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Foursome  
by  
Jane Fallon

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# I

This isn't happening.

'I'm serious,' Alex is saying, except that he's had a few drinks so it comes out more like 'I'm sheriouish', which almost makes me laugh, but then I remember the awful melodrama that I've somehow found myself starring in.

'You're drunk,' I say, getting up from the sofa to put more physical space between us. 'You should go to bed.'

Alex stands up and makes a move towards me. 'Just because I've had a couple doesn't mean that what I'm saying isn't true. It just means I've finally got the courage to say it. I love you, Rebecca. I always have.'

Oh God. There it is again, that statement that makes my stomach turn over and not in a good I've-been-waiting-for-you-to-say-that kind of way. More like I could be sick from a combination of the wine and the very idea that Alex is saying these things. Daniel, my husband, is asleep, by the way, upstairs in our bedroom. Why wouldn't he be? It's one in the morning and he's never had any reason to worry about leaving Alex and me alone together. Until now. Suddenly I'm angry with Alex. It's bad enough that he could be saying this at all, but with Daniel – the evidence if any was needed that I'm not available to be propositioned – asleep above our heads? Sweet, funny, clever Dan who has never been

anything but loyal to both of us. I decide that I want this conversation to end now.

‘Alex, you’re being ridiculous. It’s late and we’re drunk and you don’t know what you’re saying. Go to bed, OK?’

Alex leans forward, puts his hand on my arm. I shrug it away. ‘Don’t tell me you don’t feel the same,’ he says, and for a second I think, Is this my fault? Have I somehow allowed him to think this might be true? Did I catch his eye and hold his gaze for too long one night after I’d had a couple of drinks? And then I realize no, definitely not, because I have never for a moment in our twenty-year friendship thought about Alex as anything other than a friend. Fancying him would be like fancying my brother. It has literally never occurred to me.

I ought to let him down gently. He’s been through a lot lately – all of his own making, but nonetheless – and he’s obviously losing his mind, but I’m angry with him. How dare he read something into our relationship that simply isn’t there? How dare he be disloyal to Dan like this?

‘Absolutely not,’ I say, slightly too loudly. ‘You’re my friend, Alex. I’m not in love with you. I couldn’t . . . just the idea of it . . .’

OK, I tell myself, he must have got the point by now, but I can’t stop. I want to punish him. ‘It makes me feel sick. I mean, really, it’s . . . perverse. God, I could never . . .’

Alex looks like he’s sobered up in an instant. ‘Fine,’ he says curtly. ‘I get it.’

He turns on his heel and walks out, and a few seconds later I hear the front door slam. For a moment I start to worry about where he's going to go at one in the morning and without his coat, which is still draped over the back of one of the chairs, but then I think that's his problem. He's a grown man; he can take care of himself.

Rebecca and Daniel, Alex and Isabel.

It was the four of us for as long as I can remember. At least ever since Daniel and Alex, best friends since they were twelve, advertised for two flatmates to share their rundown, rented, second-year house in Windsor, and chose first Isabel and then me because they thought we looked like we might put out, as Dan once so delicately put it. Which we did in the end, although I'd held out till Christmas. We'd thought about advertising again once we had coupled up into two of the four rooms – we were students; we needed the money – but we liked it just being the four of us. We felt like a family. And that's how it stayed for the next two decades.

After college we rented flats in London, a few streets from each other, we had our weddings and then our babies in quick succession. We spent Christmases and birthdays and New Year's Eves together. We were a unit. We didn't need anyone else. Until a couple of months ago, that is, when Alex suddenly announced that he wanted out. There was no big drama – no one else was involved; he had just decided he needed to move on. He felt stifled, he said. Like he'd been in one place for too long and he needed to get out and see what else the world had to offer. He had left the girls – eight-year-old twins,

Nicola and Natalie – with Isabel, and he had moved into a new home, which was conveniently waiting for him only a few streets away so that he could still visit them. He wanted it to be civil, he said. He and Isabel could arrange times convenient to both of them when Alex could have the twins (although he pleaded with Isabel to let him visit whenever he wanted but she, quite rightly, wasn't going to let him have it all his own way). They would remain friends.

Of course, it wasn't really turning out like that. Isabel had fallen to pieces. She had always wanted to be married. That sounds bad. I don't mean for the sake of it, but she was one of those women for whom planning a wedding wasn't just about the day – she was as excited about the following forty or fifty years. She used to fantasize about being old with children and grandchildren and making jam in a house in the south of France with kids and friends and dogs running around all over the place.

Not that it should have made any difference – not that Isabel was even aware of it – but she and Alex *looked* the part. Both blonde and tanned and glowy, like the couple on top of a wedding cake. When you saw them together, you just thought, Oh yes, of course. And once she fell in love with Alex she embraced his family like they were her own, and they adored her in return. She was the daughter-in-law every mother would have wanted.

She had never questioned that she was in it for life. And Alex – or so I always thought – couldn't believe his luck that this beautiful, warm, loyal woman had chosen him. Maybe she mothered him a little too much, but he

was as complicit in that as she was. She had loved looking after him and he had loved being looked after. There had been no hints, no indications that anything was wrong. She had had no time to adjust to the fact that maybe her marriage wasn't as perfect as she had always thought. It was just over. Boom. One day it was there and then it was gone.

Alex wasn't faring much better. Faced with his new-found freedom he realized he had no idea what to do with it, and he was spending most of his time flopping around our little flat feeling sorry for himself. In any battle, it seems, you have to choose sides and with him spending so much of his time with us we were always going to look like we were on his, although that still makes me feel very uncomfortable. I know he's Dan's best friend forever, but it pisses me off what he's done. Not just to Isabel and the girls, but to all of us, our cosy little group. He might just as well have turned round and said, 'Sorry, you're all boring me.' I feel let down.

When I wonder aloud how Isabel is coping, or question what it was that drove him to make such a dramatic statement, he shuts the conversation down. It's only when I bring up the subject of the twins that he'll be drawn on the topic. He misses them – he doesn't know if he can spend a life away from them – but is that any reason to stay in a bad marriage? I never offer him any sympathy. He made his bed.

Dan loves the twins, as do I. Surrogate baby sisters to our two (Zoe, who is thirteen, and eleven-year-old William), they have been a part of our day-to-day lives

for the whole of theirs. How could Alex do this to them? I ask him. How could he do it to Isabel of all people? I've sometimes wondered what Dan would say if I put my foot down, invited Isabel to stay with us, if I told him that I didn't want to see Alex, that I couldn't forgive him. Would he go along with me or would the history of their friendship still win out? It seems so unfair but, I suppose, that is hardly the point. The point is that Daniel and Alex are like brothers.

And this is how Alex repays him.

Before he made his grand declaration of love for me, before he said those three words that would change everything forever, the evening had started out fun.

I had taken him as my 'plus one' to the opening of a client's play. I say 'a client' like I mean *I* have clients. Actors and playwrights who hang on my every word when I offer up career advice. I don't. My bosses do. I am the assistant, recently turned full time when William started secondary school. Joshua and Melanie are the Mortimer and Sheedy on the sign beside the front door. Between them they represent about forty bit-part actors and 'personalities' whose smiling faces leer down at me from their 10x8s in the reception area, which is also home to my desk, and a handful of writers of varying degrees of competence and success.

I love my job. At university I studied drama and for several years after that I called myself an actress, despite the fact that all my paying work came from restaurants or telesales centres. I once played Cordelia in a production

of *King Lear* that toured the Far East for six weeks. That was my moment. Otherwise I just sat and waited for the phone to ring, which it never did. To be honest, once I got pregnant with Zoe I couldn't wait to give it all up. I became a stay-at-home mum and I loved every second of it.

And then, when I got up the courage to go back to work, I found it was so much more fun for me to be working on the other side of the camera, so to speak. Not that there ever had been a camera, but you know what I mean. I have no real responsibilities, which suits me just fine. I don't want any. Basically I just pass on messages and keep diaries, arrange times for auditions and meetings, photocopy scripts and casting briefs. But I'm still enamoured with the world, thrilled by the possibilities every time the phone rings. The offers of TV work, the auditions for stage shows, the first tentative feelers from theatre companies about the rights to one of our writers' plays.

Truthfully, most of our clients don't earn very much. A few can sing or dance and make a good living on the regional musical circuit. A couple have turned to presenting. Our handful of actors audition almost every week and occasionally get a speaking role as 'second bank teller' or 'mugged woman' in *The Bill*. Our writers are mostly still waiting to find the Holy Grail that is highly paid TV work, beavering away on masterpieces that only a handful of people will ever read.

And then we have our 'stars'. The tiny elite who have managed to forge successful and lucrative long-term

careers and who haven't yet been lured away to one of the bigger agencies. That happens to us a lot, you nurture someone, have faith in them when no one else does, and at the first sniff of fame they're off to ICM. Not even a thank you note.

Tonight's opening involved one of our still-loyal success stories – Gary McPherson – ex-soap opera actor turned leading man via a very public sex scandal involving class-A drugs and underage girls. Flushed with the success of his new-found media attention, Gary has landed the role of the Lothario brother in a revival of a 1930s farce, which, after a whirlwind regional tour, has, rather unexpectedly, ended up at a West End theatre on London's Shaftesbury Avenue for a limited five-week run. In reality it is filling in an unexpected period of darkness caused by the set for the new Andrew Lloyd Webber having been delayed. Needless to say, we don't mention that to the casting directors and critics when we call them up to ask them to come along. We simply say that Gary has a long-awaited West End role and that we would love them to come to the opening night.

Daniel has, over the years, been forced to attend far too many of these events and, at the last minute, he feigns a headache. It's too short notice to expect Isabel to find a babysitter so Dan suggests that I ask Alex to come along as my guest instead. It might cheer him up, I think, good idea. It's awful to see someone you care about so down, even if, as that critical voice in my head keeps on reminding me, they have brought it all on themselves.

My role in the evening isn't all jollity. I am required to schmooze at the opening-night party on the rooftop of the Century club. I have to make sure that Gary is paraded around and introduced to anyone who might be able to offer him work in the not too distant future. The plan is that I am to share these duties with my fellow assistant, Lorna. Did I mention Lorna? When I said that I loved my job could you see there was a 'but' coming?

'I love my job, but . . .'

That 'but' is Lorna. I love my job, but I wish I didn't have to share an office with Lorna. It's not that she's a bitch; she's just . . . annoying. Grating. Mind-numbingly irritating. She talks all the time. And I mean *all* the time. About nothing. There are very few things that wind me up as much as people who never know when to shut up. Who will fill every available space with tales of their journey into work or their 'hilarious' mishap in Morrisons yesterday or their views on the credit crunch. And, to be honest, when I said that she wasn't a bitch that wasn't entirely true. She can be. She is. And, in fact, she has been to me at times. But more of that later.

Anyway, Lorna is supposed to be helping me to wrangle Gary and we manage to share the burden pretty well for once, which I'm grateful to her for because I don't want to keep leaving Alex on his own for too long. He's a bit of a loose cannon and he's not good with talking to people other than Dan and me because, after a few exchanges, he will launch into his whole personal history: 'I've stayed in an unhappy relationship for years; I've tried, I really have. I don't know what I've done

wrong. I mean, don't tell me she's never thought about leaving?' He can't stop himself, but it's impossible not to notice the expressions on the faces of the people he's talking to; from sympathy through boredom to the fear that he'll never shut up. A master class in acting in three easy stages. So I try to go and check on him every five minutes or so and usually find him mooching about on his own near the free bar. He's drinking far too much lately.

'Are you OK?' I ask for the tenth time.

'I'm fine. I'm having a good time.' He knocks back what's left of his red wine and reaches for a fresh one. I can't stop myself from following his movement with my eyes. I'm worried he's going to get drunk and disgrace me.

'I've only had a couple,' he says defensively.

'I wasn't . . .' I start to say, and then stop because it's obvious that I was.

'Do you want to go?' I ask him. 'It's fine if you do.'

'No. Really. Sit and talk to me for a bit, though.'

I look around and Gary seems to be happily ensconced in a conversation with a well-known theatre director who has a predilection for handsome bits of rough, so I sit down.

'Tell me about your day,' Alex says. He always loves to hear the latest bits of gossip about the clients. The worse the better. So I tell him how Gary threw a fit because the producers forgot to send him a good-luck bunch of flowers, but they remembered the actress playing his sister who only has three lines.

‘Gary has forty-eight lines,’ I tell him.

‘How do you know?’ he laughs.

‘He had me count them. But what he doesn’t know is that in the original version of the play his character had eighty-three lines. They obviously cut some of them when they decided to cast him.’

Alex snorts and I feel a little ripple of pleasure that I’m managing to cheer him up. ‘Didn’t he notice?’

‘No, he’s never read the original. In fact, he never reads anything he’s in. Just counts his lines and checks that his character doesn’t die on page five.’

Alex is laughing a lot now so I start to tell him how Lorna has complained to Joshua and Melanie that her desk is smaller than mine, which is wrong because she’s been there longer than me, so if anyone should have the bigger desk it’s her.

‘So I measured them,’ I tell him. ‘There’s an inch in it. An inch!’

‘You should measure everything, make a list of anything she has that’s bigger than anything you have . . .’ he starts to say, but Lorna herself interrupts and says that Melanie thinks Gary needs to circulate and that someone needs to rescue him from the predatory director.

‘Can’t you do it?’ I ask. Isn’t it obvious I’m in the middle of a conversation?

‘I’m knackered,’ she says, plonking herself down on the sofa. I get up, irritated.

‘Oh, this is Lorna,’ I say to Alex as I go off, and I know he’ll get a kick out of meeting her because he’s heard

me moan on often enough about how I can't stand her.

'God my feet are killing me,' I hear her say as I start to walk away. 'I only just bought these shoes yesterday and even though I take a six they only had a five and a half but I thought sod it they're bound to stretch and if I wait for them to get a six in it'll be ages and by that time I probably will have gone off them or I won't have anything to wear them to or something and anyway my feet are narrow so I sometimes feel like sixes are too big . . .'

You're not imagining it. There wasn't a single comma in her sentence. Not a moment where she paused for breath. I look round and Alex is just looking at her, one eyebrow raised in that way he has. Taking it all in so we can share a joke about it later. Smiling, I leave them to it.

We finally leave about one a.m. and we throw ourselves into a cab back to mine. It's just assumed that Alex will stay over. He hates his new place so he pretty much lives in our spare room at the moment. Besides, I'd guess he's hoping that Dan will still be up and he can drink some more and indulge in some self-flagellation ('Maybe I should have put up with being unhappy for the girls' sake. Am I being too selfish?'). It's in the taxi, though, that he starts behaving weirdly. I'm not sure if I'm imagining it, but I think I feel him looking at me a little too intently for a little too long while I'm staring vacantly out of the window. When I look round he gives me a slightly sickly sincere smile, which unsettles me for a moment.

It's worth mentioning here that there has never – not even for the most fleeting second – been any kind of frisson between Alex and me. Nothing. Not even when Daniel and I split up for a couple of months at the end of our first academic year of living together, and Alex and I were left alone in the house for the summer while Dan went back to his home town to work in his father's law practice and Isabel went off to fulfil a hastily made promise to go inter-railing around Europe with a girlfriend. Two and a half months by ourselves, an oversexed twenty-year-old boy and a newly single, heartbroken nineteen-year-old girl. Nothing. Not for either of us as far as I know. For a single second. Nothing.

Alex was always popular with the girls. He had that confidence that came from growing up knowing he was good looking, but his looks – he was slight, fair, pretty rather than handsome – were boy-band asexual rather than testosterone-fuelled manly. He was a teenage girl's unthreatening pin-up boy. He was also insufferably vain but in such a transparent way that it somehow became a virtue rather than an affliction.

'God, I'm gorgeous,' he would say whenever he passed a mirror, but he'd camp it up to make whoever he was with laugh. Everyone agreed that he really believed it deep down, but for some reason no one disliked him for it. People would roll their eyes and agree that it was just Alex being Alex. He was witty – that was his saving grace. And things happened when Alex was around. There was never a dull moment. He was always the first person on anyone's party list.

His looks have stood the test of time pretty well, actually. He still has a boyish quality, wide-eyed, smooth-skinned (I have no doubt that he moisturizes, and why not, it is the twenty-first century after all), with a thick shock of dark blond hair. I've just always preferred Dan's dark earthiness, that's all.

We adored each other, don't get me wrong. We always have. While Dan and I have everything in common – not just the surface things like tastes in music and what we like to do on holiday, but proper things, values and politics and how we want to raise the kids – Alex could always make me laugh. He's hands down the funniest person I've ever met. He can see the joke in everything – well, not so much at the moment actually; ditching his family seems to have affected his sense of humour. That summer, I remember, his favourite thing was to drag me to the local Pound Shop almost every day where he would pick out individual items and take them up to the assistant behind the counter one by one.

'How much is this?'

'A pound.'

'What about this?'

'That's a pound too.'

'Really? That's too expensive. What about this?'

Rolling her eyes. 'Everything's a pound.'

'And this?'

'Like I said, everything in this shop costs a pound.'

Every now and then he would turn to me and shout excitedly 'Hey, Bex, this is only a pound. Should I get

it?’ and then he’d turn back to the assistant and say, ‘What if I buy two?’

‘Well, that would be two pounds.’

‘How about if I bought two of these?’

And so on. He got banned in the end. I guess you had to be there.

Both Dan and I have a tendency to take things too seriously, to worry about everything before it’s happened so, for both of us, having Alex around has always been the perfect antidote to that. He’s like a walking stress ball, or at least he was. A breath of fresh air. The bottom line is that he’s one of my best friends. He’s in the top three, after Dan but equal to Isabel. But that’s all he has ever been. A friend.

So let’s just say that I didn’t see it coming. His declaration. We get back to the flat and I’m just thinking that maybe he’s being a little bit weird. A little bit needy. And then, once we’ve established that Dan and the kids are all in bed, and we’re sitting in the living room because Alex has insisted we open a bottle of wine anyway, that’s when he tries to put his hand on my leg. I shrug it off, obviously, but in a way that I hope looks casual. I don’t want to draw attention to it, make it real. But he puts it straight back on and I say, ‘Alex, don’t,’ and that’s somehow an invitation for him to blurt it all out. Great. My best night ever.

In the morning I struggle to get up for work. I’m feeling blurry. Fuzzy round the edges like a partly rubbed-out version of myself. I can’t deal with getting drunk these

days. I think my body's trying to tell me I'm too old. My head hurts. Dan is sweet, getting up with me and offering to make me coffee and toast, which I can't quite stomach. He's surprised that Alex isn't in the spare room and for a split second I think about telling him, but I decide against it. It was nothing. A momentary blip on Alex's path to post-Isabel enlightenment. But it still might make Dan feel uneasy and I would never want that to happen. Besides, I have absolutely no doubt that Alex – if he even remembers it – will be in the throes of a spiritual as well as a physical hangover. It's not every day you declare your love for your best friend's wife. I know he'll be feeling like shit, sweating about the prospect of me telling Dan what happened. I decide that the best thing to do is never mention it again. To anyone. Ever.

Thinking that, I realize that the only person who would appreciate the horror of what happened last night is Isabel, but I obviously can't share it with her. So I go to work without saying anything to anyone and just hope that it'll all go away.