More Romantic Tragedies of a Drama King

I Can't Believe I Don't Have a Boyfriend



HARRY TREVALDWYN

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Dear Jean-Pierre,

Right, I can't spend too long writing this letter because it's literally New Year's Eve and I'm running horrifically behind schedule. My hair isn't even tousled yet, not to be over-dramatic.

Once again, I must address the éléphant in the room: you still refuse to write back. It's been nearly three years since your last reply. Three years! You're becoming less of a pen-pal and more of a pen-enemy. A penemy, if you will. Everyone says I should give up and stop writing to you, but every time I'm close to giving up . . . you lure me back in. Like the other day, we got a pamphlet for double-glazed windows through the letterbox . . . was that an inside joke from you because I used to always forget the French word for window . . . ?

I'm choosing to believe it was, because there's so much to tell you. Also, don't we owe it to Anglo-French diplomacy?

Last term was basically 'boot-camp' for my untrained heart. I set my sights on a charismatic American called Peter, only to slowly fall for his emotionally intelligent and thoughtful best friend Sam. In a thrilling (and stressful) twist of fate, I find out they both fancy me but haven't told each other. So I was left to decide who to pursue at literal Prom (very dramatic). You really couldn't make it up! And I promise I haven't.

Here's the thing. I picked Sam, just before Christmas. We kissed (huge news). Naturally, I expected a holiday of festive walks, thoughtful presents and serious heavy petting to follow, but instead was rudely informed Sam was to spend the holidays with his family

visiting Peter's parents in New York.

My big issue is that Sam and I aren't officially boyfriends. Yet. I'm desperate for clarification but have been told by Jean it's not a conversation to have over text. But that's all going to change tonight. Sam and Peter are back from New York and we're all going to the same party! Can't believe I'm going to be starting the new year with a real-life boyfriend! So much nicer than that time I started the year with a fake one (don't want to get into it, had to kill him off).

So, to surmise, I have specifically three concerns going into the new year:

1. *Am I in a relationship with Sam?*
2. *Have Sam and Peter had a conversation about me?*
3. *Is it possible to wear too much moisturizer?*

The last concern is why this letter is a bit greasy btw. OK, Jean's yelling and I still haven't found my hair pomade.

Yours resentfully,
Patch Simmons xxx

PS I know that this letter has been mostly me-focused, but that's because you never reply. What have you done for Christmas? Did you get on the tennis team? How is puberty?

PPS If you reply, please do so in the traditional letter format rather than hard-to-decipher-inside-joke-pamphlet format. And

don't worry about the Milka bar!

PPPS Actually, do worry a little about the Milka bar, it's becoming quite passive-aggressive that I still haven't received one.

PPPPS But only if it's fairtrade!!

PPPPPS Don't really know what fairtrade is. Jean is all up in arms about it. Just send the Milka bar.

Chapter 2

I don't know exactly what I was expecting from my first New Year's Eve party. Most of my intel has come from movies, but *still* . . . I wasn't expecting to walk into an intimate family gathering of around twelve adults chatting in a respectfully quiet tone. All of them holding either a champagne flute, a mini quiche or a baby.

'I did tell you it was a small thing,' Rachel says defensively, closing the door behind us.

'You did,' I confirm, but I don't add that when she said 'small thing', I assumed she meant that they hadn't employed caterers or a fire-breather.

'You should have been honest and said a *boring* thing,' drones Flora, Rachel's identical twin, entering from the kitchen with a tray of mini falafels in one hand. 'Last year, everyone was either asleep or home before— *Wow*.' She stops in front of Tessa, taking in her new vibrant blue hair.

'Oh yeah,' Tessa says, self-consciously patting into place the strands that had shifted during the turbulent journey.

'Reminds me of the *Corpse Bride*,' Flora says after a moment of staring at it.

'Thanks?'

'For Flora, that's a good thing,' Rachel clarifies.

'A really good thing,' Flora confirms, making Tessa blush.

I grab two falafels and cram them in my mouth before I can say anything mean about the 'party'.

Rachel and Flora, as always, are wearing matching colours in different tones. Tonight, the colour is brown; Rachel a beige roll-neck and Flora a chocolate smock dress. As Rachel and Flora's family stare at us with thinly veiled confusion, I'm suddenly very aware that Jean, Tessa and I are all wearing a *lot* of sequins, which, considering the room is mostly filled with blue shirts and mid-calf skirts, is definitely not the vibe.

Eventually, the silence is broken by one of the adults, who makes his way over to us with an outstretched hand.

'You must be Rachel and Flora's friends from Drama Club. I'm Robert, their dad.'

It has to be said: Robert is a stone-cold fox; in his fifties, with kind eyes and floppy salt-and-pepper hair. He shakes each of our hands while we all smile dumbly up at him.

'We're so happy to have you with us!' he continues. 'Why don't you guys grab a drink and you can either hang out with us *boring* grown-ups or you can go up to the girls' room?'

Just as I'm about to compliment his shirt – the shade of green suits his eyes perfectly – I'm steered into the kitchen by Rachel and Flora.

'Nothing alcoholic!' he calls jovially from behind us.

Having finally managed to swallow the falafels, which went down with a fight, I turn to Flora and Rachel, who are busy getting glasses out. 'OK, why have you never made it clear your dad is so . . .' I try to find a tactful word for it.

'Hot. He's *so* hot,' Tessa finishes for me.

'He looks like the type of dad they would cast in a photo shoot for activewear,' Jean nods in agreement.

We all stare into the distance, imagining what that advert would look like.

Rachel and Flora turn from the cupboard and wrinkle their noses in unison.

'That's revolting,' says Flora. 'Now, what do you guys want to drink?'

They place the glasses on the counter. I note they haven't trusted us with the fancy glasses the other adults are drinking from next door, so I slowly make my way over to the cupboard and grab a delicate engraved glass from the cupboard for myself.

For some much-needed mood-elevation, we create a signature cocktail: 'The New Year Spritz'. It's basically orange squash with lemonade and a tiny bit of Prosecco snuck in at the last minute. We all have a sip and discuss whether we can feel the effects of the Prosecco in our drink, before I, clunkily, move conversation onto more pressing matters.

'Now, we've made a nice cocktail and had a nice catch-

up—' I begin, interrupting Tessa complimenting Flora's black nail polish.

'Jean! I haven't asked! How was your holiday in Wales?' Rachel asks.

I hold my finger up to Rachel's face. 'Oh! We're actually done with the catch-up portion of this evening,' I explain sharply.

Jean raises an eyebrow in warning.

'Sorry.' I drop my finger from Rachel's slightly startled face. 'I appreciate you guys and your very fanciable father hosting us, but we need to do some serious "vibe curation" if I want to get a snog by the end of the night.'

Rachel and Flora exchange a look. I'm not sure if they knew that their New Year's Eve was going to be spent securing me a kiss and, ideally, some heavy petting, but it's important we're on the same page.

'So what's on the agenda?' I ask excitedly. 'Fireworks, a masked ball, flash mob?'

Rachel and Flora look at each other. 'We might play charades later?' Rachel says hopefully.

I shake my head. 'Don't get me wrong, I love charades. But it's not *sexy*, is it?' I ask.

'Oh, it can be!' Jean argues. 'What about if you get given a sexy book? Like *Lady Chatterley's Lover*?'

'Too risky,' I reply with a regrettable shrug. 'Tonight needs to be sexy and glamorous. A *soirée*, if you will!' I do an

excited intake of breath as an idea forms in my head. 'How would everyone feel about a game of *spin the bottle*?'

I can tell from people's facial expressions that they aren't on board. Rachel and Flora especially.

'Considering about eighty per cent of the people in this house are our relatives, we're going to veto that one,' Flora replies flatly.

'Fine,' I grumble. 'Well, let's get brainstorming because Sam and Peter are going to be here any second!'

As if the universe was waiting for its cue, the doorbell rings. Oh God, it's time.

'Create a nonchalant tableau! *Now!*' I scream. There's a pause while people consider what I've said and then everyone quickly shuffles into place. Luckily, I'm in a group that are well-versed in making themed tableaus because it's a game we play at Drama Club. Within seconds, Rachel is leaning on the counter, Tessa and Flora are reclining in two of the kitchen chairs holding their drinks up, and Jean and I have our backs against the wall in a sort of freeze-frame of conversation. It either looks incredibly nonchalant or like a group of teenagers with quite weak spines.

From the hallway, I hear the muffled sound of the door being answered, followed by the unmistakable greetings of Peter's confident 'Hey' and Sam's polite 'Hello'. My stomach does a little wriggle.

'What's the game plan here?' whispers Jean beside me as

I hear Sam and Peter being directed into the kitchen.

It's a fair question and I don't have a good answer. I'm torn because – despite reading in one of my mum's self-help books that 'the very worst thing you can do with a potential romantic partner is show him you like him' – I know (because Jean keeps on telling me) that you shouldn't play games with people you like. Obviously this doesn't include sexy games like tennis and boules.

However, I need to even the playing field a bit. Sam and I were texting quite a bit over Christmas and Sam is so eloquent and smart in his messages. In contrast, somehow I accidentally revealed that I thought orangutans were made-up creatures. So I need to even the playing field *a bit* to impress him. I need a setting in which I thrive.

Examples of Settings in Which I Thrive:

- When selected in audience participation during a magic show.
- Helping my mum shop for presents for her friends, specifically homeware or accessories.
- When out at dinner, paired with a chatty waiter who I can have some playful back-and-forth with.
- Parties with adults who are impressed with my interesting questions and inquisitive nature.

That last one is important because that's literally the social

setting I'm in right now and I'm ready to showboat. Maybe I can make it so Sam overhears me ask Rachel and Flora's dad an insightful question about the dairy crisis? Obviously in an ideal world, I wouldn't have to worry about how to impress Sam and he would come in, kiss me and proudly explain to the room that we are boyfriends; but I need to be more realistic (something I am always loath to do).

I hear the door open. I make an effort not to look over, but instead say loudly to Jean, 'I'm so . . . relaxed!'

Jean nods and replies equally loudly, 'Yeah, you seem relaxed! Nonchalant, even!'

I take what I believe to be an 'impossibly casual' sip of my drink and in the process spill it entirely down my sequinned top.

'Dammit!' I hiss, staring furiously down at my cup for letting me down.

'Here,' calls a voice, and before I know it, Sam is in front of me, carefully patting down my top with a tea towel he's grabbed from the counter.

'Make sure you're gentle or it might dislodge some of the sequins,' I fuss, too flustered to look up.

'I wouldn't dare,' he replies earnestly.

I finally look up at him and his mouth curves into a shy smile. It's funny, I had spent so long thinking about Sam that I forgot the details of his face. His long eyelashes, his nose that has a slight bump and the small gap between his

front teeth. I always think Sam looks a bit like a painting of a writer from the past.

'Hellooo,' I say awkwardly.

'Hi,' replies Sam breathily.

I notice that his hand has stopped its gentle dabbing motion and is resting on my chest. He follows my eyeline and suddenly jumps back, embarrassed.

There's a pause as everyone in the room decides what to say next. Tessa thankfully breaks this silence.

'Peter! How are you, *sweetie*?' she cries and leaps up from her chair to embrace him. I think the choice of the word 'sweetie' might betray that she herself is a bit awkward, but fortunately Peter leans into it.

'Yeah, I'm good thanks . . . *cutie*,' and rubs her back. Over her shoulder, Peter looks up at me and mouths, 'Hey.' Peter somehow always looks completely relaxed in any room he's in. Then he grins and I'm reminded exactly why I first fancied him. If Sam is a writer from the past, then Peter looks like a black-and-white photo of a handsome cadet. And he's got a completely perfect chin. But it's when he smiles that he becomes the most handsome. His eyes crinkle and his face becomes mischievous and joyful and completely magnetizing. He's also somehow managed to catch a tan over Christmas and it's made his dazzling smile all the more dazzling . . . I remember to raise my hand out and wave back.

After Tessa has finally released Peter and everyone has

greeted each other, we all stand far apart in the kitchen with just the sound of the parents chatting in the other room. At least our drama teacher Ms Jenkins would praise us for 'balancing the space'.

'So this is the rager?' Peter asks playfully, raising his eyebrow.

At that moment, I hear Flora and Rachel's aunt loudly exclaim, 'I can't believe you don't keep the Parmesan rind for sauces!'

Jean and Tessa grimace.

'Well, this is pre-rager,' I garble. 'We're just getting ready for it to be a rager and didn't want to, you know, *rage*, before you guys got here. That wouldn't be fair, would it?'

Jean fervently nods in agreement beside me. 'Exactly. We didn't want to get tuckered out from raging too early, so we thought we would hydrate first.' She lifts her drink to illustrate her point. 'Although if we were in *prohibition* times, then I certainly wouldn't be able to hydrate with this . . . if you know what I mean?' Jean raises her eyebrows and gives the entire room a knowing wink before second-guessing whether people *did* know what she meant. 'There's alcohol in this,' she clarifies excitedly.

'I think we picked up on that,' Tessa says kindly, putting her arm around Jean.

I clear my throat and throw a pointed look at Flora and Rachel, who are standing by the cupboards. 'I think it might

be time for our hosts to offer up our signature cocktail? To aid the raging?' I call over to them.

Flora makes a rude gesture at me, while Rachel stands upright like a waiter who's been caught slacking and goes about making two more 'New Year Spritzes'. Let the festivities – and indeed the *raging* – begin!

Having been kicked out of the living room by Flora and Rachel's aunt for trying to inorganically start a 'dance party' and waking the now-screaming baby, the seven of us are crowded in Rachel's bedroom nursing our barely alcoholic drinks. We had to use Rachel's bedroom because Flora revealed her pet snake had got loose in her room and promised she would 'find it next year', which is in about an hour's time.

I don't have a clue how to get the party vibe going when we aren't allowed to play music and we have to keep the door open. Sam and Peter are already yawning (and then apologizing for yawning, claiming it's jet lag) and Rachel and Flora look as if they want us to leave. Tessa and Jean are admirably keeping conversation at a gentle simmer by picking up different things in Rachel's room.

'This is impressive!' Jean calls, holding up a pink-and-green rosette on Rachel's shelf and handing it to Tessa.

'What is dressage, anyway?' asks Tessa, looking down at the rosette.

'Oh, it's sort of horse riding, but not . . . jumping, if that

makes sense?' replies Rachel, shifting uncomfortably on the bed.

'It makes total sense and I'd love to hear more in great detail!' Jean replies, grinning manically. God bless them for trying, but this is not the sort of glamorous and scintillating conversation I was anticipating. I wanted *risqué* anecdotes and passionate but kind-spirited debates! Maybe I could ask for other people's thoughts about keeping Parmesan rind for sauces?

'How long until New Year?' asks Flora.

'About . . . fifty-six minutes,' replies Peter, looking down at his watch.

I catch eyes with Sam, who smiles at me, and I smile back, open my mouth to say something but can't think of anything funny or interesting, so after several failed attempts of starting a sentence, I close my mouth and pretend I've got a notification on my phone.

Peter lets out a big yawn and looks to Sam. 'I know it's early, but I think we might—'

'WE'RE PLAYING SPIN THE BOTTLE!' I exclaim loudly.

After some convincing the group and a sincere promise to Rachel and Flora that they won't be forced to kiss, we assemble into a cramped circle in the centre of Rachel's room with an empty bottle of Prosecco procured from downstairs. The circle goes: Tessa, Sam, Peter, Flora, Rachel, Jean, me. I

turn off the overhead light and turn on the pink salt lamp on Rachel's desk, so while it's hard to make out much, at least what we *can* see has a romantic pink hue.

'Right, so everyone knows the rules, right?' Jean asks officiously, incapable of not becoming games master. 'Traditionally, you spin the bottle and the person it lands on you have to kiss. However, I think we should opt for a less pressurizing game, where players can choose between a handshake, a kiss on the cheek or a kiss on the lips?'

Jean catches my eye across the circle and I give her a barely perceptible shake of my head.

'Or, actually,' she backtracks, 'maybe we should just stick to the classics and go for a kiss on the lips? If everyone's in agreement?'

I look around the room as if I'm slightly reluctant about it. 'I mean . . . I guess those are technically the rules, so we should probably do that?' I dare a glance at Sam, who looks slightly uncomfortable but gives a nod to Jean alongside everyone else.

It's really a credit to my friends that they are going along with this, because there really are only a few good pairings that could come out of it (namely, myself and Sam). The rest of the circle consists of siblings, exes (Peter and Tessa) and Jean. But sometimes you have to make sacrifices. *I* won't be making any in this scenario. I am the general and my friends are my loyal foot soldiers, willing

to sacrifice themselves for the greater cause.

I keep glancing at Sam, trying to decode his expression. Is he nervous? Excited? Bored? Filled with deep, soul-crushing regret? God, please not that last one.

Tessa spins first. It's hard to get a proper spin going on a carpeted floor, but she makes it work, and it lands on Flora. There's an uncomfortable laugh as Tessa and Flora reluctantly shuffle forwards and give each other a brief kiss on the lips. I can't make out if it's the pink hue from the lamp, but Tessa looks like she's blushing. She laughs a bit breathlessly.

Bizarrely, we all do a polite smatter of applause before it's Sam's turn. As he leans forwards to hold the bottle, he looks up at me from underneath his long eyelashes. I press my lips together and wish I had applied more lip balm when I went to the loo, but I suppose slightly dryer lips will have better grip?

Sam spins the bottle and I hold my breath as it goes past me and lands on . . . Flora again.

Everyone chuckles and I plaster a smile on my face. I can feel Jean and Tessa look at me to gauge my reaction as Sam smiles politely and crawls towards Flora, who purses her lips.

'OK, this isn't a sex party, Flora!' I snap the second her lips touch Sam's.

Everyone turns to me and I hastily laugh.

'Only kidding!' I say. 'Your turn, Peter!'

I can feel Jean trying to give me a look that tells me to relax, but I pointedly continue looking at Peter, who takes the bottle and spins. I watch the bottle do a full circle and then go past Flora, Rachel, Jean before landing decidedly on . . . me.

Peter and I both look up from the bottle at the same time and give each other slightly startled eye contact. I feel Jean stiffen slightly beside me. She's the only person aside from Peter and myself who knows he declared his feelings for me. Perhaps suggesting spin the bottle wasn't my best idea, but it would look too guilty to back out of the game now.

Peter slightly raises his eyebrows questioningly and I slowly crawl forwards in response. Either my heart is beating in my ears or everyone else has gone silent, and as I force myself not to look at Sam, Peter closes the space between us. I hear him breathlessly say, 'OK,' before leaning in and pressing his lips against mine. They are warm and soft and I feel him about to pull back, but – maybe I watched too many movie kisses as research over Christmas – I start kissing him back. He lingers there for a second and then, all too quickly, his lips are gone. I open my eyes and see that Peter has already retreated back to his place in the circle between Flora and Sam. I quickly follow suit.

My eyes dart up to Sam's, but the second I try to smile at him, his gaze goes to the bottle in the middle. There's a silence and I feel my cheeks going hot. *What was that?*

Thankfully, at that moment, the door swings open and Flora and Rachel's impossibly hot dad is there in the doorway. 'What's going on in here?' he asks with the cadence of a teacher, making him even more fanciable. I've always been a sucker for an authority figure.

Jean, whose fear of getting told off supersedes even mine, quickly scrambles across the circle to pick up the bottle, realizes it's too late to hide it and so begins scrupulously staring down at the Prosecco label. 'All that was happening, Mr Heyes, is that I was hosting a little impromptu Prosecco tasting class, only taking *tiny* sips of course, and I think we all came to the unanimous decision that this one –' and she peers down at the bottle – 'the Tesco Finest one, is just . . . really very good!'

Everyone nods in agreement, looking up at Mr Heyes, whose eyes crinkle in amusement.

'Glad to hear it. But perhaps we should reconvene downstairs, so we can do the countdown together?' he suggests, opening the door wider and stepping to the side so we can all file past him.

As I pass, I notice that he's wearing a woody perfume that almost definitely has notes of amber, and which is, unfortunately, my kryptonite. Maybe life would be easier if I just completely ignored whatever was happening with Sam and whatever just happened with Peter and found a way to break apart Flora and Rachel's family and run away with Robert instead?

⋆

'I think my overarching New Year's resolution is that I want to figure myself out a bit more,' says Tessa thoughtfully. 'But my practical one is to read a book a month.'

We've assembled in a small huddle in the living room while the adults talk about how baby Abigail is 'weirdly intelligent' for her age. Although I'm not sure what they're basing this off as she can't hold up her own head.

'What do you mean figure yourself out?' Flora asks.

'Well . . .' Tessa bobs her head, 'I think I lost myself a bit over the last few years. Not just when I was in the popular gang, but with everything. Trying to please my mum, trying to please my dad, trying to please . . . well, yeah. I want to try to figure out what *I* like. Who *I* am.' She nods determinedly. 'Reading is actually part of that. I stopped reading as much when I was with the Lodge Crew because I was worried Callum and everyone would think it was boring,' Tessa admits, rolling her eyes. Callum Taylor is the unofficial leader of the Lodge Crew and a complete brute. He remains the only boy I know in real life to give someone a 'swirly' (flush their head in the loo).

'Well, in fairness, Callum probably doesn't know *how* to read,' I add.

'Well, *my* New Year's resolution,' says Jean in a slightly tight voice, staring down at her glass with her eyebrows raised, 'is to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. *Everyone*!'

This seems like an odd resolution for Jean because she already gives everyone the benefit of the doubt. Too much, in fact; she's lost two phones and a bejewelled jacket by being overly trusting.

'Mine is to learn how to crochet,' says Rachel determinedly.

'Mine is to cast a genuine curse,' mutters Flora darkly.

Almost everyone looks around uneasily, except Tessa, who looks fascinated. Perhaps hoping Flora can cast a curse on Callum Taylor.

'Mine,' I say, to move things along and with no small amount of superiority, 'is to combat the startling wealth disparity within the UK.' I nod smugly.

Everyone looks at me sceptically, perhaps seeing through the fact that I had pre-prepared a noble resolution in order to impress Sam.

'And how do you plan on doing that?' Peter asks, trying to look serious.

'Well, you know,' I reply, flustered, 'mostly by just combatting it and then . . . yeah . . . Anyway! Over to you, Peter, what's yours?'

Peter takes a breath in through his teeth and says, 'Mine is to talk to my parents three times a week and *try* to not end up fighting with them.'

I don't know exactly what the situation is between Peter's parents. I do know that the whole reason he's spending the

year with Sam's family is because his own parents were not in a good place, but maybe things are starting to look up? Before any of us can ask a follow-up question, however, he turns to Sam.

'Oh, my turn,' says Sam quietly. 'I suppose my New Year's resolution is to . . .' He hesitates before glancing up at me. I try to smile encouragingly. In the back of my head, I come up with options for what Sam's New Year's resolutions should be.

Ideal New Year's Resolutions for Sam:

- For Patch to be my boyfriend immediately.
- To give Patch a thoughtful present every day in the hopes of somehow proving how crazy I am about him.
- To follow Patch around and kiss him very publicly whenever he points out someone who he previously had a crush on but it wasn't reciprocated.

The last one could genuinely take the best part of a year because I have very little problem in establishing a crush. I mean, there's at least four people just in the checkout team at the big Tesco. Especially Tim who scans things so quickly. And there are two people at this party I've had crushes on. Three! Now that I've met Flora and Rachel's dad. Back to the matter at hand! Is Sam about to make a public declaration

of his adoration for me through the medium of a New Year's resolution?!

'My resolution is to recycle more,' says Sam quickly.

Oh. Apparently not. Unless he's about to carry on and say something along the lines of, '*Like recycling this corny pick-up line? Patch, did it hurt? When you fell from heaven? Be my boyfriend, angel boy!*'

But it seems like he's finished with his resolution as now he's double-checking that his shirt isn't poking out from under his jumper.

Jean checks her phone and begins pacing in front of everyone like an officer. 'OK, everyone! We've got about two minutes to get ready for the one-minute countdown. I would love it to be uniform, so shall we confirm whether we'll be shouting "Happy New Year" or simply whooping?'

Flora and Rachel's relatives regard Jean with a mixture of confusion and deference as she briskly attempts to assemble everyone into a 'loose circle'. Usually, Jean is the height of politeness, but when she's in organizational mode it can be another story.

I'm just deciding whether I've got time to shove another falafel into my mouth before the end of the year when I feel fingers lightly brush past my own. I turn to look at Sam, who has walked across the room and is now quietly opening the front door. He slips out, raising an eyebrow over his shoulder as he does so. Unable to breathe, I take the cue and

follow Sam, unseen by the rest of the room. I close the door behind me, shutting out the sound of Jean telling Rachel and Flora's aunt to 'avoid dawdling' as she goes to the loo.

Outside, the chill of the night air bites my nose. I pull the sleeves of my jacket over my hands to keep them warm as my breath snakes out in front of me. I stop myself from doing pretend smoking because I don't think that would be a cool move. In the porch light, I spot Sam inspecting the flowers by the gate. I walk over to him, the only sound is the crunch of my feet on the pebbled driveway.

'Hello,' he says quietly, turning around as I approach. He points down at the flowerbed he was just inspecting and peers closer. 'These are hydrangeas, I think.'

'Oh,' I nod before clumsily adding, 'It's nice to see you.'

I immediately become awkward about what I should do with my arms. It's too late to hug him and it would be unforgivable to rub his arm. I panic and extend my hand forwards for a handshake, staring furiously down at my own arm as if it has betrayed me. Sam, also looking down at my hand, raises his eyebrows. He extends his own hand and shakes mine like we've just secured some sort of financial merger.

'It's nice to see you too,' Sam says stiffly, holding my hand for a beat too long before dropping it again. 'Sorry, I've been quiet this evening and a bit . . . awkward,' he says. 'I don't really know what we're supposed to do

or . . . yeah, I don't know where we are exactly.'

'Flora and Rachel's house,' I reply quickly.

'Well, I know *that*,' Sam smiles.

That sip of Prosecco combined with the pressure of this interaction seems to be getting to me.

'I just mean,' Sam continues, 'I don't know exactly . . . I think I'm just feeling nervous. Not bad nervous! But definitely nervous, if that makes sense?'

'I think so,' I admit, 'but I'd love you to elaborate.'

Sam looks like he's trying to do a very complicated equation in his head, which he eventually gives up on with a sigh. He crosses his arms. 'We had that . . . kiss. And then I've been away and we've been texting, but I don't really know where we are, as a . . . *we*.'

There's a rapping from my left and I see Jean knocking on the window from inside. She glares at me, shaking her head, and mouths, 'COUNTDOWN NOW!' before clocking the scene she's interrupting and then trying to do a casual shrug and mouthing, 'IF YOU WANT!'

I'm worried that this conversation sounds an awful lot like the conversations people have before a break-up and I'm suddenly desperate to be inside with everyone else. Surely Sam can't break up with me if we've never properly been together, can he?

'It's nearly New Year,' I say. 'Shall we go inside and do the countdown?'

'OK,' Sam says. 'Or we could do it out here?' he asks tentatively.

I turn back to him and swallow, before squeezing my eyes shut.

'Listen, Sam, if you want nothing to do with me, will you just tell me now because I really don't want that to be the start of my year,' I blurt out.

I hear nothing, so I slowly open one eye. Sam looks as if he's trying to say something but, as usual, can't quite get his words out.

I check my phone and show him the time. 'You have less than two minutes to break up with me, OK? So if you're going to do it, do it. Tick-tock!' I say to him, sternly. I've spent all the Christmas holidays thinking this was going to be the start of something and instead it's the end of a relationship that never even happened.

'Break up?' he asks.

'Fine,' I sigh. 'I know what you're going to say, "We were never together so we can't break up," but you know what, Sam, it's just a phrase!'

'That's actually not what I was going to say,' Sam replies tartly.

'Well, will you please say what you're going to say because I'm freezing!'

I don't quite know how this romantic conversation has turned into an argument, but here we are. I think the

pressure and expectation has all risen to the surface.

I hear the countdown begin inside.

'*Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . .*'

It's too late to go inside now. I cross my arms in front of my chest to mirror Sam's and stare at him boldly. If he's going to break up with me, then he can do it to unyielding eye contact from me.

'*Seven . . . six . . . five . . .*'

'The thing is, over the holidays, I've just . . .' Sam begins, before exhaling like you do when someone is being too loud in the cinema and you want them to know you're annoyed about it.

'*Four . . . three . . .*'

I squeeze my eyes shut again, I don't know what I was thinking doing eye contact. It will be much easier to repress the memory of me being dumped by a boy I like if I keep my eyes shut.

'*Two . . . one . . .*'

'Oh, sod it,' Sam says furiously and before I get the chance to know what he's referring to, I hear the shouts of 'Happy New Year' coming from inside and, in a surprising but very welcome turn of events, I feel Sam's lips on mine as he gives me a New Year's kiss.

I open my eyes slowly to see Sam looking at me cautiously.

'Happy New Year,' I say breathlessly.

'Happy New Year,' he replies, scanning my face, which I'm positive is getting pinker by the second. 'Was that OK?'

he asks.

'Oh . . . very much . . . I like kiss you . . . and, of course, yes!' I stammer out, hoping my vigorous nodding will make it clear it was very OK.

Even though I'm desperate not to ruin this perfect moment, I still have no idea what this *means*.

'I am confused,' I admit. 'Thrilled! But definitely confused.'

'That's fair,' Sam nods. 'I didn't want to start the New Year by giving you the wrong expectations . . . I think that whatever this is,' and he gestures between the two of us, 'I need to take it really slowly, and just see how things go?'

'Right. Of course,' I say.

'We're still getting to know each other, so let's just . . . carry on doing that?'

'Well, if we're getting to know each other,' I say in what I hope is a sexy, gravelly voice, 'then let me reintroduce you to my lips.'

Sam raises his eyebrows. 'What?'

As soon as I've said it, I regret it. It sounded great in my head, like a black-and-white movie! But in person came across as a bit seedy.

'Nothing!' I chirp.

At that moment, another chorus of screams comes from inside the house, but it doesn't sound like a scream of celebration. In fact, it sounds like it could be . . . panic and terror?

'Ohh. I think they've found Flora's snake.'