

CHASING 30

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WEBSITE PREVIEW... ENJOY!

1. FORGOTTEN CHOICES

Lost opportunities often return with two great friends – realisation and regret. It's in those moments that everything somehow makes sense; when your forgotten choices come back into your life, dragging behind them all those things you never said or failed to do.

Amy had been the source of realisation that my life needed to change, that I could be more than I was – happier than I'd ever been before. And now she stood before me, in the darkest corner of the church, somewhere between a stone bench and my freedom. I could see the anger on her face but my mind could only fill itself with regret.

Regret that I didn't do it all sooner.

'Hello, Josh,' she said without moving, her arms folded as one shoulder leaned against the cold wall. Up close, she hadn't changed as much as I had expected, and it disappointed me. Her ginger hair was a little longer than I remembered, her body still a little too thin, but otherwise she was three years in my past.

'Hello, Amy,' I said, as I stood a few cautious steps away.

She moved to sit on the bench, so she could look up at me from a calculatedly lower position. 'I wondered how I would feel when I finally saw you again,' she said, taking a deep breath. 'I had no idea when that would be, until I was kindly invited to the wedding.' Her smile savoured that moment.

I took my turn to let the wall brace me. 'And how do you feel now you've seen me?'

Her face scrunched up. 'I think you're as much of a bastard now as you were when you left me.'

'I didn't leave you.'

'You gave me no choice – that's as good as walking out.' She crossed her legs and took a moment to glare at me. 'It's probably more cowardly than just abandoning me. Don't you think?'

I didn't answer. I simply hovered – unable to defend the past or choose my future. If I walked off now, I would never be able to put things right. And if I stayed, she would say things I didn't want to hear, things I didn't want other people to hear. Each choice offered unfair consequences but I already knew what I would do. I'd known for the last three years – since the day I tore our lives apart; since the day I left her without the answers she desperately wanted. Today wasn't the first time she'd had me trapped, but it was the first time that it was of her doing.

The inevitable tears started, as she held a deliberate hand to her pale face in an effort to muffle the crying. I moved to sit on the bench, keeping a clear space between us. She cried for a few minutes as I looked around the empty church, its eager flock now on the road, heading towards the reception and a promise of watery Pimms and Cava dressed like Champagne - as complimentary as they would be rationed.

'I can't believe you still make me feel like this,' she said, as her hands carefully dabbed a tissue around her eyes. 'You know I cried for weeks after what you did to me.'

She had told me that in the last five letters she sent to me, each one more unforgiving than the last. I didn't understand it then and I didn't believe it now. There was never any intention in what I did, no sinister plan – just life doing its thing. I never told myself I was guilty of anything. But then I never convinced myself of my innocence, either. The jury in my head never reached a verdict, until recently. And ever since I had known this day was coming I had thought about nothing else.

She turned to look at me. It wasn't the same look as when I last saw her. That look, just a few years ago, was of a broken woman – a victim's look. Now she was powerful, the judge sitting next to me – ready to deliver the verdict. 'I tried to tell myself that what you did wasn't because of me, but I always thought it was.'

I sighed. I wanted to tell her she was wrong but I promised myself no more lies.

She placed a hand on the bench, closer to my body than her own. 'I took a long time to stop loving you. Maybe for a year after we split up I still wanted to touch you, to see your naked body, to be the one who kissed you. I always enjoyed being the one to make the other girls jealous.'

I didn't answer. I didn't have the heart to tell her how quickly I forgot all those things.

She put the tissue away and then her fingers vainly surveyed the lines of her face, checking for any sign of a smudge. 'But I'm happy now. I want you to know that, Josh – I'm so very happy now.'

'I'm glad for you.'

She slapped my face, the shock showing in her eyes before the pain hit me. Those fragile hands carried more than I expected, less than I probably deserved. Her face scrunched up. ‘I don’t want you to be happy for me. I want you to be jealous, upset and angry.’

‘Look Amy, I’m – ’

She sat forward and pointed a finger at my face. ‘Don’t say it, Josh. Don’t say that word. For three years you lured me in with the love word and then you tried the other word when you left me. I accepted your love, unconditionally, for the rest of my life. I tell you I will never accept the other word, so don’t even say it.’

I leaned towards her. ‘I tried to love you, Amy – I tried so hard. I was desperate to love you, for both of us.’

She pushed me away, her face full of practised anger. ‘You tried to love me? You didn’t try very fucking hard, did you? Instead of just being honest to both of us, you let my feelings grow stronger every day. Did it make you feel good?’

I didn’t argue back. I didn’t see the point of asking for forgiveness when all I really wanted was her secrecy.

She stared at me with all the intensity she could summon, with all the disgust she could find. ‘The man who never says a lot... good bloody thing, because when you do you crush people. You make them love you. They fall for the looks, the charm, and the silent hero. You lured me in *and* kept all those things from me.’ Her hands started to shake, probably considering another slap. ‘My therapist called it the makings of an abusive relationship.’

I listened, silently forgiving all that she said.

The creases slowly vanished from her forehead as her simple face unfolded into a subtle smile. ‘What I don’t understand is why the sex was still so good? I mean, it was great right up until our last time together. You still made me – ’

‘Amy, enough now.’

She stopped, only to allow the tears to return.

I gently touched her folded knee. ‘I tried to love you. I wanted so badly to make you happy but things had to change. If you can’t see that now, then I don’t know what else I can say. You won’t let me say *that* thing, and you won’t believe I really did care for you. I didn’t do any of it deliberately – can you believe that?’

She pushed my hand off her body. ‘I don’t know what to believe. All I know is, back then I was so happy.’

‘But I wasn’t,’ I muttered.

Someone finally appeared at the door. I recognised him as her new man – an expected but unwelcome visitor to our conversation that didn't seem to have the end I longed to see.

Amy uncurled herself and stood up. 'Josh, this is Andrew, my fiancé.'

I stood up to greet my replacement but he didn't come any closer. He simply nodded, his quiet gaze resting on Amy as he held out a hand – calling her to him, as if I was somehow his competition from a past he never knew.

She obeyed but kept her pace slow as she walked past me. 'Do your parents know, Josh?' she asked, with a smile spread across that twisted face.

I couldn't answer.

'I guess not. Well, you know it's not good to keep secrets.'

I stared as her eyes stayed fixed on mine, her body nearing the big wooden door.

'See you at the reception,' she said, before slamming the door shut.

2. GREEDY SECONDS

The wedding couple looked at each other with such rehearsed happiness as they danced to their first song. They gazed into each other's eyes as they comfortably held their embrace, staring at each other with the passion of newlyweds, their feet carrying them with the experience of a hundred dances. This wasn't my parents' first wedding – this was their greedy second. Today was a renewal of their vows, which came with a specific set of rules about treating this exactly as a first wedding.

My mum loved everyone staring, the wedding buzz like a drug to her. She had said throughout the planning that she had even more energy than the first one. My dad made no secret about having the same enthusiasm but spending a lot more money – predictable to the end, my dad.

I watched my parents' dance, full of such genuine love, as lifelong friends joined them after the first song. My mum smiled expectantly at me as she whirled around the dance-floor. I knew she needed so much more from me than I offered today; my thoughts stuck in a ceremony I didn't want to witness, listening to a crap song born long before me. I stood in the corner, cautiously looking for Amy, paying no attention to their special day. I realised I wasn't alone in my unfair absence from the moment, seeing Ryan – the typical younger brother – more interested in seducing a barely-legal girl into his hotel room than seeing his mother's dream come to life, again.

And that's why she had invited Amy. Mum had always made it clear my girlfriend was the daughter she had always wanted. Sometimes, many times, I thought she looked at Amy more as an offspring than my sexual partner. To this day, my ever-prying mum never knew why her perfect daughter had been torn so quickly and brutally out of her life. I had watched several times tonight as Amy made short whispers into Mum's ear, and she would always find me in the crowd as she walked away, searching for the predictable torment on my face.

Matt stood beside me, staring at me with a mixture of disappointment and frustration, as I continued to keep a watchful eye on my parents' celebration of thirty years of marriage, which only served as my reminder of my thirty years of loneliness. He had challenged me several times about the exaggeration in that thought – since I was about to turn twenty-nine and my loneliness couldn't have started until I left home, he thought my views a little over-inflated.

Finally, and unsurprisingly, he pushed me towards the door. My mind wanted to argue, to keep an eye on the threat, but my body welcomed the break. We walked in silence through the gardens, moving further from the hotel until we reached a small bridge, covering nothing more than an oversized pond. Matt leaned against the wooden frame and I stood opposite him, our feet nearly

able to touch as we stretched our bodies. The near-darkness helped by one small lamp, revealed his big brown eyes set against the paleness of his skin.

‘I can’t believe you let her say all of that stuff to you,’ he said, his thoughts far away from the romance of the lovers’ bridge.

I sighed. ‘She’s entitled to her feelings, Matt.’

‘Well, she needs to get over them and move on if you ask me,’ he said, as his hands played with his already messy hair. ‘Which I know you didn’t.’

I nodded.

‘All that rubbish about abusive relationships. What planet is she on?’

‘It must be how I made her feel. I never thought I was *that* sort of person.’

The bridge creaked as Matt pushed himself off the frame towards me, his warm breath hitting my face. ‘Josh, you are not *that* sort of person. You did nothing wrong. You’re not exactly a criminal, are you?’

I shook my head. ‘I’m sure if you ask other people, they will say what I did was bad, maybe even a bit evil.’

He smacked the fencing next to me. ‘Oh come on, listen to what you’re saying.’

My head still shook, my mind continuing to judge me in Amy’s absence. ‘To deliberately make someone love you, to build up a life together that they think will last forever, knowing in your own heart it never will. All of that wasn’t a normal thing to do.’

He shut his eyes for a moment, as I enjoyed the welcome silence.

‘Josh, it’s called growing up and finding out who you are.’

‘If I had been braver, stronger even, I would never have let it go on for so long.’

He pinched my arm. ‘You really need to snap out of this. You have done no worse than literally millions of people, and your feelings were much more intense. You were fine until you knew she was coming today.’

‘I’m not sure you’re right. But she has moved her life on.’

‘And you haven’t?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Thanks, Josh, that makes me feel great.’

I grabbed his arm, pushing my fingers around his tensed bicep. ‘I don’t mean it. You saved me. If it wasn’t for you, well... let’s not even imagine that.’

He pushed himself back to the other side of the bridge. ‘You have to tell me what’s wrong. I can’t bear the hours of silence any longer. This six-month daydream you’ve been in has to end,’ he said, massaging the confusion in his temples.

‘It’s not you if that’s what you’re thinking.’

He nodded.

I edged closer. ‘I’m pushing close to thirty and I’m still single, inexperienced in so many ways and sometimes, a lot of the time lately, I feel lonely.’

He massaged harder. ‘Great, I feel good again. Well I’ve tried, Josh, God knows I’ve tried.’

‘You’re not giving up on me, are you?’

He suddenly laughed. ‘After three years’ investment? You must be kidding. Completely the opposite, actually – tomorrow, we’re throwing you a party.’

‘You know I don’t like my own parties, and anyway, it’s a bit early for my birthday.’

He nodded, clearly expectant of my reaction but offering no sympathy. ‘It’s not that sort of a party. You’ve spent way too long sulking in our flat. And since there’s nothing there for you, we need to get you out and onto the market.’

I gave my usual, standard frown. ‘You mean the internet?’

He smiled. ‘Yes. Look, loads of people have one.’

‘I don’t think so.’

He held out a hand to cut off any further protest. ‘Well, we’re all sick of the zombie, so it’s this or we go speed-dating. Since you struggle to put two sentences together with a stranger, the online option seems better. And besides, the internet will be much quicker at helping you sort out those extreme standards you have. It’ll weed out the right one for you.’

‘Why are you doing all of this with a party?’

‘A *Profile Party* – we thought if it had a name, you’d adapt to it quicker,’ he said, a row of teeth glinting in the moonlight. ‘And this way we can bring you round with a lot of alcohol.’

I sighed, too tired to fight.

‘So no arguments, okay? We don’t want to ruin this’ – he looked around and grinned – ‘perfect moment.’

Finally, he noticed.

With one step, my shoes were touching his. I forced my way into his eyes and slowly moved my hands to straighten his unspoiled cravat. ‘You know, I overheard a couple of people asking if you were my secret date tonight.’

He took a deep breath, his gaze quickly resting on my eyes.

‘Oh look, the lovers,’ Amy shouted, her form appearing from the darkness. ‘Lovely view for the parents.’

‘Amy, please –’

‘Oh, don’t start begging me not to tell them!’

I tore myself away from Matt to face her head-on, a hand silencing the predictable taunting. 'I have no intention to beg. Tell them or don't tell them. I can't stop you, but you can quit the blackmailing.'

Her face creased as she took a step back but I continued to advance, offering no interest in her fiancé who finally showed himself in the background. 'Look, Amy, I never cheated on you in all of our time together. Can you imagine how hard that was for me? Can you even start to appreciate the unexplored feelings I buried deep in my head so that I could make *us* work? I finally found some courage to do something –'

'Stop, please,' she said, with both her arms stretched out, as if to cover my mouth; to stop anything else ever being shared between us. 'I really don't want to hear it and I've said the things I needed to say.' A tear ran down her cheek which she quickly wiped away, both hands suddenly fussing around her eyes. 'I only came out here to tell you that I'm not going to tell your parents.'

I stood in stunned silence, unable to understand quickly enough what that meant to my future, or to figure out what I could possibly offer her in return.

'Nothing to say?' she asked, as she slowly shook her head.

'I could start by saying thank you.'

'I really don't want your gratitude,' she said, her eyes now vacant of emotion. 'I'm only keeping silent for your mum's sake. It's her special day and I won't be responsible for shattering it.' She started to walk away from me. 'It's pathetic that you haven't told them and I really feel nothing but pity for you.'

I could only watch as she turned and ran towards Andrew, her arms stretched out the moment they were within reach. He pulled her close, without so much as a look at me, before he walked my old life back into the darkness, far away from me.

He could have it. I finally had my closure.

3. MY PROFILE PARTY

I couldn't be sure if I was dreaming.

It felt too good to be a dream, an almost physical touch to it. My mind was starting to wake up as it made an effort to bring the rest of my body back to life. I wanted desperately to be able to see what I was feeling right now, as the sensation moved slowly up my arm.

I lay still, familiar scents telling me I was in my own bed, as I felt a tingle from something brushing down my neck. The feeling was too much as the silent strokes carefully played around my nipples before moving down the centre of my chest. My eyes protested at the lack of sleep, the demand to open so unfair. More fingers joined the touching stimulation as they found the lining of my boxers. I could feel the cold skin and the sharpness of unkept nails as they edged further down my body.

The pleasure was as welcome as it was confusing; too much time had escaped since I last felt the thrill of a morning's touch. The anticipation was so satisfying, the hope of a climax too intense. I finally forced my eyelids to open, only to find a pair of large pupils looking into mine.

'Matt?' I asked quietly, still too dazed to know what was happening.

I quickly realised my mistake – the black to Matt's seldom-tanned skin, the smile much whiter. I bolted upwards, pushing away the hand that was already pulling at my boxers. In front of me I saw a familiar but unwelcome face.

'Aaaahhhhhh! Aaahaaaahaaa!' the voice shrieked at me. The body it belonged to shot back from me and jumped off the bed. 'Were you enjoying that, you dirty boy?' he asked and then marched around my room, arms flapping and legs raised high off the floor one at a time in a sort of celebratory dance.

'What are you doing in here?'

He stopped at the end of the bed, leaning the top half of his body down, his thin arms propping himself up. 'Getting off at Matt's expense, were you? Does he know you dream about waking up with him touching you? Ha!'

'Eric – touching me up whilst I'm sleeping is as far as you will ever get, my friend.'

'I still got further than you've had in a long time, virgin-boy.' His big lips made a pronounced kissing motion before he ran out of the room, his giant footsteps thumping down the stairs. 'Guess what I've just done with the queen upstairs, proper hard-on and all!'

I brushed my hand over my mouth to remove the invisible germs, and then looked down to see that he wasn't lying. I rejoined my duvet and shut my eyes, cursing Matt for letting Eric

anywhere near me. I hated the truth that my only stimulation was from a perverted friend, who didn't even have the decency to wake me up.

I knew Matt would be preparing this party idea of his. It worried me, but not enough to get me out of bed. I moved one arm to cover my eyes from the morning sun as the other ran a finger up and down my chest, using the same light stroking movement I had awoken to. It felt good, if not a little desperate – my thoughts imagining it was someone else stroking me. Definitely not Eric, but someone I wanted to be with.

I heard him come back into the room and I quickly sat up. 'Eric –'

Matt was sitting in his blue dressing gown at the end of my bed, absently eating a slice of toast as his other hand held an entire plate of golden-brown bread. Without speaking, he pushed the plate my way.

We sat in silence for a few minutes as I concentrated only on feeding my hangover. He watched until I had finished and then his eyes motioned towards two mugs of tea on my bedside-table. I wondered how long he had been in here as I was busy touching myself.

'Sorry about Eric,' he said.

'How did he get in?'

'I let them in, but I didn't know he got up here. I must have been busy in the kitchen and he sneaked up.'

'She's here too?'

A simple nod didn't disturb his slow chewing.

I couldn't believe he had invited both of them to today's nightmare. Maybe if Matt and I sat down and did it together, I could cope. But every inch of my being was about to be analysed by two of the most ignorantly critical people I knew, and then broadcast for the world to see.

But I would be okay. I had Matt.

Life with him was simple. He made everything just happen – he was the driver and I was the happy passenger. I hated my life before him; he took so much of the chaos in my head and ironed it out. I had always had a feeling towards men but could never describe it and would never allow myself the opportunity to appreciate it. My mum's constant lack of understanding for why I left the apparent love of my life drove me to near insanity as the days rolled by slowly, the questions never changing.

Even up to the day Amy and I split up – for finally confronting my truth – I had never been with a man. Of course, it made things a lot worse. How could I confess my love of men when, at twenty-six, I had never been naked with one?

So when you're trapped at your parents, stuck as a corporate slave in a job that's literally sucking the life out of you, and feeling like your penis might explode – what do you do? I found myself in a gay bar. I was determined to find a man and see what happened – to finally find the answer through a quick and nameless shag.

Instead of all that, I found Matt.

'So you had a good night?' he said, carefully breaking into my thoughts. 'I don't think we did anything embarrassing.'

'My memory gets a bit faded after we started on the third bottle of champagne.'

He laughed. 'You should probably try to remember tying those three bottles to the back of your parent's limo.'

I grinned. 'They appreciated it.'

'No, your dad appreciated the humour. Your mother was a different story.'

I walked into the en-suite but turned back. 'Look, my mum should just be thankful my dirty secret didn't ruin the super-wedding.'

He sighed. 'It's not a dirty secret.'

I nodded back. 'You're about to publish it on the internet, so it's not a dirty secret *any more*.'

Matt simply nodded.

The shower was supposed to be my chance to prepare. It did nothing. All my thoughts could do was return to last night – to Amy's apparent secrecy. But I had no time to celebrate as I heard the laughter of my next problem echo from downstairs.

I looked at my deliberately plain jeans and grey t-shirt, hoping their mutual simplicity would invite zero criticism. But I knew they would hold nothing back – the two that never did anything constructive; the pair that had never had a proper job between them – the kind that trains you in the subtle art of feedback. I grabbed my watch from the fireplace and left my room for the vast unknown.

In the living room I found Matt at the dining table, as he looked up from his laptop with a grin that showed no intention of involving me in the plans so far. At the other side of the room I saw Eric, laid chest-down on one of the sofas, his legs hanging off the end as he focused on the Sunday trash. He started screaming when he saw me, and then he turned onto his back so he could kick into the air. The child leaped up to properly greet me, his arms flapping in front of a pink tank-top that hugged his slim body. 'You ready for this? It's gonna be just mental.'

‘Nice tank,’ I said and moved towards the kitchen with a feeling that everything was different today. It wasn’t the sinister undertones of criticism under the guise of some random daytime party that bugged me. It wasn’t even the extra noise in our usually calm two-man pad; I liked our regular intruders. What really grated on me was the absence of the fresh smell of coffee. I could never claim to be a person of habit, but if my day didn’t start with a cup of Columbian and some type of pastry, it felt wrong. But there was none of the usual gurgling this morning. I looked over at my helpless friend – starved of power and materials – its light not flickering today.

‘Finally, you’re up. It’s time for a breakfast drink!’ the final judge said and skipped across the kitchen, with a bottle of wine in one hand and four glasses grappled in the other.

‘That wasn’t the kind of drink I was thinking of.’

She purposely placed everything onto the side, and within moments, all I could see was a pair of angry olives stabbing at me through a bleached fringe. ‘You’re a bundle of excitement, aren’t you? You know Matt’s gone to a lot of trouble? And all for you, so don’t go silent and moody today.’

I looked beyond the red cheeks to see her breasts pushing through her t-shirt, reaching out to touch my chest. I laughed.

She looked down to see what amused me and smiled. ‘Oh, you love them.’ She took a step back as her hands readjusted the baggy t-shirt. ‘But seriously, Josh, you need to get behind today. It’s a party and it’s all about you.’

I sighed. ‘Yes Nat, fine – I get it.’ I looked at my friend, trying to understand her sudden interest in me. The few years on the rest of us never did push her into the big sister role, and being Eric’s best friend, she possessed the same quality of thinking only about herself. But lately, I had vague memories of whispers between her and Matt, too many hushed silences when I walked into the room, their own codes for things – for things about me.

‘So, you ready for this, big boy?’ she asked as she grabbed the wine.

I nodded and picked up my share of the glasses, following her back into the living-room. We found Matt and Eric carrying on as if the day was their own, each absorbed in a screen. Nat pushed Eric’s legs onto the floor so she could sit on the sofa with him. He made a whining noise but his body obeyed, as her gaze led me to the other sofa, her best come-to-bed eyes inviting me to join them.

I sat opposite, no longer truly comfortable in my own home. It was the not knowing, more than the thought of what Matt wanted to do, that worried me.

He quietly arrived next to me; his laptop placed in between all the clutter of the coffee-table. They had me pinned in – my closest friends holding me captive on my own sofa.

They all looked at each other.

And I looked at Matt, in a desperate plea for reassurance. 'Maybe I might meet the perfect guy on the net?'

'You couldn't meet any less,' Nat said.

I smiled, not able to find any lies in that statement.

Eric laughed and then turned off the television, sat up straight and crossed his legs. Matt turned the laptop screen towards me, already on *that* website.

'I see you've been busy, Matt.'

'You know why we're doing this, Josh,' he said and smiled, not able to control the excitement. 'Most young people have one and I've met loads of cool guys off the net.'

'And you're still single.'

He let out a long sigh. 'I know you think it's uncool to put up your photo and write stuff about yourself, so that's why we're doing it for you. This is the modern world – it's how our generation meet, bond and breed.'

'Are you going to give me some statistics now, Matt?' I said and sat back. He probably did have a good story – one about how many young professionals meet their lovers on the internet. It will be a sad story, riddled with the cruel fact that so many Londoners work hard and party harder; the only option left to the time-poor is to ask technology to play cupid. Love reduced to an online transaction.

He nodded. 'Here's one for you – one-hundred percent of guys like us meet in a club or on the net.'

I playfully shook my head. 'Rubbish. I don't believe you.'

'Can you afford not to believe me?' he said as he arched his eyebrows. 'And since you hate nightclubs, what choice do you have?'

Eric jumped forward. 'Yeah man, we get drunk and write loads of crap about you. It don't even have to be true, cos no-one cares once they've met you. They forget all them little lies.'

'What if my parents or my bro see it?' I asked, realising the stupidity as I said it.

Eric and Nat looked at each other and scrunched up their faces.

'I doubt your parents even know this site exists,' Matt interrupted calmly.

Eric nodded. 'Trust me Josh, your bro, that little hottie, ain't on any site like this.' He wrapped his arms around Nat and shivered. 'I mean, he's so much fitter than you, but he ain't bent. And it's such a shame!'

I sat up and leaned over the coffee table. 'I think he'd put you in a grave if you ever tried.'

'Relax, man! I'm just saying he's hot, that's all. No harm in looking. Yum-yum, eh Nat?'

‘Shut up, Eric,’ Nat said and pinched his arm, making him squeal. ‘And Josh – why would your brother be on this website? Grow up.’ She shook her head and took a deep breath. ‘Look, everyone has had enough of your moping around, moaning that you only have one more year before you turn thirty, and no man in sight. So for fuck’s sake shut up and get with the programme.’

I choked at the thought of what they had to deal with. I wanted someone but I wanted to find them through romance and suspense, not internet chat-rooms and old photos. Flirting on a webcam was alien to me, but my comfort in natural silences failed me in real-life bars. So my way hadn’t worked for the last three years – it was time to accept that this change was inevitable. I took a gulp of wine, sat back, and joined reality.

Nat and Eric cheered as Matt smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder, slowly pushing the laptop across the table until it sat halfway between both of us. ‘So I’ve already set up your username and basic details.’

‘Basic details?’

‘Yes. Things like where you live. I assumed you would want me to say no to drugs, you’re a non-smoker and you only have safe sex.’

‘Prude!’ Eric shouted.

I nodded. ‘This is easy so far.’

Matt grinned. ‘Excellent, let’s carry on. The questions get a bit more probing but remember it’s all for a good cause.’

‘Yeah, you getting a shag,’ Eric said.

Nat grabbed his neck and shoved his head into the coffee table, as Matt looked at them and calmly prepared himself to continue. ‘I put your height as six-one and your eyes as blue, along with your light-brown, messy hair.’ He paused as he examined me. ‘Should I put that it has some type of style?’

‘That’s debatable!’ Eric interrupted, in between his head hitting the hard wood.

‘Are you going to do this for everything he asks?’ I said.

Nat let go and he held his arms up. ‘Oh relax, you bender, I’m here to help. I can write things on there that will get you laid in hours.’

‘Eric, I don’t want to get laid.’

I did want to get laid. I craved sex right now like it was a shadow over every waking thought – an excess I near constantly denied myself in favour of the old excuse of *quality over quantity*. In truth, neither of them had been forthcoming in the last few months. I put my head in my hands as I thought of the good sex that youth was supposed to offer – that I was eternally wasting. ‘Okay, yes, I want some fun, but not the way you prowl around for it, Eric.’

‘Don’t judge me, Josh, otherwise I’ll start counting.’

Matt laughed. ‘So a light-brown, slightly messy hairstyle works for you?’

‘Perfect.’

‘Okay, next is your body type.’

‘What are my options?’ I asked, now throwing myself into the project.

‘Slim, average, defined, muscled, overweight or obese.’ Matt read them out slowly, so matter-of-fact.

‘I don’t know,’ I said and then paused, knowing they would scrutinise any word I dared to use. ‘Just put average.’

Matt looked at me and shook his head. Even Eric seemed to agree with him.

‘Well, I don’t exactly have a footballer’s body, and we barely make it to the gym twice a week.’

Nat suddenly launched around the table towards me. I put my hands out to push her away but she had already put one knee into my stomach. I struggled, trying to understand what was happening, as I heard the other two laughing. I tried to push her onto Matt but she swung back and grabbed my t-shirt before jumping over the back of the sofa, pulling me with her. I felt my shoulder burn on the carpet as she held my missing clothing, grappling her arms around my chest and pushing me towards the sofa. ‘What’s this then, boy? I definitely feel some muscle here,’ she shouted as she poked at my exposed chest and stomach.

‘Josh, we’ll put ‘defined’,’ Matt said, already typing onto his laptop as she threw the t-shirt at me and leaped back over the sofa. He smiled as I nodded in modest agreement and rejoined him. ‘Okay, the next question is’ – he paused as the other two sniggered – ‘Ummm, penis size, please.’

I watched Nat’s legs for any sign she was about to come over again and do some measuring. ‘Can we leave nothing to the imagination?’

‘Do you want a ruler, Josh?’ she said.

Eric’s mouth fell open as he sat in total silence, the anticipation of an answer holding his complete attention. I opened my mouth but closed it again; his frustration was so predictable. Nat smiled as she picked up on his unusual concentration.

‘I don’t need it in inches, we’re not that crude,’ Matt said, breaking the air of expectance. ‘You can pick small, average, large or extra large.’

‘Extra small!’ Nat and Eric shouted together, followed by laughter and much pointing at my crotch.

Matt gave me a wink and Nat quickly picked up on our exchanged looks, her glare shifting between us. ‘Of course, if anyone knows it will be Matt.’

‘What?’ Eric said. ‘These two have done it?’

I looked at Matt as he stared back at me. I had tried so hard to remember the facts of that one night. It should have been my best memory but it lacked so much detail – the groans of pleasure now filled in from our rare weight-lifting sessions, every detail of his few chest hairs slowly patched together whenever I caught him leaving the shower. However hard I tried, the uneven memory could never compete with the real thing.

Eric broke me out of thought with a rapid clicking of his fingers in my face. ‘So come on, tell us everything and spare no detail.’

‘He won’t speak,’ Nat said. ‘But it still means Matt can give us some clues.’

Matt looked at me and smiled as he leaned back on the sofa. ‘Let’s just say he won’t get many complaints.’

‘No! We need more specifics,’ Eric shrieked, his head ready to explode.

Matt was about to say more when I grabbed his arm. ‘Average. Just put average.’

Eric sat back looking disappointed. ‘That’s code word for small.’

‘No, it’s code word for modesty,’ Matt said and then looked at me. ‘Next question – what’s your role in the bedroom?’

Eric snorted. ‘Not a lot, judging by this morning.’

‘I might have known this one would come up. What are my options?’

‘Top, bottom or versatile.’

I always admired the gay world’s ability to organise just about anything. There was no room for confusion or modesty as our section of society carved out a niche market, defined by its apparent openness to everything that had been turned to taboo over the centuries before us. ‘If you insist on an answer, I’ll go for ‘versatile’.’

‘Well, I’m a complete bottom. And the bigger the better,’ Eric announced with a wide-eyed grin, as if we didn’t know it already – as if we didn’t have to hear some graphic evidence to support this fact at least once a day.

‘How does it work for you, Nat?’ Matt asked, as Eric frowned.

She focused on pouring more wine. ‘Use your imagination.’

He paused as his mind started to wonder; I guessed all the nuts-and-bolts detail would need to be figured out for him to be happy.

I prodded him. ‘Matt, final question, come on.’

He took a deep breath and kept his gaze on the safety of his computer screen. ‘So what are you looking for?’

‘Do I get to freestyle this bit?’

‘There are options, of course. Your choices are relationship, friendship, sex or other stuff. You can pick as many of these as you like.’

I shrugged my unknowing shoulders, the boredom already setting in. ‘Tick whichever one will get me started.’

He nodded and clicked some boxes I’d never see, never know how to change. ‘Okay, Josh, that’s the basics done. I have already uploaded a photo and set home as Shepherds Bush.’

‘Don’t you want to check the photo? Might be a naked one,’ Eric teased, his face hopeful.

I turned to Matt. ‘Did these two have anything to do with it?’

‘No involvement whatsoever.’

‘Then no, I don’t need to check it.’

Nat jumped up and ran towards the kitchen. ‘This needs a celebration.’

I looked at Matt who was still tapping away, no doubt editing the finer points of the virtual-me. This moment did need a drink, but I wasn’t sure it was a celebration.