, she'd made it. My gain was the Marbella Golf Club's loss.

In the rows behind the star attractions, a sea of smiles beamed at us as we walked down the aisle. Steps behind me, were my best friends, Lulu and Rose in matching pastel elegance. Was it okay to call them 'best friends' at our age? Did that belong back in the days of teenage territorialism? Okay, so my 'closest' friends, their grins masking hangovers that were crying out for a dark room and a box set of *Grey's Anatomy*.

Rosie, a hopeless romantic, had been on board with the wedding from the start, but Lulu had been resistant, listing all the reasons I should wait and keep my options open. I was only 24. My catering company was growing and would demand lots of attention. I was an independent woman with a flat, a job I loved, a bank account that was (just) in the black. And besides, a piece of paper didn't matter to a relationship. Marriage was an outdated institution. Married women inevitably dumped their friends in favour of nights in, pandering to their men while gaining five pounds a month and neglecting their roots – hair, not ancestry.

Not for the first time, I ignored her.

And the reason was there in front of me. Colm. My gorgeous Colm. Standing there at the altar, in a suit that fitted him to perfection, showing not a trace of nerves. His expression radiated enjoyment, like this was a party he'd been looking forward to for ages and now he was thrilled it was starting.

I was too.

I wanted to dance towards him, sashay and pirouette into his arms, skip straight to the kissing and cheering part.

I saw flowers, and light and love. I saw promise. Commitment. Belonging. Delight. Contentment. Lust. Excitement. The realization of dreams. An incredible future.

I saw happy ever after. Until forever.

But that was then. Before everything happened. Before time, like a well-worn yet inevitable cliché, took its toll. Before my heart was broken. Before one of those closest friends betrayed me. Before my husband slept with another woman.

Before death.

Fifteen years ago, I walked up the aisle in white.

This time, I'm wearing black.

2

2001

When Shauna Met Colm...

If he had been ten minutes later we'd never have met.

The bar was getting too crowded and too loud, with the sound of smug, boorish after-work suits trying to out-do each other.

'Nailed six million, mate. The yen played a fucking blinder for me this week.'

'Not bad. Keep it up and you'll get to play with us in the big boy pool. My margin on pharmaceuticals this week is buying me a Porsche,' his buddy gloated, his repetitive nose-rubbing suggesting he'd been celebrating with pharmaceuticals of a different kind.

Their chronic wankery didn't detract from the fact that I loved this bar. The classic white colonial frontage sat on the bank of the Thames, supporting the huge wooden deck that overlooked the water and Richmond Bridge, only yards away to the left. Even on a chilly October evening, as we stood outside, getting jostled by the masses, there was something of a fifties romance about it.

We'd come here for celebration drinks with Vincent, a mate from college, who had decided to start up a corporate catering service on the other side of the city. He was now deep in conversation with a five foot ten Cindy Crawford lookalike who was eyeing him with such lust I expected her to unhinge her jaw and swallow him whole at any moment. Vincent had that effect on women. Except me. The dark-haired, chiselled jaw, brooding hunk thing wasn't my type so I found it amusing to watch as he... yep, there it was. Cindy reached up and kissed him, then he gave me a wave, blew me a kiss and the two of them disappeared out the door.

Not a bad idea. It was time to go home.

It had been a long week. My feet hurt. I'd had three hours sleep thanks to a delightfully wealthy Battersea housewife who'd booked me to prepare a banquet breakfast for a fundraiser, ignoring the fact that if they'd just gone for bacon butties the recipients of the charity would have been a few hundred pounds better off. Not that I was complaining. The wealthy housewife market had been a fantastic source of income in the two years since I'd launched the company. When I say 'company' I

mean me. And a van. My only other assets were boundless optimism, enthusiasm, and a small but growing customer base, so I was thankful for the work, even if it did mean that the aroma of eggs Benedict and smoked salmon blinis had followed me around all day like a sinister yet appetizing stalker.

The following morning, I had a children's party for thirty twelve-year-olds in Balham and those chicken goujons weren't going to prepare themselves.

My bed was calling me until Lulu, in typical fashion, changed my plans.

'Shauna, I'll be five minutes. Cover for me if Dan arrives,' Lulu hissed, before punctuating the request with a kiss on the cheek that definitely constituted coercion, possibly even conspiracy, with an added twist of emotional blackmail.

Every guy in the bar watched her as she wiggled her way past them. Captivating. Mesmerizing. I was probably the only one who noticed that she was actually following a tall, gym-formed Australian she'd been subtly flirting with across the bar all night.

A mental image of my bed faded. In Lulu's world, five minutes could mean thirty, or longer. She'd once left me holding her drink while she popped out of a bar for a cigarette with a ski instructor, and called me the next day from Gstaad.

'Bloody outrageous!' I added to the list of descriptive terms for the Jessica Rabbit redhead who was heading to the back of the restaurant.

'Who's outrageous?' Rosie asked, breaking off from the conversation she'd been having for the last fifteen minutes with Paul, the mature student. This was the third time she'd invited him to join us for a drink, and there was a spark there, but he was a very measured, analytical academic who was studying geology, or psychology, or zoology, or one of the ologies, so the spark was taking a long time to ignite into anything more than deep discussions about... actually, I had no idea what they were talking about.

'Our friend,' I whispered, smiling as I gestured to the departing wiggle. 'Remind me to kill her at some point. I promise I'll make it painless.'

'I'd help dispose of the body but I'm a bit preoccupied,' she replied, making sure Paul was out of earshot. I hoped he was good enough for her.

If ever there was an illustration of how there was no equality or fairness in the distribution of confidence and self-assurance, my friends were it. Lulu killed at life, at fun, at demanding attention and getting it. She took risks, and she grabbed what she

wanted. Rosie, on the other hand, the eternal people-pleaser, quirky, with a huge heart, lived in hope of love and adoration finding her .

The restaurant was filling up now, the noise level increasing as Toploader finished ‘Dancing In The Moonlight’ and handed over to Kylie who was, for some inexplicable reason, ‘Spinning Around’.

‘Bugger, there’s Dan,’ Rose whispered, urgently.

Of course it was. Because, hey, the Gods of Reckless Friends loved this kind of shit. I should have left already, made the escape sooner, before the devastatingly handsome boyfriend of my darling friend was strolling towards me, while aforementioned darling friend was outside, undoubtedly doing something immoral, possibly illegal, definitely wild, with a tattooed Australian. Instead, I was about to give a performance that would win me an Oscar for “Best Liar In A Friendship Situation.”

‘Hey girls,’ he greeted us, with a kiss on each cheek. I’d always thought that Dan Channing was one of those enigmas, people who looked like they were something other than what they actually were. He looked like a square-jawed, impossibly handsome male model or an actor. Or at the very least, one of those firemen who strips naked with a strategically positioned hose in a Christmas calendar. But no, he was in sales of something I wasn’t exactly sure about. Car parts? Mechanical supplies? Anyway, he managed a sales team that travelled around garages flogging some vital component of a vehicular nature.

‘Where’s Lulu?’ was of course his first question.

‘In the ladies,’ I replied. ‘She might be a while. Think the cystitis is playing up.’

A mischievous lie but I couldn’t resist laying the seeds for a discussion that would make Lulu squirm. It was less than she deserved for putting me on the spot. My grin was quickly accompanied by a scarlet flush of the face, as he stepped to the side to reveal the curious gaze of green eyes of a tall, cute guy standing right behind him. ‘Guys, this is Colm. Colm, meet Rosie, Paul, and the one that’s talking about cystitis is Shauna.’

Ah, a resounding moment of dignity, one which Colm took in his stride by reaching out to shake my hand, saying, ‘Please to meet you. And just to get it out of the way, I have never suffered from cystitis.’

Yes, those were the first words the love of my life ever spoke to me. It wasn’t exactly Mills & Boon, but that didn’t matter. I’ve no idea whether it was the soft Irish

accent, the rapid humour, or the way he smiled the most open smile I'd ever seen, but right there and then I decided he was mine.

3

2015

Shauna and life before everything changed...

We were a few minutes away from Lulu and Dan's house and he still hadn't asked me. Maybe he wouldn't. I'd noticed that lately it was sometimes just taken for granted, a raised eyebrow of question in my direction when he opened the first beer. Invariably, I'd nod, almost imperceptibly, using fourteen-years-married coupledom telepathy to convey my agreement. Okay, you drink, and I'll drive home. I didn't mind, but sometimes it would be nice to be asked.

'You okay?' Colm asked, taking one hand off the wheel to put it on mine.

'I'm fine, just tired. Been a long week.'

A definite understatement, yet I bit my tongue, determined not to do that thing where I listed all the tasks I'd carried out that week and pointed out that he was probably oblivious to them all. You know the one... 'I worked six ten-hour days, took our daughter to school every day, ferried her to five after-school clubs, did two lots of baking for school functions, cleaned the house, organized flowers for your mother's birthday, booked the car in for a service, spent hours researching a holiday that meets the needs of everyone in the family, cleaned the house from top to bottom, organized a sitter for tonight, cooked a meal in advance and left it ready for the sitter and our daughter to eat later, then rushed upstairs and got ready in five minutes, throwing on the first decent thing I could find, and slapping on a quick make-up job in the car so YES, IT'S SUNDAY NIGHT AND I AM BLOODY KNACKERED.'

Instead I just turned my attention back to staying awake while letting his touch soothe me out of 'harassed working mother and wife mode' and into me mode. Just Shauna. If I really tried, I might even summon up sociable Shauna, and enjoy our first night out in ages.

I felt myself responding to him, stroking my thumb against his palm, as I glanced at him and realized he looked tired too.

'I think it's time to have the chat again,' I told him amiably, as I leaned my head back against the cream leather headrest, a motion that took my ponytail to a whole

new level of messiness. With a bit of luck it would at least camouflage the fact that highlights for my dark blonde hair were long overdue.

Colm nodded. 'The one where we say we have a crap work/life balance and we need to redress it?'

'Yep, that's the one.'

How often? Once a month? More? Probably as often as work allowed – and that was the problem. We'd slipped into 'work to live' instead of 'live to work'. We had to sort it out. Definitely. And we would. When we had a spare five minutes to breathe. I mentally added it to the To-Do list. Defrost fridge. Arrange new school uniforms. Address roots. Have life-defining conversation with husband.

We pulled into the drive and I grabbed the bottle of Prosecco and huge tub of eighties retro sweets – Lulu and Dan's respective favourites – then headed up the path. Lulu and Dan's home had a façade that belonged on a Christmas card. Left to them by Dan's grandparents, the four storey, redbrick Georgian house overlooking Richmond Green had the beautiful white panelled windows that were typical of the era. The stairs up to the front door were bordered by wrought iron, and ivy wound its way around the red gloss door. Lulu and Dan lived on the ground floor and basement, with the upper levels split into two more apartments, which they rented out to give them a healthy monthly income. Dan had been meticulous in retaining as many of the original features as possible, so it still had the original tile floors, high ceilings and ornate cornicing. It was gorgeous, which made Lulu's ongoing mission to persuade Dan to sell up and move to a modern, eye-wateringly expensive, high-tech shoebox down at the river so much more perplexing.

Exhaling, I slapped on a smile and shook off my fugue just as the door was answered by a giggling Lulu.

'Come in, come in! Hey gorgeous, how are you?' That was directed at Colm, not me, but it did make me laugh. Lulu, the irrepressible flirt, had barely changed in personality or looks in the two decades I'd known her. Eternally wild and reckless, she still had the long flowing red hair, the ridiculously curvy shape, the wide eyes that were designed for mischief and her alabaster skin was almost unlined despite the fact that, let's face it, forty was on the horizon, ready to ambush us.

'I suppose you're not bad either,' she offered, when she prised herself away and hugged me next.

'I could kill you with one squeeze,' I told her in my best serial killer tone.

‘Please do, it’ll save me from Dan,’ she countered. I was probably the only person who would pick it up, but it was there, the undertone of truth under the jocular barb. Oh God, not again.

‘Hey, we’re matching!’ she observed, pointing to my black jumpsuit, with the crossover front, cinched waist, and mildly protruding shoulder pads, a style match to her red version of the same look. Gotta love cyclical fashion trends. If the eighties were wrong, I didn’t want to be right.

‘Jesus, we look like a Nolans tribute act,’ I told her truthfully. ‘If either of us could hold a tune, there could be a new career option here.’

‘Fuck it, I need a new job. Make it happen and I’ll mime,’ she retorted. There it was again. Lulu had worked with Dan for the last six years, ever since he and Colm had gone out on their own and set up their management and training consultancy. In the early days, Lulu did the books, typed up the invoices and generally took care of everything that needed to happen to let Dan and Colm go out there and earn. That was then. Now the business was a bit more established, with a steady income, she’d taken the first opportunity to reduce her workload. With no mortgage and no kids, and a firm belief that there was more to life than slogging in an office during her prime years (her words, not mine), she cut back to a couple of days a week doing the paperwork and spent the others in a function she called ‘networking and raising the company profile’. Others would call it ‘shopping and doing lunch’. The reality was that it left Lulu with far too much time on her hands – a dangerous situation for someone with the attention span of a fairground fish. When it came to Lulu, too much time led to boredom, which led to a need for excitement, which led to trouble, usually for her either her bank balance or her marriage. Or both.

We headed through to the open-plan kitchen and dining area at the back of the house, which had been extended to add a lounge area too. It was the only room that was thoroughly modern, with its white walls, cream travertine floor and glass doors that spanned the whole of the back wall, letting the solar lights of the garden create little spheres of gold that looked like floating stars.

The others were already sitting round the dining table. Rosie was the first to welcome us. ‘Hello lovelies,’ she said, her beaming smile as wide as the large goblet of red wine she held aloft in greeting. I’d always thought Rosie was the personification of a Betty Boop cartoon, with her short black pixie cut, her huge blue eyes, and eyelashes that could sweep floors. Not much over five feet, she celebrated

her curviness in fifties-style clothes that made her stand out for all the right reasons. Tonight she was in a white low-cut top, with red polka dots that matched the scarlet of her lips, with a coordinating scarf tied around her neck.

In my standard colour palate of funereal black, I suddenly felt resoundingly bland compared to my Technicolor friends. More stuff for my to-do list. Must wear colour. Must take longer than five minutes to apply make-up.

I did the rounds of hello's – Rosie first, then her boyfriend, Jack, a life coach who sat somewhere between hipster trendy and those guys who wore man buns and carried yoga mats. They'd met in Rosie's café and despite the fact that he could be a little studious and earnest, we were all hoping for Rosie's sake that this one was a keeper. Six months in, the easy vibe that flicked between them suggested that he could be. However, we'd been here before so we weren't buying hats just yet.

After hugging Dan, I slid into the empty seat next to him. Over at the marble island, Colm flipped open a bottle of beer. Ah, there it was, as predicted – the raised eyebrow of enquiry.

'Honey, what would you like to drink?' Colm asked.

'Vodka, straight.' I answered, and watched as a momentary flicker of surprise was replaced by a grin.

'Or maybe I'll just stick with water,' I said, smiling. In truth, I didn't really mind. Beth had ballet in the morning and a crowd of five-year-olds wasn't something I wanted to negotiate with a hangover.

Next to me, Dan immediately lifted a large jug from the centre of the table and poured iced water into the wine glass in front of me.

'You didn't bring Beth?' Rosie asked, with a hint of disappointment.

There were many things I adored about my friends, and one of them was that they treated Beth as a communal child, not a hindrance or an irritant to spoil their sophisticated chat. (Not that we ever actually had any sophisticated chat, but that was beside the point.) So many of these dinners ended with Rosie on the floor with Beth, doing a jigsaw or channelling Little Mix on the karaoke, the two of them laughing helplessly. Jack, whose sole experience with children extended to informing Kensington mothers that their family life was encroaching on their opportunities for meditation and growth, didn't ever give a hint that he minded his evening being interrupted by an impromptu game of rounders in the garden. Even Lulu and Dan,

who had no plans to add to their family, loved having Beth around, mostly, I suspect, because they got all the fun but didn't have to deal with the responsibilities.

'Cinema and sleepover with one of her classmates,' I answered, before the bang of the oven door diverted our attention to Lulu. 'Something smells great,' I told her.

'Lasagne, garlic bread, salad,' she replied. 'I'm not winning any prizes for originality over here.'

I loved the fact that it clearly didn't bother her in the least. Tonight, like all our gatherings, was about chat and catching up. The food was way down the priority list, and given that I'd spent a long week cooking for other people, I was just happy that it wasn't me over there using a cheese grater to slice cucumber into a bowl of leaves.

Colm joined us at the table and immediately turned to Dan. 'How'd you get on with the Bracal Tech pitch prep today?'

'Hey, hey, hey! No work talk at the table please!' I interjected. It was the one overriding rule, set down about a year after the guys first went into business together. 'Lulu has salad tongs and she's not afraid to use them,' I added, gesturing to Lu, who stood one hand on hip, raised tongs in the other.

Whilst the others were laughing, it took me a moment to realize that, beside me, Dan was uncharacteristically straight faced.

His demeanour didn't change too much throughout dinner. On the surface, the conversations were as convivial as ever but I sensed an undertone. I decided not to question it. Nothing good could come of probing.

Instead, I had a couple of chunks of garlic bread and let the company of my closest friends shake off the lethargy that had been seeping into my bones earlier.

Colm looked like it was having the same effect on him. The dark shadows under his sea-green eyes were still there, but his crooked grin and the remains of a garden tan saved the day. Right now he was telling some story about a buff, Lycra-clad guy in the gym who'd hit on him the week before, and the others found it hugely amusing that he'd been so concerned about hurting the guy's feelings that he'd let him down gently then taken him for a coffee. That was Colm. The dark brown hair might now be flecked with grey, and there may be a few grooves on his face that weren't there fourteen years ago, but he was still the loveliest, funniest guy I'd ever known.

Next to me, it was obvious that Dan still wasn't feeling the same happy effects of the gathering. In my peripheral vision, I could see his jaw was clenched now, his knuckles pale as they squeezed his glass. A quick glance from Rosie told me she'd

noticed too. It wasn't like him. Sure, he could be impatient and was sometimes easily riled, but in this environment, surrounded by friends, he would usually be chilled out and regaling us with stories of his week.

Rosie had obviously decided to steer the conversation to a topic that would cheer him up. 'So, guys,' she said breezily, directing the conversation at Lulu and Dan, 'I was thinking, we should do something for your wedding anniversary next month.'

In a perfectly executed act of dark comic timing, Lulu, who was clearing the table, picked that moment to drop the salad bowl, laying a carpet of withered, leftover rocket across the floor tiles.

'Fuck,' she blurted.

I jumped up to help her clear it up, but ended up doing it myself as she'd already moved back to the centre island and was decanting several inches of red wine into her glass, her sociable joviality suddenly replaced by a silence and barely suppressed irritation.

'Let's wait and see if we make it that long, shall we?' Dan replied tersely, removing any semblance of forced joviality from the group.

Oh God. I suddenly wished Beth was here to divert us all with an innocent game. I spy with my little eye, something beginning with an excruciating silence and a murderous glare-off between Lu and Dan.

Eventually, Lulu was the first to blink.

'You really want to do this now?' she asked, her exasperation tempered with something that sounded like defiance. It was classic Lulu. When under attack, go on the offensive. When irritated, scared or just bloody fed up, steam right through those feelings with a forceful blend of rebellion and boldness, then hope for the best.

'Might as well,' Dan shrugged, meeting her gaze. 'Do you want to go phone your boyfriend first and ask his permission?'

Suddenly my weariness had returned and I could see it settling on Colm and Rosie too. Jack was too new to the group to understand the dynamics and history of this situation.

Actually, I was a founding member and struggled to understand it too. Throughout their entire relationship Lulu and Dan had adhered to their own set of rules and they were written in a language that no one else understood. However, even when they were in one of their frequent rocky patches, they generally kept things convivial when we were together as a group, so whatever was going on now was obviously serious.

One thing I absolutely did know for sure, was that the worst thing we could do was intervene. I really wished I wasn't driving. A cocktail would have been much appreciated right about now.

Lulu took a gulp of wine then set it down on the worktop with the slow, definite movement of someone who was trying desperately to stay in control.

She barely skipped a beat before she spoke. 'I'm not sure of the number. Perhaps your girlfriend might look it up for me?'

'If it salves your conscience to think that, you go ahead,' Dan retorted, his voice low with anger. 'But we both know this one is on you. Why don't you tell our friends about the afternoons at the Richmond Hotel?'

'You bastard,' Lulu hissed. 'You had me followed?'

'Didn't need to. You used your credit card.'

'For personal training sessions! And I can't believe you checked my card. How low can you go?' Lulu retorted.

'Not as low as you it would seem. I checked. You're not a client there. So go on, come up with as many excuses and explanations as you want... or you could save us all the trouble and be honest. Admit it. You did it again. Who is it this time? The guy who works in the gym? The local estate agent? Or are you going for a variety and spreading it around?'

My previous resolve to stay out of it crumbled in the face of Dan's fury and the sure knowledge that I had to try to cut this off before it got out of control.

'Dan, don't,' I cautioned gently. I wasn't taking sides, but I couldn't let this escalate because I instinctively knew it wasn't heading to any kind of happy place. I had no clue as to Dan's culpability in whatever battle they were having, but I recognized Lulu's expression. It was the same combination of guilt and determination not to cry that she'd shown in every sticky moment in her life, especially when the problem was of her own doing.

Rosie was watching it all, mouth agape. Colm was rubbing his temples with his fingers. And Jack was studying the empty plate in front of him with intent fascination.

'Look, we should go,' Colm said. 'It's getting late and my head is banging.' He didn't add, 'And I can't do this again,' but I knew that was what he was thinking. How many times had we been through this? Three? Four?

Lulu and Dan had the most tempestuous relationship I'd ever known. Her relentless need to flirt and hedonistic tendencies had been a constant source of discord

in the early days, but it was her need for thrills that would surely break them. There had been two affairs that I knew of on her side, one on Dan's. They were a couple who needed constant drama, constant excitement to survive. I couldn't comprehend it when they were dating and I couldn't comprehend it now, but I knew the best way to deal with it was to bail out until they'd sorted it out themselves. Taking sides would be a fatal friendship mistake, because when they made up – which they had done on every previous occasion – you didn't want to be the one who'd bad-mouthed the other.

Rosie was already on her feet. She was no pushover, but she hated confrontation, avoided disharmony at all costs and, like me, knew that this was all going to get messy and the best thing to do when Lulu was escalating to battle stations was to evacuate the area. 'I think so too. Jack?' She didn't need to ask twice. Jack was on his feet and already heading for the door, waving as he went. 'Er, thanks for dinner. It was lovely.'

I winced in pity for him. Clearly he was in the 99.9 per cent of the population who would find this deeply uncomfortable.

Dan sat staring morosely at the table, while Lulu followed us out, handing over our coats from the vintage stand at the door.

I slipped mine on. 'You okay? Why don't you come stay at our house tonight?' Guilty or innocent, at fault or not, I wanted to give her a way out of tonight's shitstorm.

She shook her head. 'Not tonight, but I might take you up on it tomorrow night. I'm leaving him, Shauna. I can't do this any more.'

Droplets of tears gathered on her lower lids and she blinked them away. To be honest, I didn't take her vow particularly seriously. The number of times she'd threatened to leave him over the last fifteen years stretched to double figures.

I gave her a hug. 'Let's talk about it tomorrow. If you change your mind about staying, come over any time during the night. Just use your key and crash in the spare room.'

Her squeeze was cutting off oxygen to my windpipe.

'Thanks babe.'

Beside me, Colm still hadn't said anything, and he remained silent as he headed out the door and back to the car. Only when I'd switched on the engine did he finally speak. I wished he hadn't.

‘I don’t know how you can stand by her when she does this. Come on, Shauna, she’s a nightmare.’

‘Hey, Dan did it too.’

‘Only after he’d put up with her humiliating him for years. Not the same.’

‘How isn’t it? You can’t judge her, Colm. You don’t know the dynamics of their marriage and what makes it work. Or not,’ I finished ruefully.

‘Maybe not, but I know enough to be bloody sick of the way she treats him. Dan works damn hard to give her a great life. Why can’t that be enough for her?’

I sighed and leaned back against the headrest as I steered on to George Street, heading towards Richmond Bridge. Brilliant. My friend was allegedly having an affair, yet it was Colm and I who were now fighting.

It didn’t help that Lu was the one person who could press his easy-going, live and let live buttons. In the years since that first night at the bar in Richmond Bridge, they’d developed a relationship that had almost a sibling dynamic. They loved each other, but Colm didn’t shy away from calling her out or standing his ground with her. When she was wrong, he was direct and honest with her, even when she didn’t want to hear it. When she was right, he’d be the first person to step in to help or back her up. She drove him crazy, yet two minutes later they’d be buckled in mutual hilarity at some inside joke.

But hilarity was in short supply tonight.

In my peripheral vision I could see that he had his eyes squeezed shut, and he was rubbing the bridge of his nose.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, more to break the atmosphere of conflict than anything else. I wasn’t big on confrontation avoidance, but tonight I was so damn tired I was making an exception.

‘Thumping head,’ he said, surprising me. I’d thought it was just an excuse to leave when he’d mentioned it earlier.

‘I’ve got some paracetamol in my bag,’ I told him, gesturing to the handbag in his footwell.

I thought he was leaning down towards it, but then realized that his hand had veered over towards the radio and was twisting the volume dial. It wasn’t on, so his actions had no effect.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, puzzled.

‘Trying to switch this damn thing off.’

‘Colm, it’s not on.’

‘So what’s the noise?’

Was this a joke that I wasn’t getting?

‘What noise?’

He sat back in the seat. ‘You can’t hear that?’

‘What?’

‘It’s like... I don’t know. Radio interference. Like a crackling sound.’

I’d have blamed the alcohol, but I knew he’d only had a couple of beers. And not only was the radio off, but there was no other noise to be heard. Had to be a joke.

‘Okay, skip to the punchline.’ I told him lightly, grateful that he wanted to add a bit of levity and salvage the mood of the night.

‘Shauna, I swear I’m not kidding around. You honestly can’t hear anything?’

‘No.’ I pulled up at a set of traffic lights on red, and turned to him to see a mask of confusion and uncertainty. This no longer felt like much of a joke.

‘This is so weird,’ he said quietly.

‘Has it happened before?’ I asked.

‘Couple of times. Think it used to happen to my mum, though. Migraines.’

‘Yeah, migraines can have all kinds of weird symptoms,’ I said. ‘Couple of pain killers and a good night’s sleep and you’ll be fine.’

The lights turned to green and I pulled away, trying to ignore the creeping unease that was infiltrating my nerve endings.

I should have paid attention.

4

2001

When Colm Met Shauna

Crash. Bang. Holy crap.

I'm not one for romantic words or any of that kind of nonsense, but I'm fairly sure that was a fair account of the stuff that was going on in my head the first time I saw her.

Dan had dragged me out for a pint, to – as he said – stop me being the kind of prick who got pissed on a Friday night and ended up shagging the girl I'd just broken up with. Or the wife I'd been married to for six years.

I appreciated his point, but I had no worries on that score. Jess and I had finalized our divorce a month before and I had no intention of going back there. None at all.

In fact, if there was a stray band of celibate monks roaming the streets of London that night there was a fair chance I'd be up for joining, as long as they had beer on tap, a pool table and a subscription to Sky Sports.

Still, Dan was the guy on the sales team who was always up for a laugh, always the life and soul of the party, and right now I could do with a bit of nonsense. I was divorced, not dead.

I'd envisaged a night in the city centre; maybe hit a couple of clubs. Did people even say 'hit' a club anymore? My grasp of trendy vernacular was slim, since I'd settled for married life in a Victorian terrace in the not-as-posh end of Notting Hill. Jesus, just past mid-twenties and I was already out of touch. Probably just best settle for a few pints and keep my mouth shut if anyone under twenty-five was in hearing distance.

Anyway, seemed that Dan had a different idea of a night on the town, dragging me way out to Richmond, because his latest girlfriend was out there. Brilliant. First night out in years and I was going to play third wheel to a work colleague and a woman he described as '100% babe'. Again, Jesus. I'd already decided that if she was twenty-two and took the piss out of my dated chat, I was bailing and heading home.

My mind changed the minute I saw Shauna. I don't go for all of that 'love at first sight' rubbish, but there was just something about the combination of the messy

blonde hair, the cute freckles and the completely contagious smile that made me want to just stand there, staring like a lemon. It was a special person that could open a discussion with cystitis and still come over as adorable.

There was some kind of row between Dan and his girlfriend, Lulu, but to be honest, it didn't matter to us. Shauna and I started talking and ended up being the last two people still standing, huddled together so tightly that we didn't care that the temperatures had dipped to bollock-shrinking cold. No uncomfortable silences. No awkward comments that betrayed the fact this was the first time I'd chatted up a girl in years. I don't even remember anyone else leaving.

When the bar staff got fed up of sweeping around us, we finally left, and I walked her home, over Richmond Bridge, to her flat a few streets away on the Twickenham side. She invited me in, making shushing gestures so that we wouldn't wake her flatmate, and then, with cups of coffee in our hands, we headed to the tiny concrete balcony off her kitchen.

This was all new. The girl, being in someone's flat, and sure, I was pretty much out of my depth, but I figured if I could just keep her talking there was less of a chance she'd toss me out or – worse – fall asleep in my scintillating company.

'So you've never been married? Engaged?' I asked her, really hoping the answer was no – and not just because I wanted to check that some bloke wasn't going to storm in and lamp me at any moment. I'd never been much of a fighter.

She shook her head, making even more wavy blonde curls collapse out of her hair. 'I was engaged,' she admitted, almost sheepishly. 'We broke up a year ago.'

'Am I allowed to ask why, or is that too forward?'

Her laugh was low and raspy after a night of shouting to each other to be heard over the riot of sound in the pub. 'You're sitting on my balcony in the middle of the night. I think we can take "too forward" off the table.' She took another sip of her coffee. 'It just didn't work out. Realized I'm a bit of a commitment-phobe. The thought of the whole "one person forever" thing makes me uneasy. I change my mind about the wallpaper in the hall every six months. Clearly I have long-term commitment issues.'

She was smiling but even at my non-perceptive best, I could see there was a chink of sadness in her smile.

'What about you?' she asked.

Ouch. I'd led the way straight into that one. Twenty-seven and already one failed marriage under my belt. Wasn't the best reference, was it?

She mistook my hesitation for something else and looked searchingly at my left hand. 'Oh shit, tell me you're not married. I should probably have checked that before I asked you back here.'

I shook my head. 'Nope, not married.'

'Oh thank God.'

The sensible part of me was demanding that I leave it at that. I could fill in more details later, when we knew each other better. Start slow. Take it easy. Not too much too soon. Unfortunately, the sensible part of me wasn't having much of an influence on what was actually coming out of my mouth.

'But I was. I'm divorced. It was all finalized a month ago.'

She was silent for a few seconds and I mentally gave myself a good boot in the defrosted bollocks. Score zero for honesty. She was bound to want shot of me now. Who needed the hassle of being the person who picked up the pieces after a divorce?

I made one last bid for clarification. 'Look, I know that's not long ago, but I'm not an emotional disaster. The divorce was definitely for the best.'

That was true.

'And there are absolutely no regrets, and it wasn't a messy break-up.'

That wasn't true, but hey, cut a guy a break.

'So...'

I braced myself for 'it's been nice meeting you and show yourself out'.

'...Are you sworn off marriage for life?'

Oh God, here we go again. Truth or not? Truth or not?

'Pretty much,' I admitted. Truth.

She looked over and her blue eyes met mine as she laughed. 'Then I think we'll get on great.'

I wasn't sure what had just happened but I wasn't on my way out the door so I was going with it. She disappeared into the kitchen and came back out with a coffee pot and refilled our mugs. Right, no more revelations. Everything else could wait until I'd succeeded in not fucking up, and she'd agree to see me again.

I changed the subject. 'So what made you start your own business?'

She shrugged. 'Just wanted to run my own life. It's a kind of loose ten year plan – slog to build up the business now, so that I can bring in other people to run it if I

suddenly wake up one morning and decide to travel, or have a family or maybe join a cult. You know, the usual stuff. I don't ever want to be dependent on someone else or end up being one of those women who are totally exhausted because they're juggling high-pressure jobs, long hours and kids."

Alarm bells rang. This girl was way too smart and sorted for me. I'd never met someone with a life plan. I had to get one of those, but in the meantime, I pulled every amusing story out of my past and hoped I could distract her from my lack of focus and depth with nonsense. It seemed to work. I've no idea how much longer it was when she gestured skywards.

'First plane of the day. I love watching them come in. Like shooting stars coming to land.'

I looked up to see soundless flashing orange lights crossing the sky and realized we were underneath the flight path for Heathrow. Against the backdrop of the sun coming up, and if you ignored the sight of all the bins on the ground below, this felt like the perfect place to be.

After being with the same person for years, I was way out of practice with this stuff, but I was pretty sure this was one of those moments in which I could do what I'd been wanting to do all night.

I bottled out and went for clarification first. 'So I really want to lean over and kiss you and I'm just checking that would be okay with you?'

'Did your wife divorce you for lack of romance?' Shauna asked, eyebrow raised, cheeky smile on her face.

'Nope, it was because she was intimidated by my stunning good looks,' I joked back

'Ah, I can see why that would be a problem.' Her expression was completely deadpan, which had the opposite effect on me and I creased up laughing, only stopping when I realized that she was on her feet. She took a couple of steps towards me, then twisted and sat on my knee, before leaning down and kissing me. That answered my question, then.

I'd love to say it was the most romantic moment of my life. It absolutely could have been – if the rickety wooden chair beneath us hadn't chosen that very moment to commit chair suicide, and crumble to the ground taking us with it.

We'd already ascertained that I wasn't gifted in the areas of romance or suave moves. But as we lay there, laughing while waiting for the pain receptors to deliver

the bad news, I couldn't help thinking that there was no way any of those hundreds of people flying above us had ever had a moment as brilliant as this.

5

2015

Shauna and the Self-diagnosis

‘So have you heard from her today?’ Rosie asked, her voice echoing from the depths of my fridge. Before I could answer she emerged clutching a strawberry yoghurt, then headed to the cutlery drawer for a spoon. Today she was wearing a forties style pink tea-dress, with a short red cardigan and navy kitten heels. It should have been all wrong and yet it looked great – a very glam contrast to my old jeans, grey gym T-shirt, bare feet look of zero grooming.

‘No, nothing. I called but she didn’t pick up and I texted her a couple of times but no reply. She doesn’t make it easy for herself, does she?’

‘Never,’ Rosie agreed. ‘She’d be great at providing storylines for soap operas though.’

‘You’re right. Do you think Dan has an evil twin he can produce at short notice?’

On the surface of it, it probably seemed like we were being unkindly blasé about our best friend’s marital woes, but in our defence, we’d been here so many times before we were probably just slightly inured to the situation.

‘So how’s the romance of the year coming along then?’ I asked, while folding the pile of towels I’d just dragged out of the washing machine.

‘If I say it’s great, do you think I’ll jinx it?’ Rosie asked.

‘Definitely not.’ Or at least I hoped not. I was cautiously optimistic and hopeful that Jack would prove to be the guy Rosie had been waiting for, the one she would settle down with, who’d give her everything she deserved.

‘In that case, it’s great. Like, strangely so. I keep waiting for the hitch. You know, the “I’ve got a criminal record” convo or the “I’m only going out with you so that I can scam your bank account and leave you destitute” one. I’ve seen them all on Jeremy Kyle.’

‘Rosie, he’s a life coach from Kew. I’ve never seen Jeremy Kyle, but I’ve watched every episode of *CSI* and I can tell you life coaches from Kew are not the usual demographic for serial killers and scammers,’ I told her over the top of a huge navy

bath sheet. ‘Since when did you become cynical and jaded?’ I paused in a moment of realization. ‘That should be Lu and I’s nickname. Cynical and Jaded.’

Rosie laughed. ‘Years of defeat have worn me down. It’s a battlefield out there. Anyway, like I say, Jack has passed all the tests so far. Own hair, own teeth, a real job.’

I took her checklist a little further. ‘No porn addiction or previous restraining orders? And did you Google him and check there are no images of his penis anywhere online?’

‘I did. No penis pictures. And he’s lasted six months so far, so he’s obviously not just after random hook-ups. With all that and a pulse and no plans to take off in the near future, he’s practically perfect.’

It was great to see her so happy. I was a big believer that no woman needed a man to define who she was. A few of my friends were single by choice and loving the lifestyle and freedom that gave them, but Rosie wasn’t one of them. She would never take the easy way out and settle with the wrong man, but she definitely wanted to meet someone who would stick around. She’d had a rough run of luck. Over the last two decades there had been many relationships, each one self-destructing around the twenty-four-month mark. The two-year curse, she called it. There was Mark, who decided to go off trekking in South China to find himself. Zak, the roadie, who’d got a job as a tour manager for a band and had never been seen again. Jason and Colin, who both called it a day because they weren’t ready to commit. And who was that guy she was seeing when I met Colm? It took me a moment. Paul. Yep, that was it. He moved north to work in a zoo and Rosie had decided he loved wildlife more than he loved her. She always chose guys who were, like her, a little bohemian, then was surprised when they went off and did something... well, *bohemian*.

Touch wood, Jack, the life coach, seemed like he might have staying power. Even if Colm claimed it was a whole load of ‘psychobabble crap’, and he did give me a slightly creepy feeling that he was analysing me and planning a schedule of improvements every time we spoke.

Rosie had met Jack when he popped into her café for morning coffee. After a decade of temping and saving her cash while she tried to decide what she wanted to do with her life, she’d finally stumbled on a tiny café that was closing down just off Chiswick High Road. In an inspired moment of spontaneity, she’d rented it, before going on to refurbish and reopen it as a forties retro café called Doris’s Day. It was all

doilies, big-band music and tables that looked like they belonged in your granny's front room, and while it was never going to make her a fortune, it was doing well and she loved it. If things worked out with Jack, then her life would be pretty close to perfect and I'd be thrilled for her – just as long as she still found time to come sit here in my kitchen and discuss life's joys and stresses. And Lulu.

The banging of the door announced a new arrival and, checking the clock, I realized it was too early for Colm. He was over in Canary Wharf running a training course for a software company today and I didn't expect him home before 6 p.m.

My money was on Lulu, but it was Dan who walked in the kitchen door, accompanied by a fairly large holdall. This couldn't be good.

He opened with a rueful, 'Hi.'

Beth chose that moment to pop her head through from the dining room, her huge messy mass of blonde curls appearing a couple of seconds before the rest of her. 'Uncle Dan!' she bellowed, running towards him and jumping just in time for him to catch her and swing her round. Colm aside, Dan was her very favourite man.

I waited until she was back on the floor. 'Right, honey, off and finish your dinner, then it's bath time.'

'I'm getting to eat my dinner next door!' she announced to Dan, like it was a proper achievement. Which, in her world, it was. I usually insisted we all ate at the table but had decided that censoring the conversation with Rosie would be too difficult after last night's events. At five, Beth was probably too young to learn the words, 'affair', 'infidelity' and 'betrayal', so her favourite sausage and spinach pasta while watching *Frozen* won – or saved – the day, especially now that her favourite uncle had wandered in with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

She beetled back off humming 'Let It Go', the song from the movie that she chirped on a repetitive loop all day long.

There was a highly pregnant, slightly uncomfortable pause before I gestured to Dan's huge bag. 'Is Lulu in there?'

He at least managed to muster something approaching a smile as he sat down across from Rosie at the table. There were lines of weariness etched into his handsome face. I wanted to help. I may have known Lulu for longer, but my loyalties were split, because I loved Dan too. I automatically poured him a coffee from the pot that was permanently brewing on my kitchen worktop. My whole adult life had been conducted to the aroma of medium roast.

‘I was tempted, but no. Look, I know it’s an imposition but...’

‘It’s fine. You can stay. You don’t need to ask.’ Over the years he’d crashed here many times after fights and fall-outs. I decided not to acknowledge that this time felt a lot more serious.

A few of his lines eased as relief took over. ‘Thanks, Shauna. We can’t even be in the same bloody house together. It’s done this time. I’m seeing the lawyers on Friday.’

Rosie leaned over and rested her hand on his. ‘Are you sure? Maybe it’s a mistake, or a...’

She stopped, realizing how ridiculous that sounded. We all knew it was highly unlikely that it was a mistake. This was Lou we were talking about. It wasn’t her first adulterous rodeo.

‘Thanks Rosie, but you know how it is.’

We did. That’s what made it so sad and bloody infuriating. What do you do when it’s your closest friend that’s in the wrong? And how many times over the last thirty-odd years had I been torn between wanting to hug her and kill her? Too many to count.

I took a key off the tiny gold hook next to the back door and handed it to him. ‘Here’s the key for the flat. There’s fresh bedding in the cupboard. If you need anything just shout,’ I told him.

‘Flat’ was probably an optimistic term. Colm had converted the garage into a man cave, with a sofa bed, TV, tiny kitchen area and bathroom. ‘Studio’ was probably a better term. I preferred ‘claustrophobic demonstration of sexist maledom’. Over the years, Dan and Lulu had stayed there many times after dinners or parties, but for now it could be Dan’s home. Hopefully it wouldn’t be long before they sorted this out and he was home again.

Rosie got up and lifted her cherry-red satchel from its dangling position on the back of the chair. ‘I need to head off. I’m meeting Jack at 7 o’clock and there’s some serious grooming to be done. Dan, if you need anything just call me. And if you get kicked out of here, there’s always my couch.’

Her efforts to inject some levity into the conversation almost made the whole situation sadder. God, poor Dan.

He got up at the same time, kissed me on the cheek and headed back out the door, key for the flat in hand. I made a mental note to pop in on him later and see how he

was doing... after I'd put the laundry away, poured a coffee, had a snuggle with Beth, bathed her, made Colm and I's dinner, and planned the schedule for a lunch I was catering the following day for a baby reveal party. Seriously. This woman was inviting fifty of her closest friends round to reveal that she was pregnant with her third baby. As with her previous two children, in twelve weeks' time, there would be a 'gender reveal' party. Then a baby shower. Then a christening. Yes, she was definitely milking the experience for maximum attention and gifts, but hey, it made her a fantastic client.

'Hi m'darlin, how's you?' I'd been so deep in contemplation of Mrs Tower's announcement that I hadn't heard Colm come in.

'Fed up with laundry, tired, short-tempered, sore back, overworked and irritated,' I replied, smiling to dilute the moan.

'Ah. I was just looking for "fine",' he said, grinning, as he put his hands around my waist and kissed me on the neck. After all these years I wasn't sure if it was romantic, shallow or ridiculous that the minute his arms went around me the day got just a little bit better.

'Daddy!' Beth screeched, throwing herself at us to join the embrace. Our daughter didn't do subtlety or patience.

'Uncle Dan is here!'

'Where?' Colm replied, puzzled, before opening the fridge. 'Is he in here?'

Beth shrieked with laughter.

'Nope,' Colm went on, bending over to look under the table. 'Down here?'

'No!' Beth giggled.

'Ah, then he must be in here,' he said, opening the oven.

'He's in the garage!' Beth announced triumphantly, delighted to be a credible source of information.

His eyes met mine in a questioning glance.

'He's come to visit for a little while,' I told him in my best child-friendly, all's well, run along, nothing to worry about, tone.

He got the hint, sweeping Beth up and throwing her over his shoulder, then marching her back next door. I felt a huge pang of gratitude that no matter what, he always had time for his girl. He was never too tired for her, never too busy to listen to what she had to say. There was no doubt he was Fun Dad, the soft touch who couldn't say no, while I was the one who handled all the practicalities. No surprise there then.

But much as it sometimes needed, there was nothing I loved more than seeing them laughing together.

Over the next couple of hours, I ticked off everything on my list, right up to the point where our dinner was on the table. There was silence from upstairs, so I guessed Colm had finished with his storytelling and was now probably asleep next to his daughter on her bright blue sleigh bed. Her choice. She was in a militant, anti-pink, tomboy phase.

I trudged upstairs, and popped my head in the door to her bedroom. She was sound asleep, upside down, covers thrown to one side. I decided to rearrange her later when she'd had time to get into a deeper slumber.

Colm wasn't in our bedroom, so I headed to the smallest room, which doubled as a study. There he was, staring intently at the screen. That was unusual. He rarely worked from home, didn't have Facebook or Twitter or any of the other social network websites that sucked up time.

'Babe, dinner's ready,' I told him.

'Okay,' he answered automatically, his focus not leaving the screen.

The fact that he was engrossed piqued my interest and I moved closer to see what he was staring at with such intent. It took a few seconds to work out that it was one of those medical self-diagnosis sites.

'What are you doing?'

He shrugged. 'Och, I know these things are rubbish but I was just curious. Hang on, I'm almost done.'

I scanned the list of questions he'd already completed, starting with 'Headaches?' He'd ticked that one, and several of the others down the list. I had time to read a couple of them. 'Audio distortions.' I knew about those. 'Vision disturbances.' I had no idea what that meant. Other than the weird sound stuff and the headaches, he'd never mentioned any other symptoms. I still wasn't too concerned though. Didn't migraines often come with flashing lights or strange zig-zaggy lines?

He was at the last one and ticked 'no' in the box after 'weight-gain', then pressed 'enter'.

'I can't believe you're doing this,' I told him. Colm researching anything online was very unusual. 'It'll probably tell you that you're pregnant. Or a hypochondriac.' I wasn't buying into this at all. Hadn't I read a dozen articles that talked about how these websites were wildly inaccurate? Apparently, people were going in droves to

the doctors after self-diagnosing life-changing illnesses on the internet. There was a name for it. I racked my brain. Cyberchondria. Yep, that was it.

He pulled me down onto his knee. 'I know, but it's this or the doctor and I don't have time for the doctor. I'm a busy and very important man.'

I was still laughing when the computer pinged and the results came up on the screen.

Most likely cause? Number one – migraines. As predicted by Doctor Colm, and seconded by my extensive medical expertise gathered from watching *Casualty* on a Saturday night. There was a whole list of other possible causes listed below it – everything from concussion to head wound, to brain tumour. I could see why these sites had been accused of scaremongering.

'Aw, not pregnant. Are you gutted?' I asked him with mock sympathy. 'My name is Colm O'Flynn and I'm a cyberchondriac.' I told him, kissing him between words.

'Come on. Let's get dinner and then go make sure Dan isn't lying in the mancave with a tub of ice cream singing Shania Twain break-up songs.'

'Hang on, just want to do one thing...'

With his free hand, he used the mouse to flick back to the previous page.

'I noticed my jeans are feeling a bit tight on me,' he said, as he changed his answer to the 'weight-gain' question. Tick.

'That's because you haven't been out running this week,' I said, standing and pulling him upwards. 'Come on, you've a heartbroken pal to attend to.'

He was already on his feet when there was another ping from the screen.

The results had changed slightly.

Number one on the diagnosis probability scale?

Brain tumour.

I stared at it for a second, long enough for a chain reaction that went something like 'oh for goodness sake, how bloody ridiculous' to 'it couldn't be, could it?' Closely followed by a tiny niggles of fear and doubt, then a swing to 'of course not, but let's get it checked out anyway and get the problem sorted.'

The next day, I called the surgery and made an appointment for him to see the doctor.