

CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes it starts with a lie. I don't understand why, when that's not me. All I want is a simple life. Why is it that everything should always be so complicated?

You know what I mean. What does it take? Five seconds maybe. You pass someone coming the other way whilst walking down the street, and you know immediately, in that brief instant, that you're made for each other. She's the one and you're the one. The soul mate, the one who will really understand you, the one you will understand, the one who will be with you forever. And as you pass her, she sees it as well, and for that briefest moment both you and she feel something. For that briefest moment your eyes meet, and you float, and you are one. Both suspended in this perfect, imagined nirvana.

But the moment passes too quickly, and because you are with someone else—a wife, a husband, a partner, whatever—that moment kills you inside. That moment makes you realise all that might have been. So you walk into a Debenhams store, and whilst your wife is fluffing pillows and jabbering away, you go over to a far corner of the store and kick all hell out of a brown leather settee. Just because life's not fair. It's just not fair.

My wife's grinding voice brings me back to reality.

"You are driving me crazy. If you're not interested in curtains, why the hell did you come into town?"

Jane, I gather, is not that well pleased with me, but in my defence I must say that every curtain in our house is less than a year old. Why change them? She just shops because she can.

"Of course I'm interested." Really, I am.

"So which room are we looking for?"

Damn, a trick question. Maybe I'm not as interested as I thought I was. Come on, Danny, think of something to say. "Uh, the lounge?"

"You are such a waste of space!"

Probably not the lounge then...

"I tell you what. You go off and wander around in your usual brain-dead state, and we'll meet up in an hour or so."

Whoo! Result! "Are you sure?"

"Oh, piss off, Danny."

Result! "Okay, I'll see you in Costa. About an hour?" And I'm gone before she realises she has been brilliantly, if rather luckily, outmanoeuvred.

I hate shopping malls. It kills a man's dignity, as well as his hunter instincts, to be enclosed in these hollow glass pavilions of dross. Mind you, that's just my personal opinion, which as of late is not worth a lot in Jane's eyes.

Still, I love a strong cappuccino and my body needs some caloric intake, so it's the carrot cake for me. Nowadays, time stands still buying a coffee. Days seem to pass by as the queue in front of me stagnates, waiting on decisions of "Regular or large?" "Chocolate or cinnamon sprinkles?" "Cash or credit card?"

I'm half studying the wooden tray laden with my hunter's haul whilst looking for a free table when I see her. She's sitting on her own, reading the Telegraph.

"May I?"

She looks about her and notes there are at least three tables unoccupied at the moment. She's already forgotten the earlier incident and that I'm the love of her life, and she scans my face to determine whether I am the local nutter. A royal and rather vague hand gesture is all I need to leap into the chair opposite her.

Of course, this would work so much better if I wasn't tongue-tied. I spend a few minutes idly looking around the coffee shop, but all the time my eyes are darting back to her, building up a fuller picture.

She is very pretty. A gorgeous little turned-up nose. Light brown hair, clean and bouncy. Her eyes are...her eyes are mahogany brown with maybe flecks of green? Her hands are pale; long artistic fingers. No rings. I've got a ring on my wedding finger, but I'm not married, not really. We've just lived together for a long time.

It all starts with a lie.

"Pardon me!"

Her voice startles me.

Oh, my God! I've been talking out loud. I haven't blushed since school days and I can feel my face turn the colour of a ripe, healthy rhubarb. "Sorry. I'm sorry, I was miles away."

But there is something in her eyes—amusement maybe, but some sort of interest flickering in the air. Oh hell, in for a penny. Honesty is the best policy. Dad used to say that. Mind you, that was before they locked him away for six years. But that's another story. Go for it. Carpe diem, Danny.

"I'm sorry about that. My name's Danny. Uh, here's my card." There's one left in my jeans; it was not quite so grubby when I stuffed it into my pocket last week. It doesn't actually look quite as impressive as it should. I smooth it out as best I can, carefully palming some fluff away. She clearly hesitates before taking the offending card between two delicate fingers, and reads out loud.

"Daniel Pearson. Regional Sales Manager. RFP Electrical Supplies."

I love her voice. I just love her voice. It's soft and husky. Very sexy. Danny—strike that last thought out of your mind.

"I was trying to point out that I'm not the local nutter. I'm almost a pillar of society."

For the first time, she smiles. "And this card"—she dangles it in front of me—"proves to me that you are not a nutter?"

"Well, sort of." Quick, keep talking. "Do you live locally?"

"No, I'm here for a conference."

Damn. Actually, maybe not.

"So that means you've probably got your own card?"

That smile of hers gets better each time I see it. Her eyes don't leave mine as she delves into her handbag and passes me a card, which I take and read. "Ella Chamberlain. Direct Media Consultant. Giraffe Group of Companies. Ella. Great name. It suits you." That's maybe too personal, but I can't take it back now. I glance at her coffee cup; only half empty, thank God. Go for it, Danny. She lives fifty miles away at least; what have you got to lose? Nothing, nothing at all. Be brave, young white hunter.

"Okay. Here's what it is." I take a deep breath because I need to get this right. "We passed in the street, you and me, about twenty minutes ago. I didn't follow you here, that's just serendipity, you know, that we finished up in the same coffee shop. But something happened when I saw you, something strange and wonderful, and if I don't do something about it, I know I'll kick myself forever." I don't give her a chance to comment, but rush on. "You know my name. I'm thirty-four. All my own teeth and hair. Reasonable prospects financially. I hate Vin Diesel. I love rom-coms. I hold the world record for re-watching the last five minutes of Notting Hill. I support West Ham. Uh, I've got a sister a bit younger than me. My dad's weird, my mother's brilliant. My favourite city in the world is Rome. If I could spend time with anyone in history it would be Leonardo da Vinci. I ride a mountain bike most weekends, so I'm fairly fit." I'm out of breath, but manage to summarise. "So I'm really not a nutter."

She stares at me and it's the longest ten seconds in the history of this planet as I wait for her response. Those seconds tick by agonisingly as my heart labours whilst waiting.

"And you say your dad's weird?"

And we both laugh loudly, loud enough for everyone around us to stare. I don't care because I know we make a great-looking couple.

She maintains eye contact before she continues, "Okay. You know my name. I'm thirty-two. And that's all you're getting out of me."

Thoughts are flying through my head. Fireworks flashing, fuzzing my brain, so I smile my best Hugh Grant sort of smile.

She frowns. "Are you okay?"

Maybe not quite Hugh Grant then. And then she stands up to leave. I'm shattered.

“You’re going—already?”

“That I am, Danny. You’ve got my card. Give me a call sometime.” A cheeky smile and she is gone. I’m sad but excited. Lost, but with a sense of direction. I stare at her body as it disappears into the elevator.

“What are you looking so pleased about?”

Jane. Oh, hell. Say something. Anything.

“Nothing. I’m just glad to see you.”

As I keep saying—it all starts with a lie, and not always a white lie.