



Desperately Seeking...

The moment she heard herself say
she would marry him, she knew she
had hit **ROCK BOTTOM**



Evelyn
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by

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I

As soon as I heard myself say I would marry him, I knew I had hit rock bottom. I had seen it coming, I could have prepared an answer that declined his proposal absolutely but sweetly, yet still left him in no doubt of his worth as a person or in his ability to love again. I could have done it. I could do anything with this guy. But I had been lazy. I had become accustomed to him and I had forgotten what this was supposed to be. And now here I was telling him that I loved him too and of course I would marry him.

It was a lovely proposal. He didn't buy me a ring because he didn't trust himself to pick one without me. But he did take both of my hands in his and he looked at me so intently I had to turn away.

'I love you,' he said. 'You are the most amazing person I have ever known. Just put me out of my misery and marry me.' His gaze was still fast upon me when he added, 'I promise to make you happy.'

When I looked up again I was so overcome there was nothing I could do. The moment seemed to demand it. Nothing but a resounding yes would satisfy the universe. Otherwise something catastrophic might happen elsewhere in the world, to a butterfly, maybe, in South America.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, I'll marry you.'

Then I said that I really had to go to the loo, which was the first true thing I had said to him all evening. I had been about to go when he appeared so unexpectedly at my door. He was supposed to be away for the entire weekend, at

some work thing, and I had been looking forward to an all-me weekend of pyjamas and pottering about. Had he been ten minutes later I would probably have been in my pyjamas. And he probably wouldn't have noticed. I can never work out whether that is something I hate about him, or love.

So I left my new fiancé in my neat beige living room and went off to think about what I had done. I stared at my surprisingly untroubled face in the mirror. What could I do? He was supposed to be my get-over guy, my feel-good fella, who was definitely not my type but would help me feel good about myself again while I got over one of the world's biggest bastards. Nobody had been meant to fall in love, especially not the get-over guy. Surely he knew I was a mess and not responsible for any of my actions. The only person meant to get hurt here was me, so what could I do?

However, as I continued to look at myself in the harsh light of the bathroom mirror, I was suddenly overcome by a need to get out. Even though an intimate evening in with your new fiancé is probably customary, I needed the intimacy of a big crowd. So I hauled out my machinery and began a little touch-up, which quickly became a full-on party-time make-over. Surely a girl deserves a party.

The only problem was who to conjure up for this party. My parents were an absolute no-no. If I had to deal with my mother tonight someone would end up in Casualty. My sisters? All of them? The noise would be deafening and then there was the Casualty issue. It would just have to be friends, any friends. All my friends.

'Keith, honey, I want to go out and celebrate!'

He had already poured champagne into the fabulous Waterford crystal flutes he had given me for Christmas.

‘Oh . . . Kate, sweetie, I thought we’d celebrate at home,’ he said, gazing at me sheepishly. It was his signature look – full of love and tenderness, but weak. ‘This is a wonderful moment, for both of us.’

The look remained.

‘Oh, Keith, I feel so excited! I just have to go out and tell people – I have to party!’

‘OK, honey, we’ll go out.’

I can be very mean when I want to be.

It was at somebody else’s engagement party that I met Keith. Or birthday, or house-warming, I wasn’t paying much attention. I think one of my sisters dragged me out, Lucy probably, but we were definitely locked deep in the heart of Limerick’s newest and hottest new and hot pub – O’Flaherty’s. I was still deep in the blues at this point, and getting pretty drunk, but I do remember noting that all the men there were lying, cheating, ugly bastards. Lucy told me later that I pinned some poor guy up against the bar and insisted he account for the sins of his sex. Apparently it’s all down to genes.

I’m not usually this aggressive when I go out and I’ve never believed in giving men a hard time – it’s much more fun to flirt with them and I’m normally a happy drunk – but these were not normal times. I do have a vague recollection of Keith from the party. He seemed to materialize somewhere near the end of the night, all neat shirt and affability. He was exactly what I didn’t want – someone nice who wasn’t drunk and foolishly thought I wasn’t either.

‘Hi!’ he said.

‘Pardon?’

‘I said hi! Hello!’

‘Oh. Hello.’

‘This place is a bit insane, isn’t it?’

‘Is it? I kind of like it.’

‘I prefer a quieter place myself.’

‘No, I like it here, it’s good and buzzy, you know? You feel like you’re alive in a place like this. Where would you prefer to be? Somewhere like O’Grady’s where everybody falls asleep watching the fire?’

‘I like O’Grady’s. But I see your point.’

‘So why are you here?’

‘Got dragged in.’

‘Me too.’

‘I’m Keith, by the way,’ he said, proffering his hand.

‘Annabelle,’ I said immediately.

‘Annabelle what?’

‘Annabelle . . . Jones.’

I think we stalled there, and before he thought of anything else to say I was dragged off to look at someone’s tattoo.

I went home and woke up with the hangover I deserved. He went home and looked up my number. (Which wasn’t there, of course, because I never give out my real name to strange men in crowded pubs. And even if I did I’ve always been self-important enough to go ex-directory.) It seemed he had a hunt on his hands. Absolutely irresistible!

It was fruitless, however. Having surfaced for a brief moment, I returned to the depths of the city. Except, of course, that I bumped into him in the same pub the very next week. I think it was even the same table. That’s Limerick for you.

I was more civil this time. Something at the back of my mind suggested I might owe him an apology. There wasn’t any need to say much. For a quiet guy he was doing an awful lot of talking. A lot of gesturing, smiling, beseeching; he was being a bit girly, really. But it did give me a chance

to sit back and take him in, size him up. Just to pass the time, really, because he was absolutely not my type.

He was one of those guys, and it only happens with men, that the instant you look at them you know exactly what they were like as a child. I could see him in primary school in grey trousers and maroon knitted jumper. His hair would be fairer and fuller but the expression of his eyes would be exactly the same. A queer mix of confidence – because he was intelligent and knew he was loved – but also an expectation of hurt, of not quite knowing what to do with the world. It's an image I can never fully separate from the thirty-two-year-old adult who likes to take himself just a little bit seriously.

'So what is it you said you did?' I asked, phasing back in for a while.

'I work in the chemical industry. At the moment I'm with a company in Shannon that blah blah blah blah blah blah . . .'

He didn't move his mouth very much as he spoke: his lips seemed to revolve gently around his teeth, which were even and pearly.

'And what is it you do?'

I was tempted to lie, I'm always tempted to lie, but I didn't.

'I'm a solicitor.'

'A solicitor?'

'A solicitor.'

'That's impressive.'

'No, it isn't. It's just a job. The firm I work for mainly deals with the small stuff. It's quite boring, really.'

'Well, I'm impressed. I must take your number in case I ever end up in trouble.'

I wished he wasn't so impressed and I assured him hastily that I would be useless to him were he to ring me from Henry

Street Garda Station in the small hours of the morning. He still seemed impressed.

The rest of that night went on with more people joining the table, people he knew, people I sort of knew, people it turned out we both knew. There were too many conversations happening at the same time. And none was about anything. It was just dawning on me that maybe I was getting too old for the super-pub scene. Already I was willing to make a fuss to get a seat and now I was finding fault with the kind of mindless chatter I used to find enchanting. God, I was becoming boring! But right then my only alternative to the super-pub was my empty apartment. At least here it looked as if I was having a super time.

Some time later that night, after I had slipped out for a sneaky cigarette, I was joined by Keith. I remember groaning, feeling sure I was in for a tedious rehash of the horrors-of-smoking routine but he said nothing. He leaned in and touched his lips against mine. He kissed my smoky mouth and he left.

I was surprised. I was even impressed. As a move, as a way to make an exit, to leave an impression, it was fabulous.

Suddenly I was interested.

Ages passed before I left the doorway of O'Flaherty's pub. I was, as they say, transfixed. Some light rain was falling, one of those late-evening autumn mists that remind you winter is coming and it might not be so bad. I had my bag with me and there was nobody left inside I wanted to say goodbye to, so I stubbed out my cigarette, which had burned away to nothing in my hand, and began to walk.

It had been a long time since I replayed an incident like that over and over in my head. I think it was the innocence of it that was so seductive. Nobody had paid that kind of

attention to my lips, and only my lips, since adolescence, or childhood. I felt like I was in my own movie and I was the heroine. I walked around for ages, not ready yet to go home. I think I was afraid the feeling would disappear if I returned to the scene of my former life, my life before the kiss. The darkness and the mist were the perfect backdrop to my little fantasy.

For, of course, I knew it was a fantasy. Real people didn't behave like that and my experience of grand gestures has always been that they come at a price. But where's the harm in allowing it to run for a while? If you have a cold you take Lemsip, if you have a broken heart why not a daydream? I could wear it like a bandage until the wound went away. That was all I wanted. Where was the harm?

Yet, the following day I was surprised again. I was sitting at my desk plodding through a dossier, actually smiling to myself as I thought of Keith's notion that I was Ally McBeal or something, when I got a call. From Keith.

'Hi, Annabelle?'

'Ahm . . . aah . . .' For a moment my brain wouldn't work.

'Or is it Kate?'

'Ahm . . . yeah, this is Kate . . .'

'Are you busy?'

'Not really.' (I should have been.)

'Are you free for lunch?'

'Maybe.'

'Would you like to go to the Furze Bush?'

'Maybe.' Then, 'Wait a minute. Aren't you out in Shannon?'

'Nope!' I definitely heard an exclamation mark. 'I have the day off!'

'I didn't think chemical-engineer type people could do that.'

‘It’s rare, but it can happen.’

‘Well, in that case I suppose I’ll just have to meet you for lunch. I love the Furze Bush.’

‘Will I meet you there at one?’

‘OK.’

‘OK, then.’

‘Oh . . . and, ah . . . sorry about the Annabelle thing. How did you find out my real name?’

‘The barman told me.’

‘The barman?’

‘No, actually, it was one of your friends.’

I felt quite foolish, but not foolish enough to run away. ‘Anyway, sorry.’

‘That’s OK. I could have been anybody. See you at one, then.’

‘See you.’

So I met him for lunch in the Furze Bush and then a drink in Mooney’s. A few days later we had dinner at the Wild Tiger and then we were seeing each other all the time. We were going out. My Lemsip habit had become addictive. Nothing had changed. I still knew he was wildly not my type. I still found half of what he said profoundly boring and the other half delightfully ridiculous. But he did have a couple of things going for him. Mainly that he thought I was amazing. You have to like that in a guy. He said all sorts of daft things just when you weren’t expecting them. He might be in the middle of explaining the minutiae of some documentary he’d seen on the Discovery Channel and then he’d say something like: ‘You know, your eyes really do sparkle.’

‘That’s my sparkly eye-shadow.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I absolutely don’t. You’ll have to explain it to me.’

'You glow.'

'Well, now, that's just my Day Glo bronzing powder.'

'I'm serious.'

'You can't be.'

'I am. You light up a room.'

I had to laugh out loud at this. 'Keith, you're hilarious!'

Then he'd give up and go back to the documentary, and while my sparkly eyes gave the impression that I was listening, I would be thinking how nice it was that someone would think you could light up a room, no matter how ridiculous it sounded.

Another thing he had going for him was that not only was he a wonderful kisser (and not just the gentle lip-brushing kind, either) he was a bloody good lover too. You would never have thought it. He never seemed all that sexual in the normal course of things. Then again, I suppose you never know. That's the mystery of it.

I can't remember exactly when it was that we first slept together but it was several weeks after our first lunch at the Furze Bush. He liked to take things slowly. The main thing driving my desire to sleep with him was curiosity. I couldn't remember a time when things had been this, well . . . formal. I almost expected him to request an audience with my father where he would outline what he was going to do to me and where and when and was it OK? It was more of that early feeling I'd had with him that I was in a charming romantic comedy. I even began dressing in cute little outfits and taking more care with my makeup. Not to impress him, more that the role seemed to require it.

I had, of course, been thinking about it ever since that first kiss. After the lunch I knew it was inevitable so I indulged myself in bedroom fantasies. And some living-room fantasies, some kitchen fantasies, even one or two

open-air fantasies, but those would have to wait for summer.

With someone new I always prefer to be on home ground. I think it might be a very, very vague remnant of my Catholic upbringing. Somehow, doing it at his place before there's even the remotest possibility that we might get married makes me a whore. And doing it at my place doesn't.

So, when I started to feel that he might be starting to feel he couldn't wait much longer, I suggested we spend a quiet evening in at my flat. (When, at the age of twenty-five, with no money and a travelling debt, my father suggested I invest in property I had no idea how grateful I would eventually become.) I did a quick tidy, made sure my bedroom was willowy and fragrant and that the lights were low enough in the living room to hide what I couldn't. I opened a robust red from the Côtes de Castillon and left it to breathe between two tall Waterfords. (I mainly prefer excellent wine drunk out of excellent glasses. But I have been known to drink any old rubbish out of any old rubbish.)

As for myself, I put on a Wonderbra, French knickers and Chanel No. 5. Over that I draped a silk wrap-around dress that clung suggestively to all my best bits.

We had very different taste in music so I went for a neutral moods compilation. It was the kind of stuff that usually made me sick, but lately my tolerance for schmaltz had been growing. He arrived a little early, something that bugged me to distraction normally but, as I said, I was mellowing.

He, also, looked nice. Essentially, Keith isn't a handsome man. He still has too much of the boy in him but he's too old to be boyish. His features, while perfectly fine and regular, are just a little too soft. His colouring is nondescript but leans towards a mousy brown. You wouldn't pick him out of a crowd but you couldn't justify throwing him out of

bed either. He has a nice face. A face that gets nicer with knowing.

He came in and took off his coat. The shirt was new. Possibly the jeans also. Usually he would hang his coat carefully over a chair but tonight he simply threw it against the back of the sofa from where it promptly fell to the floor. He didn't pick it up.

'You look nice,' he said.

'Thanks, so do you.'

I thought I detected a little shortness of breath in his voice so I poured the wine straight away and suggested he sit down. He drank the wine too quickly and spilled a drop on his shirt. He didn't seem to notice. Then he kissed me. It was a long, lingering kiss, a kiss you could live in for ever. 'You know I love you,' he said.

Suddenly I got it. With all the talk about glowing and lighting up rooms, this was what he had meant. He was in love with me. This kind, sweet, intelligent, unmarried man was in love with me.

'I love you too,' I said.

Right at that moment I did. I'm certain of it.

He kissed me again and rubbed the back of his hand gently across my cheek. 'I've never known anyone like you.'

'I'm not so special.'

'You are. You're the most -'

'Honestly I'm not. Kiss me again.'

He obliged but broke off quickly and stood up.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing . . . I . . . do you . . .'

'Keith . . .' I said, sidling up beside him. 'Is there something you want to say?'

'Well . . . I was just wondering if . . . seeing as we . . . if maybe . . . you were thinking . . .'

‘If I was thinking what?’

‘If maybe . . . you were ready . . .’

‘You know, Keith, you’re going to have to learn to talk properly, I have no idea what you’re trying to say . . .’

It was too much for him. He grabbed me by the waist and kissed me furiously, the kind of kiss that extends beyond you and takes your clothes off and leads you into the bedroom. And after his first sigh at the sight of the Wonderbra and French knickers, he sighed again, and then again as he opened first one hook and then another, and as he slipped the silky underwear from my hips, over my buttocks and down my legs he began to groan, and he continued to groan as I undid the buckle on his belt and dug my hands deep inside his trousers. There was hardly time to take the rest of his clothes off before he was inside me. It felt good to have him there; it erased certain memories I wanted rid of. He kept kissing me and groaning, and I kept kissing him back and sighing, and I even started a little gentle screaming and by the time he came I was on the verge of an orgasm myself without even having to try very hard. For the last thrust I climbed on top of him and was delivered of sweet ecstasy. All in all it was a pretty good shag.

I lay there afterwards thinking that this wasn’t a bad place to be a couple of months after the worst break-up of my life. So, I wasn’t completely sure what I was doing but when was I? So, he seemed to like me more than I liked him. I was more than happy to try that for a while. A nice guy, and great sex, where was the problem?

‘You *cannot* be serious!’ said Lucy, when she arrived at my engagement party.

‘No *fucking* way!’ said one of my other sisters, Marion.

‘I am not being your bridesmaid!’ said my colleague

Denise. (I had no intention of asking her to be a bridesmaid.)

‘You must be so happy!’ said Angela, this total pain in the ass I work with. (Texted her by mistake.)

‘Well, it’s time for you. How old are you now? Thirty? Nearly thirty? It’s time for you!’ said my plain-speaking friend Colette.

‘No, seriously,’ Lucy again, ‘you can’t marry him. I mean he’s nice and all, I know you like him. Hell, I like him, but you can’t marry him. It’s wrong, sweetie, you know it’s wrong. He’s not the right man for you. You’re not the right woman for him. Marriage is a serious business, you know. All joking aside, Kate, you can’t.’

‘I know you’re not going to go through with it,’ Marion this time, ‘you haven’t thought about it properly. Mum won’t know what to think. And Dad’s only going to get upset. He’s very easily upset these days. It’s too sudden. I don’t know why you’re doing this. How long have you known him, for God’s sake? You don’t even believe in marriage. What’s the point? Why are you doing this?’

‘I think it’s brilliant!’ Denise. ‘It’s about time one of us got married. You are going to be so happy. Oh, I know he’s a bit quiet and everything, a little bit nerdy, but he’s a really nice guy. I’d have him any day. Well, obviously, I wouldn’t, but you know what I mean. And, actually, he’s not all that bad-looking. He kind of grows on you, you know. I don’t really like his hair colour, and it *is* receding, just a bit, but that doesn’t matter in a man any more. You know?’

Angela: ‘Of course, it’s very unusual to get engaged without a ring. When my sister got engaged they’d had the ring for ages. Six whole months! They got it when they were working in Dubai. Diamonds are much cheaper over there so they were able to get a much bigger one than they could

have afforded if they'd got it here. I mean, her fiancé has a very good job – he's a manager in Intel – but diamonds are so expensive now and you never really know what you're paying for. It's platinum. Gold is out now. It's all platinum. I suppose you're getting platinum?'

'I mean, why not? Everybody gets married eventually. Or wants to, eventually. What's the big deal? Marry him. You'll be happy, or you won't. Either way, it's not the end of the world. He's perfectly fine. Better than most. It'll do you good. Just don't get carried away. That's where people go wrong. They start expecting too much. It's not *Sex and the City*. It's much more like your mother says it is. But it's still better than a lot of things.' That was Colette.

O'Flaherty's was buzzing. Or maybe it was me. Something was making a ferocious noise inside my head. Maybe that was the Jack Daniel's. Or maybe it was the Coke. Coca-Cola. Friday night is always a buzzy night in town. It's a night for the working people. Students go out on a Thursday, the leisured on a Saturday. It's something to do with all that steam being let off mixed with perfume and deodorant and the air of expectation. Even girls who haven't gone home after work have tarted up their office gear. Buttons have been opened, skirts hoisted up, bellies revealed. And the men – they're loud and sweaty and deeply attractive. I looked around and thought I'd happily snog the head off several of them. But every time I looked around Keith was there, smiling idiotically and laying his hands all over me. He was like a half-witted octopus.

I kept saying to myself, over and over and over, that this was my engagement party but it was like that dozy cow said: it's so strange to get engaged without a ring. I began to wonder what kind of a ring I might like. Diamonds are clearly the best but they're so boring. Oh, what a lovely

solitaire! Oh, what a lovely diamond cluster! I like the coloured stones but they're so old-fashioned. I think I'll have a ruby studded with sapphires and encrusted with emeralds. That would be very nice. I'll have it specially made by a designer in Bangladesh. Yes, that's what I'll have.

And that wasn't all. If I really was going to get married there would be a whole wedding to plan. Hotels, bridesmaid dresses, cakes, cars, honeymoons. Yes, we'd have to have a honeymoon. I was in need of a holiday. A little continental sun would relax me no end. I wondered if we could get away with a little pre-honeymoon holiday, an engagement break? After all, weddings are supposed to be incredibly stressful. We'd need to build ourselves up.

I was looking for Keith to put this to him when Lucy nabbed me. Her sweet face was wrinkled with concern. 'Look,' she said, 'it's not that I'm not happy for you, or that I don't want you to be happy and I definitely don't want to spoil the happiest night of your life so far, but you really have me worried. And Marion too. You know how we never like to agree on anything but she's as bothered as I am. You don't love him, Kate.' She fixed me with her deep opal eyes and pleaded with me to come to my senses.

Unfortunately, despite my love for Lucy and my general high regard for her opinions, I wasn't budging. The drunker I got and the more people gave me advice, the more I was warming to the idea of marrying Keith. Being engaged and getting married were very exciting. It was nice to be the centre of attention for a while. It was about time my family looked at me for a change. I might be the youngest of the brood, the runt of the litter, but my time had come. I was taking control and I was getting married. To Keith. Keith was my choice. And that was that.

So I took my favourite sister in my arms (the only one

who hadn't yet taken the plunge) and told her not to worry. Whatever it looked like, this was right for me.

And there was Keith in front of us, more than a little drunk himself, his face shiny with sweat and delight. He put his arms round the two of us and squeezed tightly. 'I'm such a lucky man,' he was saying, somewhat indistinctly. 'Not only do I get this fabulous girl, I get all her fabulous sisters as well!'

Lucy extricated herself, with further congratulatory mumblings to Keith, while I remained locked in his embrace. 'I'm so happy, Kate,' he whispered into my ear.

'Oh, me too, Keith, me too.'

'I cannot wait until you're my wife!'

'Slow down there a while. We have to get used to being engaged first.'

'I'm used to it already,' he said, nuzzling my neck, 'I feel like I've been engaged to you for ever.'

'Well,' I said twisting myself round to face him, 'I'm not. I want to enjoy this time. I want to do it properly.'

'OK, my love. Whatever you want. You shall have whatever you want.'

'Come on,' I said to him, 'let's find some of your friends. They're a happy bunch. They think it's really cool that you're getting married.'

And so we joined Paul and Jack and Aiden, an accountant, a tax inspector and a chemical engineer, who treated me as if I was some kind of exotic plant and their friend as if he was James Bond. We had more to drink before eventually stumbling home to bed. We slept very soundly, very contentedly. The sleep of the newly engaged.