



**A**nother Saturday night down the Mouse and Duck. Jerry, the landlord, was swearing in the kitchen. Paul and Philip were nearing the end of their pints and arguing about football in the preliminary step to arguing about whose turn it was to get the next round. Gets Drunk, Gets Horny, Gets Angry Man was steadily making his way through his fourth pint and was making the lip and eye movements that signified that he was having an imaginary conversation with himself. Maud and Martha were eyeing up the karaoke machine through their haze of smoke. And I'd spilled half a pint of Stella over my shoes when I was serving the group of students who were starting to get loud over in the corner.

I made sure that nobody was watching me, and topped up my orange juice with vodka from the House Special optic.

Jerry exploded from the kitchen, swearing at the top of his lungs about frozen peas. I raised an eyebrow at him, a reminder of the conversation we'd had last week when I'd informed him that if he wanted to start getting a

higher class of punter in the pub he should stop coming out with torrents of filth at the least opportunity.

‘Did you order any blimmin peas, Eleanor?’ He corrected himself, running a tattooed hand over his buzz-cut scalp.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I haven’t ordered anything since I got the healthy-option chips and you said you wouldn’t trust me any more.’

‘But *peas*,’ Jerry protested. He caught the glance of the student who had innocently ordered fish and chips. ‘Just a minute,’ he called across, and disappeared into the kitchen again.

I thought about what my agent had said to me on the phone that afternoon about my latest erotic comedy novel: *It lacks the whiff of reality, darling*.

How would my agent in his London office like this whiff of reality? Stella-soaked shoes, fag smoke, and no blimmin peas?

I took a swig of my drink, grimaced at the taste of vodka, and filled it up to the top from the optic again. It tasted even worse now, but it was starting to make my knees feel unaccustomedly weak.

Hugh stood up from his seat in a secluded corner and I stashed my drink underneath the bar out of sight. He’d put on a designer shirt for a Saturday night, and he’d done something to his hair that made it stick up in a more orderly way than usual. It was much more effort than the Mouse and Duck required; he was probably going on somewhere else.

When he got to the bar Hugh handed me his glass and I put it under the lager tap. ‘She’ll have cider and black,’ he said, jerking his head slightly to indicate the blonde girl

taking up a sliver of the bench he'd left behind. I'd never seen her before, but that was hardly surprising.

'I don't believe you're going to sleep with someone who drinks cider and blackcurrant,' I said.

'I like girls with sweet teeth.'

What he meant was that girls with sweet teeth liked him, but I didn't bother to correct him.

'How old is she? Seventeen?'

'Twenty-two. She's got a job somewhere.'

'Somewhere. You're really smooth. Do you know her name?'

'Harriet.' He said it confidently, and then glanced back over his shoulder. 'Yes, definitely Harriet.'

I restrained myself from gulping more of my drink. Hugh had a nose like a bloodhound. It probably came from sniffing out all that firm young female flesh. Instead, I turned away from him and poured blackcurrant into a pint glass.

'Better make sure you get her name right,' I said. 'You don't want to be crying out the wrong name in passion.'

'That happened to me once.'

'I'm surprised it was only the once.' I flipped the lager tap off over Hugh's drink and began to fill the blonde's glass with cider.

'No, not me – I've never done it,' Hugh said. He was leaning on the bar, enjoying the conversation more than I was. 'It happened to me. The woman yelled out "Joe!"'

'You sure she wasn't saying "ho"?''

'It was definitely "Joe".'

'And what did you do?'

'I carried on. It was at a point where it was difficult to stop.'

‘That’s your problem, Hugh. You’re such a damn romantic.’

I put his blonde’s purple drink on the bar next to his pint of lager, then thought, *screw it*, and retrieved my drink from under the bar. Hugh’s eyes narrowed as I took a sip.

‘What are you drinking?’

‘Orange juice.’

‘No you’re not, you’re acting weird. What are you really drinking?’

Bloodhound nose. This was probably how he always showed up at my house whenever I cooked a meal or uncorked a bottle of wine.

I shrugged. ‘It’s a screwdriver.’ Which consisted of considerably more screw than driver . . . or was that more driver than screw? I giggled.

He frowned. ‘You don’t usually drink at work. Are you okay?’

‘It’s Saturday night, Hugh. Lighten up.’

‘Have you had bad news about the book?’ he asked in a lower tone, so the rest of the pub couldn’t hear.

He knew me too damn well. ‘Of course not,’ I beamed. ‘After sixteen books I should know what I’m doing.’

‘What about Horny/Angry? He hasn’t been bothering you, has he?’ Hugh gazed down the bar at Gets Drunk, Gets Horny, Gets Angry Man. He had a name, I thought it was Norman – at least he responded to Norman when he was drunk. But Horny/Angry fit him much better and it was easier to remember.

‘Nothing is wrong, Hugh. Everything is exactly the same as it always is. Nothing ever changes around here. I just fancied a drink, that’s all.’

He looked at me, then back at Horny/Angry, who was

still in his own little world, for now. 'I didn't think you liked vodka.'

'I love it.'

Hugh leaned his chin on his fist. 'I'll stick around here if you want me to.'

'I'm just having a drink.'

Hugh has this way of staring at you and assessing you. His brown eyes go all intense. I'd seen him use this technique on many women and for some reason it made them melt.

Not me, though. 'Your blonde is waiting,' I said.

He raised his eyebrows, shrugged in capitulation, and took the drinks back to his table. It took all of ten seconds before the blonde had her hand on his knee and they were laughing at something together.

I refilled Paul and Philip's pints. 'How'd Reading do today?' I asked.

Paul launched into a play-by-play description of the day's football match. I didn't know the first thing about football, but years behind the bar in a pub had taught me how to look interested when in reality I was completely mystified.

'Wow,' I said, when I judged he'd finished.

He sipped his beer, thirsty after his sporting commentary. 'You haven't a clue about what I just told you, have you?'

'Of course I do.'

'Who won?'

'Reading,' I guessed, because he looked quite cheerful.

'And what was the score?'

That was a stumper. 'Um.'

'I told you thirty seconds ago.'

'It all sort of blurs together,' I said. 'Sorry.'

Paul shook his head and took the drinks over to the table

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he habitually shared with Philip. Jerry came out with the student's fish and chips, conspicuously light on the peas and heavy on the chips.

I poured myself another screwdriver. Martha and Maud got up and began to sing an Engelbert Humperdinck song. Horny/Angry beckoned me over and spent five minutes telling me an incoherent joke so he could stare at my tits through my T-shirt.

'This is the whiff of reality,' I told the vodka optic, as if it were the craggy face of my agent. Nobody could hear me over Martha and Maud. 'The one person who's interested in my body only notices me when he's had five pints, and he'll be picking a fight with another punter in the next half an hour, which he'll lose because he's sixty-eight and a chronic alcoholic. And you wonder why my book sucks?'

I downed my drink, and poured another. I wished that something would happen.



I didn't see him come in. The Mouse and Duck had two doors, one either side of the bar, and if I'd seen him come in I would have noticed which door he entered, which would tell me which direction he was coming from. But the pub was unusually busy.

Vodka transformed the karaoke singing and the shouted conversations and the bleeps of the pinball machine into a jumble of sound. I concentrated so as not to spill the creamy head from an over-full pint of Guinness, and spilt it anyway.

'Sorry,' I muttered to the customer, one of the students, but he was drunk enough not to care. He missed my hand when he gave me his money and the pound coins fell into the frothy Guinness pool. I threw a bar towel over the whole mess and went away. Jerry wasn't serving; he was talking with Paul and Philip and drinking his own brandy.

I sloshed wine in a glass for one of the women who'd just finished singing karaoke and when I turned around from the till, there he was.

In retrospect it should have been a cymbal-crashing strobe-lit moment. In actual fact, I didn't register him,

much, except as another person to serve. I leaned on the bar in front of him, more heavily than I normally would have done, and smiled, more widely than I normally would have done.

‘What can I get you?’ I asked.

He looked at me steadily, then took his time turning his head and surveying the pub. ‘This place is a dump,’ he said.

His words were so exactly what I’d been thinking that I laughed aloud and plonked both my elbows on the bar, making myself comfortable. ‘You’re not wrong.’

He was in his late twenties or early thirties and had short dark hair and a bit of a moustache and goatee. He smiled, and his teeth were perfectly straight.

‘Can I buy you a drink?’ he asked.

Now that was something new. Even Horny/Angry at his horniest never bought me a drink. ‘Thanks, I’ll have a vodka and orange,’ I said. ‘Yourself?’

‘Sounds good.’

I helped us to the premium vodka instead of the House Special and topped both of our drinks with the coloured bendy straws that were Jerry’s concession to the world of cocktails. He paid me with a twenty and lifted his glass to me in a toast.

‘To dumpy pubs,’ I said, and took a gulp. The alcohol was starting to taste very good, and it warmed my body all the way from my lips to the bottom of my stomach.

‘To meeting new people in dumpy pubs,’ he said, and it was completely cheesy, but I smiled at the line.

‘Another couple of pints, Eleanor,’ Jerry called, and I turned away from the stranger to pour Stella. I felt his eyes on me as I walked behind the bar. Again, cheesy. But his gaze felt like a light touch on my shoulders, my hips, my

behind. The hairs on the back of my neck stirred as if he were breathing on me.

When I glanced up, he hadn't looked away. He gave me half a private smile and sipped his drink.

Warmth grew in my belly. This wasn't Horny/Angry leering at my tits and arse. This guy was young, good-looking, well-dressed and, as far as I could tell, more or less sober.

I checked the corner of the pub. Hugh and his blonde had left. I had a vague memory of him yelling goodnight to me and waving on his way out the door, though it was hard to tell if that was a memory from tonight or from any other one of a thousand nights.

Martha and Maud wanted more gin; the students had decided to do shots of Aftershock; the guy who ran the karaoke machine needed his two bottles of lager. As I filled the orders I glanced surreptitiously at the new man. He wasn't talking to anybody else at the bar. Instead he was sitting quietly, sipping his drink, surveying the action, such as it was. I caught his eyes on me two or three times.

The gloopy noise of the pub seemed sharper, the karaoke beat more enticing. Knowing I was being watched, I traded banter with the punters. My smiles were twice as wide because they were for an extra person.

As soon as I could without being too obvious, I wandered back to the man. 'Ready for another?' I asked him, even though his glass was more full than mine.

Okay, maybe I was being obvious. He was no more subtle than I was, though, because he shook his head and the next words he said were, 'What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?'

I burst into laughter that was more than a little tipsy. 'That's the worst line ever.'

He leaned a little bit more on the bar, a little bit closer. 'Maybe, but I want to know.' He had a nice voice. I couldn't hear all the nuances of it because it was too loud in the pub, but it was deep and it was, at this moment, intimate.

'This is my local,' I said, shrugging, 'and they offered me a job a couple years ago.' As I said it I realised I was wrong – I'd been working at the Mouse and Duck for almost three and a half years. If that fact wasn't pathetic, I didn't know what was.

'Do you like it?' I could catch the subtext even through the noise: Who would?

'I'm not just a barmaid,' I blurted. 'I have a secret life.'

He raised one eyebrow and all at once he looked very familiar, though I couldn't tell why.

'That's intriguing. What's your secret?'

I lowered my head towards him and lowered my voice, too. 'If I tell you, it wouldn't be a secret, would it?'

'True.' Closer, he smelled of aftershave. Something subtle and expensive, not the Lynx that most of the pub regulars slapped on for special occasions.

I gestured to the room. 'Nobody around here knows. It's very glamorous,' I added, although, in truth, writing erotic novels wasn't exactly glamorous. In fact, the whole reason it was a secret from everybody except for Hugh was that I didn't fancy most of Reading knowing I had a filthy mind.

Both his eyebrows went up this time and I pegged it: he looked like George Michael. Not in Wham! – later. When he was going for the urban sophisticated image, without the earring. This guy was rougher around the edges, and I wasn't really sure about the features, not having stared at George Michael since the eighties, but he had the same

general look. Except straight, obviously. His clothes were well-cut and expensive, too.

‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘Let me guess. You’re a spy.’

‘Close.’ I raised my own eyebrow, smiled, and realised that I was unmistakably flirting.

Good. I wanted to flirt. I wanted to be someone other than myself, tonight.

‘Actually you’re right,’ I said. ‘I’m a spy. Don’t tell anyone.’

‘I won’t.’ He lifted his glass to his lips and drained it, then held it out to me. ‘Fancy one?’

‘Sure.’

My fingers brushed his as I took his glass. The contact seemed significant. In fact, everything seemed significant: the smell of his aftershave that lingered in my consciousness as I turned away, the place on the glass where his lips had touched it, the way that everyone else was wrapped up in their own conversations, leaving the two of us somehow connected.

I stretched to the vodka optic and felt the way my breasts lifted under my T-shirt. I bent to the refrigerator for orange juice and pictured how my backside was outlined by my tight jeans.

I wrote about this feeling all the time. Mostly from imagination and exaggeration. And now it was happening to me.

It even had the whiff of reality.

‘You can’t come in here and do that, you’re all a bunch of fucking cu—’

I recognised the high-pitched, outraged voice right away. I might be in my own little world of sexual tension, but Horny/Angry had turned the corner into rage. He’d seized one of the students, a particularly scruffy one, by the collar and was yelling in his face.

‘Here we go again,’ I muttered and went around the bar.

Jerry, Paul and Philip got there just as I did. Philip and I each grabbed an arm, Jerry and Paul grabbed a leg, and we hoisted Horny/Angry off his stool and towards the door.

‘Time to go home, mate,’ Jerry said to him, the same words he’d been saying just about every Saturday night since I’d worked here, and before that, when I’d been a customer. Probably for the past twenty-four years, as far as I knew. Horny/Angry struggled a bit, but he was used to this routine too, and mostly he only breathed his breath, sodden with alcohol and fags, in my face.

‘Shouldn’t let a woman do this work,’ he slurred at me. ‘Bunch of fucking cu—’

‘You’re speaking to a lady,’ I reminded him, and that shut him up long enough for us to get him outside into the chill autumn air. Philip and Jerry set him upright and Jerry gave him a gentle push homeward. Horny/Angry staggered a bit, but he took the hint and started moving off, muttering under his breath.

‘See you tomorrow, mate,’ Jerry said, quite cheerfully, and those words were so depressing I felt like running back inside and downing the rest of the bottle of premium vodka.

‘And this is my life,’ I said to the night sky and Horny/Angry’s retreating back.

As soon as I re-entered the pub I was hit by the wall of sound and smell, like the old drunk’s breath, only everywhere. The air outside, cold for September, had hit me like another shot of vodka, the one that made everything clearer; the air inside fuddled my brain, made me feel drunk.

I walked behind the bar and straight to the sexy stranger. Near him, the air was fresher from his aftershave. He watched me.

‘Very professional handling of that old man,’ he said, his voice amused.

‘I can handle all sorts of men,’ I said to him, the words coming out without a plan, fuelled by booze and frustration. ‘Listen, do you fancy going somewhere else after I close up?’

He smiled. His eyes narrowed and as slowly as he’d smiled, he looked me up and down. I nearly shivered, his gaze was so appreciative.

‘Yes, I do,’ he said.

‘Great.’ I seized the bell ringer and clanged last orders. It wasn’t quite time for them yet but I didn’t feel like waiting any longer than I had to.

The typical last-order rush kept me from looking at my new date for the evening. But I felt him there, like an itch in my side. It was half pleasurable and half torture. My hands were clumsy and when I turned around too quickly I got dizzy and I spilled part of the drinks I was serving. Nobody seemed to care. I wondered why I bothered staying sober, then poured more lager and thought about my date and where I was going to take him, and the itch turned into a gnawing in my stomach because these things happened in my books, but I never did them.

I didn’t drink while I was working, I didn’t come on to total strangers, and I certainly didn’t contemplate taking them home with me and having sex with them.

I whipped my head up from the taps and had to blink hard to focus my eyes.

Was I contemplating taking him home with me and having sex with him?

I pulled the pint glasses from under the spigots. Slushing cider all over my hands, I shoved the drinks towards the

customers, took their money, threw it into the till, and looked for the man I was planning to make a slut of myself with.

He was gone.

His stool was empty, his glass likewise.

‘Damn,’ I said. Not only had I practically propositioned a total stranger, he had also run away at the first opportunity.

This did not happen in my books.

I tossed the rest of my drink down my throat before it occurred to me that he could have gone to the loo.

Serving drinks while keeping one eye on the men’s loo and one eye on the empty barstool wasn’t an appropriate task for someone who’d imbibed an uncountable number of screwdrivers. I poured tonic into Maud’s gin and promptly dropped it on the floor, shattering the glass.

I knelt down, gingerly poking the shards into a pile. Jerry appeared, as he did whenever there was the threat of breakage to his pub belongings.

‘You all right, El?’

I looked up and saw that he was regarding me with something that could be concern on his stubbled face.

‘I’m fine, it’s no problem,’ I tried to say, but something about the change of altitude as I was kneeling on the floor had made my speech centres mushy and it came out as more of a jumble of consonants.

He took my arm and pulled me upwards. I noticed that I had gin and other assorted tipples soaking into the knees of my jeans.

‘You look done in,’ he said, and even in my state I realised that he was using a euphemism for ‘pissed’. ‘Why don’t I finish up here and you go home and rest.’

‘I’m all right.’

‘Good. Go home, I can handle this.’ He patted me on the shoulder again, as he’d done outside, and turned away to serve the remaining punters.

I went into the back room to fetch my coat and bag. *When I come out, he’ll be on the stool again*, I promised myself, but when I came out he was still gone. Jerry was pulling a pint of bitter, and I hovered near his shoulder.

‘You want a taxi called?’ he asked me.

‘No, I—’

What I wanted was for him to go into the men’s loo and check to see if my date was in there, feeding pound coins into the condom machine, but I couldn’t ask him to do that.

‘Goodnight,’ I said instead. I let myself out from behind the bar and threaded through the people and noise of the pub towards the door.

Outside, the cold air was like a shot of vodka, but this time I’d already had too many. I banged the door shut behind me and made my unsteady way past the picnic tables in front of the pub, towards the street and my way home.

‘Eleanor.’

I whirled around at the voice coming from behind me. A dark figure was in the shadows cast by the pub. I could see a faint puff of condensation from his breath before he stepped forward into the light from the streetlamp, and I saw it was my man of the night.

‘I thought—’

‘I went outside for a breath of fresh air while you finished up,’ he said. He took my hand in his. He was very warm and the contact made me feel even dizzier.

I don’t know if I swayed towards him or what, but a second later we were back in the shadows near the pub

wall, and I was in his arms. He was a bit taller than I was, broad-shouldered, narrow in the hips, and his chest and arms felt strong around me. The sound of his breathing shocked me, it was so real.

His mouth met mine in a kiss, which was even more shocking. His lips were hot and soft and his facial hair a subtle scratch. He didn't feel like any other man I'd kissed before. He tasted of orange juice and the smell of his aftershave. His tongue touched mine and I clutched his jacket, holding on and letting him in.

*I should write about a man with a beard,* I thought.

The street and shadows whirled around us, the noise of the pub faded into the background, and I was only conscious of our breathing and the sounds I was making in my throat. His hands were on my waist and his mouth was gentle, demanding, accomplished. When we broke for breath I tried to focus on his face, but couldn't see much except for the gleam of his eyes and the moisture on his lips from our kiss.

'I only live around the corner,' I gasped.

He smiled and I could see his perfect teeth. He seemed to have a lot of teeth, but I wasn't exactly seeing one of anything.

'All right,' he said.