

APPY Ever AFTER

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For Zoë, my happy ever after

Chapter One

Beth offered her cheek, sidelining his attempted kiss.

‘Thanks for a lovely evening,’ said Number 33.

‘It was really nice to meet you,’ she fibbed.

‘How are you fixed for next weekend?’ he asked, fishy breath tickling her nostrils. Yes, he’d had the salmon, but the odour had been there when he arrived.

Way to make a good impression, 33... I mean Callum.

‘Busy jumping naked into a pit of spikes,’ Beth wanted to say.

‘I’ll have to check my diary,’ she replied.

Hopefully, he’d understand that was universal code for “I have no intention of seeing you again”. The guy surely knew that not all first dates led to second dates. Her conversion ratio was 20%. Third dates? 5%.

It’s a numbers game, 33. Please read the room.

He gave a resigned smile. ‘Okay.’

He *did* have a nice smile, but the problem was all the other stuff. Well, not *all* the other stuff. Some stuff. The inability to take an

interest in her life—not just her chest—was a turn-off, especially as his profile used the word “empathetic”. And she hadn’t been thrilled by his 47-minute discourse on voting constituency boundary changes.

She *had* checked her watch. Subtly.

Still, standing outside Winchester’s finest seafood restaurant, she realised she was being hard on Callum. Perhaps first date nerves had caused his verbal diarrhoea. Perhaps he simply loved his job. Perhaps he was trying to stop *her* from talking about the world of venture capital. Perhaps he wanted an excuse to gaze into her eyes. He had been. She’d gazed into his. A mistake, given the attempted kiss. He must have thought things had gone well. And they had—more or less.

He’d arrived on time. He’d courteously paid for dinner. He’d opened the door for her. All big ticks. But there was the breath thing. And his incessant eyebrow tugging. And his Apple Watch face was the Mickey Mouse one. Fine if you’re ten, not if you’re thirty-seven.

Some people might call Beth picky. No: she was merely being careful. Once bitten, twice shy.

‘Where are you parked?’ he asked.

‘I came on the bus.’ She pointed across the road to a bus stop that was mercifully close but not, technically, hers.

‘Want a lift?’

‘Um... no, thanks.’

Disappointment pursed his lips. ‘Okay. I’m this way.’ He waved her to the pedestrian crossing.

At least he’s being a gent. And he’s already tried the kiss thing, so hopefully no more of that in a mo.

At the wrong bus stop, they shook hands.

‘Thanks for walking me over,’ she said. ‘Drive safe.’

‘Take it easy, Beth. I’ll wait to hear from you.’

‘Absolutely.’ She flashed a smile and parked her backside on the sloping slab of plastic that constituted a seat under the bus shelter.

Mercifully, he took that to mean “End of the evening. Now please sod off”, and duly strolled away.

A bus glided to a halt with a hiss of air brakes.

Her stomach tensed.

Please don’t look over your shoulder.

He looked over his shoulder.

She glanced at the matrix display under the canopy’s roof. This stop only served one route.

Shit.

So she stepped aboard and almost made it to the solitary vacant seat before the bus pulled away. Almost.

The lurch threw her sideways. She grabbed for the rail. Missed. Toppled into an older woman in a purple beret, who shot Beth the evils.

‘Sorry,’ Beth said, grimacing. Then, propelled by the vehicle’s acceleration and a desperation to escape the scene of the crime, she blundered up to the back row, whacking her head on the low ceiling, and thumped down onto the seat.

Fucking fuckety fuck.

Rubbing her head, she took out her phone to check the route, see where she was being unwittingly taken. The bus slowed.

In every crisis, there is opportunity.

She sprang up, keeping her head bowed, let the vehicle’s momentum carry her to the doors, then stepped gratefully back into the cool June dusk.

Glancing nervously around—just her luck that Callum would still be strolling past—she crossed the road and secreted herself in another shelter, ready to head back to her *actual* destination.

Fifteen minutes later, she arrived at her suburban semi.

In the hallway, she tugged off her low heels and put them on the small rack. As Callum was a six-footer, she'd added an extra inch onto her 5'7", on the off-chance they'd get into a smooch. As it was, she wouldn't be kissing him again.

Best to rip the plaster off quickly.

She pulled out her phone, thumbed the dating app, located his profile, and sent a brief but polite note saying she didn't want to take things any further.

Closing her eyes, she let out a breath of relief.

Sorry, 33. You were not my lucky number.

The lights were on in the living room. Beth didn't like coming home to darkness—not out of fear, only to give some sense of warmth and comfort. Crusading naysayers like Wilson (number 20) would have accused her of single-handedly killing the planet by keeping three bulbs on unnecessarily. However, she didn't care what Wilson Joseph thought, because he'd sneezed without covering his nose, reckoned women weren't cut out for football, and had his bloody name the wrong way round.

She glanced at the trio of whisky bottles on the side cupboard.

It was Saturday night, and after the evening's failure, she deserved a tot. To her credit, she hadn't had a drink following *every* bad date. She'd be a raging alcoholic by now. Instead, she'd maintained the mantra that it was a numbers game and she merely needed to kiss a few more frogs. Ideally, metaphorically. But the game was becoming tedious and disenchanting.

She poured a finger of Glenfarclas 15yo into one of a pair of cut-glass tumblers. Some wedding presents were too nice to throw away. Or let Leon have.

A corner of the room squawked.

She wandered over and opened the cage door. ‘Hey, Quincunx.’ She lifted the parrot onto her shoulder. ‘Anything to say for yourself tonight?’

‘Squawk.’

In nine months, the parrot hadn’t said a single bloody word. She’d considered asking the rehoming centre for a refund, especially as the bird was there because its previous owner had become fed up with its constant chatter. It was a hell of a relationship litmus test that she couldn’t even find a pet that was on her wavelength. She’d had better conversation with Jeremy (number 7) and his sparkling repartee had opened with “What’s your favourite type of bread?”

She sank into the sofa’s welcome embrace. Quincunx nuzzled at her hair.

She’d bought the bird for company, something to fill the house that felt very empty when Leon moved out. A companion who didn’t complain at almost every VAR decision on Match Of The Day. Yet Beth didn’t resent her soon-to-be ex-husband for watching football. She might as well have been annoyed about the toilet seat being left up or him falling asleep immediately after sex. Unfair if the sex was excellent. And Leon’s was.

She sipped the whisky. Its smooth warmth slipped down her throat.

Leon never appreciated whisky. That wasn’t why they split. No single thing was, truthfully. They simply reached the end of the road.

He wasn’t a parrot person either. When they’d hooked up, twelve years ago, age 22, he’d mocked her collection of parrot paraphernalia. Later, when they’d moved into this, the marital household, her colourful array of sketches, trinkets and figurines was banished to the loft.

She still hadn’t retrieved the keepsakes. Perhaps tomorrow.

Give Quincunx some avian company, after a fashion.

She stroked his white feathers.

What had caused the sulphur-crested cockatoo to fall silent? Was it the environment? The tension of divorce in the air? His cage? Did the little guy hate his name?

Is it me, buddy, not you? I give as much love as I can.

Well, there was no way she was sticking with “Cocky”, the name when she acquired him. Yes, it’s sweet when a child names a pet, but if she’d introduced him to friends as “Cocky the cockatoo”, they might have rushed out and bought her a doll’s house or some loom bands.

Besides, “Quincunx” was nicely maths-y, as well as sounding a bit rude. If she found a bloke worthy of bringing home—Ben (number 26) was the only one so far—and he knew the word meant the pattern of five dots on dice, she was onto a good thing. Mr Right needed to have a smart head on his shoulders... and fulfil other criteria.

Many, admittedly.

Too many, apparently.

How come that with thousands of eligible men in the country, plenty of ways to meet them, and a range of apps to facilitate the dating game, she’d struck out with quite magnificent consistency?

Is it me, not them?

She swiped to the second screen of her phone, held a thumb to the chosen icon, and, when they all jiggled, she tapped the tiny minus sign.

“Delete App”?

You betcha.

Tap.

If love truly was a numbers game, Beth Moore was fed up with counting.

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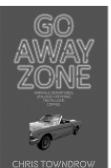
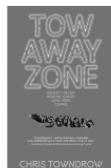
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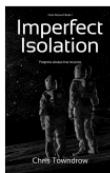
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