

**PIP  
DRYSDALE**

**THE  
STRANGERS  
WE  
KNOW**



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## THE STRANGERS WE KNOW

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*For you*

*We all have a wound so deep the air can't get to it,  
a wound that explains everything*

**Pilot**



**SATURDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2017 (9.07 PM)**

It was a Saturday night at Electric House and my life was about to change forever. I didn't know it yet, of course, just like how Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* didn't expect Richard Gere to pull up in that Lotus Esprit. Or, you know, how Marvin in *Pulp Fiction* didn't expect to get his face blown off. It can always go either way, right?

It was raining and cold that night, so the heating was on and the windows had misted up. I was supposed to be meeting my best friend Tess for a drink; I hadn't been out much since 'The Breakup' and she'd said if I didn't practise doing my eye makeup and flirting with someone soon I'd probably forget how. So I'd strapped myself into my prettiest dress, highlighted the shit out of my cheekbones, and forced myself to go. But now here I was, alone at the bar, staring down at her text message: *Work emergency. 20 mins. Sorry. xxxx*

I looked up and around, searching for my bartender: *My drink, I need my drink.*

That's when I first saw him: Oliver.

Watching me.

He had thick, dark hair, a chiselled face, broad shoulders and was wearing a white t-shirt under a dark dinner jacket. He was leaning on the bar. Alone. And I remember thinking: *very James Dean*. Our eyes met and I thought he'd do what people usually do when you catch them looking at you: look away. Stare down at *his* phone. Pretend it hadn't happened. But he didn't. Instead he smiled this big, perfect smile. And, for a split second, I awkwardly smiled back.

But then insecurity hit: *Shit. He's probably smiling at someone behind me.*

My face grew hot, my blood raced – *how embarrassing* – and I quickly stared back down at my phone, frowning at the screen like something very important had just come in.

*Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom.*

*It's okay, Charlie. Just pretend it didn't happen. You're an actress – you can do this.*

Calmly, I looked up again, my face set to neutral as I watched the slowest bartender in the world fiddle around with lemons and limes near the far wall. I refused to look back at Oliver – that would just make it worse – but there he was in my peripheral vision, right where I'd left him. He shifted his weight. Cocked his head. Instinctively the movement drew my eye. And do you know what he did next?

He poked his tongue out at me.

For real.

There, amid all the ripped jean wannabes living on their credit cards and acting cool and superior, was this incredibly handsome man sticking his tongue out at me. You couldn't have scripted a better 'meet-cute'. I burst out laughing – it was ridiculous. But that was always the thing with Oliver. He was anything but predictable. No. He was the closest thing to magic I'd ever seen: it was as if he'd stepped straight out of a rom com. Like the cast of *Friends* might be trailing close behind.

But *shit, shit, shit* – what was he doing? He was moving towards me now. I could see him weaving his way through the crowd.



I wasn't ready for this.

My head grew light.

'So,' he said, appearing beside me for the first time. He was six foot two. I'm five foot seven so we matched well. And from the way he looked at me, it felt like maybe, just maybe, the pendulum was finally swinging back my way.

The bartender was back. He slid my drink across to me on a napkin and I took a sip. Chilled. Tart.

'So,' I replied. I could smell his cologne: Ylang-ylang? Spice? And feel the warmth pulsing from his chest.

He grinned at me and leaned in to talk into my ear. The music was loud, it would have required shouting otherwise. 'I'm Oliver,' he said. His hair smelled clean and my heart was pumping hard.

'Charlie,' I said into his ear, the warmth of his cheek against mine.

'Like the perfume?'

'Pretty sure that's what I was named after,' I said, pulling back to look at him. Our eyes locked and all I could hear was static. We were standing close. So close. Grinning at each other. Neither of us breaking eye contact. I was proud of myself: if this wasn't flirting, nothing was. I couldn't wait to tell Tess. And for the first time since my breakup I wasn't thinking things like: *How will I hold it together when Josh asks for his key back?* That was his name. The one before Oliver: Josh.

Instead, I stood soaked in the present moment, my fingers wrapped around an icy glass, my eyes tracing the stubble on Oliver's

jaw; his mouth, his eyes. His eyelashes were unjustly long. But there was something in his expression that told me he was mentally weighing things up: should he say it or shouldn't he?

'What?' I asked – *Say it* – and he smiled.

Then he leaned forward again. 'Are you feeling brave?' he asked. I squinted at him. 'In what way?'

'Well, I realise this is forward but do you fancy going somewhere? Grabbing some supper?'

His eyes were clear, traffic light green and full of promise.

'Ummm,' I hesitated, taking another sip of my drink. *Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom*. I needed something good to happen, something to make me believe in life again. In *me* again.

'It's just dinner, Charlie. Don't overthink it,' he said. 'Yes or no.'

I liked the sound of him saying my name and, logically, he was right. What harm could dinner do? A little bit of spontaneity, a dash of recklessness, would be good for me.

He smiled at me again, his hands in a prayer position: 'Pretty please?'

And I laughed. 'Sure,' I replied, reaching for my phone. 'I just need to text my friend.'

And as I typed out the message – *I think I met someone. He wants to go for dinner. Can we do drinks another time? x* – I thought: *Wow, I almost didn't come out tonight. I almost missed this*. It felt like fate, really it did.

It was only six weeks later that Oliver admitted to me what that movie-style meeting really was: a bet. Courtesy of Justin, his best friend and long-term work colleague.

Nothing is ever as it seems, is it?

So there you have it: how we met. Where it all started. How I ended up here, three years later trying to figure out how something like *this* happens. Because things like this are not supposed to happen.

No, we like to believe we're in control of our lives; that if we buy insurance, think positive thoughts and pay our bills, we'll be safe. Everything will be okay. But the truth is: sometimes it's not okay. Sometimes all it takes is one plot twist to realise nobody is who you think they are and everything you know to be true is actually false.

Well, a plot twist *and* a dating app ...

**TUESDAY, 5 JUNE 2018 (10.09 PM)**

Let's fast-forward eighteen months: to Tess's thirty-second birthday. The fifth of June. A Tuesday. We'd gone for drinks at one of Tess's favourite Mayfair bars: all amber lights, blue velvet furniture, expensive suits and the sociopaths who wore them. Oliver would have been there too except he was flying in from a business trip – Brazil – at 7.30 pm. He'd had dodgy internet access for the past ten days and all I'd received from him were a couple of garbled calls via WhatsApp, a handful of photos – some tourist shots, a selfie on a beach, a shot of his wet legs with sugar loaf in the distance – and a few 'I love you baby' texts between meetings.

I hated it when he went away: his absence gave my mind the opportunity to go to dark places, to replay his side of phone conversations I'd overheard between him and Justin that sounded stressful (they always sounded stressful), to question how safe he was when he went away to places like Nigeria then came back with stories about how someone had an AK-47 in the meeting room, and to think of all sorts of improbable ways things could go wrong. That I could lose the happiness I'd finally found. I couldn't wait to see him; for the bad thoughts to stop. To feel his warmth around me, smell the ylang-ylang on his skin and his shampoo on the pillowcase in the morning. Our bed was too big for one person.

Tess was my oldest friend. We'd met in the loos at Tramp one night when we were both nineteen and new to London. We'd soon become each other's family here; each other's 'in case of emergency'

person. She was more a sister than a friend, really. And she was in good spirits that night, mainly complaining about the daytime heat and how hard it was to wear a jacket to meetings throughout the summer. By ‘summer’ she meant the five consecutive days of sunshine we’d just had – a British heatwave, if you asked the papers. But she was a fledgling family lawyer at Legal Aid and had her ex’s name (Marc) tattooed in cursive on one of her wrists, so jackets were compulsory. But that night she was jacket-free in a silver, sequined cami and a pair of black jeans, her sparkly eye shadow just a little heavier than usual. That meant one thing and one thing only: she was, in her own words, ‘open to making new friends’.

Now, you need to understand something about Tess: she wasn’t like me. When Josh broke up with me it took weeks for me to ditch the dry shampoo and stretchy pants routine, returning to semi-normal function. Who knows how long I may have continued to wander through my life like a ghost if Oliver hadn’t swept in and changed *everything*.

Because Oliver was like one of those brightly coloured dividers between sections of a school folder.

There was my life ‘before Oliver’: where reality was such a far cry from what I’d thought life would be like. The overpriced rent, the panic attacks, the disappointments inherent in a career in the arts and the truth about relationships – that nobody runs through an airport for you and even when you’re an ‘us’ you can feel marrow-achingly alone. ‘Love’ with Josh was confusing at best. There were moments where I was sure we loved each other, but ninety per cent of

our relationship could be characterised by: Josh working long hours and refusing to communicate his emotions (if he had any) when I needed him most, me checking his horoscope or doing Myers-Briggs personality quizzes on his behalf to figure out why he was like that (INTJ?), then him frequently breaking up with me due to feeling like he, and I quote, ‘never did anything right’. Which was fair: he didn’t. There was always the sense that somehow, even though I’d chosen it, I was in the middle of the wrong life. That I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because this was *not* how it was meant to turn out. It was meant to be bigger, brighter, more luminous. But I wasn’t sure which way to turn to find the ‘right’ life.

Then there was my life ‘after Oliver’: where I was calmer. I felt, I don’t know, healthy. It was all okay. Good even. It wasn’t twenty-four seven bliss, but when I was sitting beside him, watching a romantic scene in a movie, I wouldn’t flinch, horribly aware of the fact that what I was feeling was far removed from the characters’ feelings. With Oliver I felt all the *right* things. ‘Love’ with him meant I was seen, I was safe. We weren’t perfect, no, but together we were stronger than we were apart because we loved each other, accepted each other, and when I woke at 4 am, thinking about death or remembering things I didn’t want to, even when he wasn’t actually in my bed, I could feel him there with me. And that would calm me. It gave me strength. As though my love for him formed a secondary spine.

I had no idea how Tess pulled off life without an Oliver, but here’s the thing: Tess didn’t want one.

And there was a reason: Tess had suffered too.

Of course she'd suffered: we *all* have a wound so deep the air can't get to it, a wound that explains everything. It's there, whether we're aware of it or not.

Mine meant that when I walked into a room, I immediately scanned it for potential weapons and exit points. Salt and pepper shakers (or anything solid that fitted in a hand) could be used to at least buy me some time. Lamps were a strong choice, although they were usually plugged into the wall and that could cause problems with swing. Right now, I'd probably use the glass in my hand or the little metal vase of flowers in the centre of the table. It had a sharp, geometric edge that would at least stun an assailant. So yes, I could refuse to think about it. Refuse to talk about it. But there it was: living in my actions.

Tess's wound was different, but that's not to say it wasn't as deep – it still fractured her heart, rattled her faith: an affair with a director at the private law firm she'd worked at straight out of university. Marc. Yes, the tattoo. He'd told her he was 'unhappily' married and on the verge of the divorce papers coming through, that his wife was cruel and cold. But after a few months, the feeling that something was 'off' about Marc became so strong that Tess had launched a low level investigation into him.

Of course, Marc wasn't on the verge of a divorce, was he? No, he was not. Instead, Marc was 'happily' married to a woman with bouncy, chestnut hair who, judging from her Twitter account, was not enjoying her last trimester of pregnancy. Tess confronted him immediately, desperately needing to be wrong.

It was the very next day that the office gossip began.

Within a week everyone had heard Tess was obsessed with Marc. In love with him. E-stalking him. That she was trying to break up his perfect family but he was fending her off. It was the sort of rumour offices love. And as their relationship had been a closely guarded secret, he'd insisted on phone calls instead of texts and no photos (these were the very things that had her embark on her investigation in the first place), she had nothing to prove otherwise.

Besides, she was too tired and fractured by then to truly fight.

Those were dark days: lots of crying, blocking and unblocking his wife, vodka and googling tattoo removalists. But after the initial meltdown period, Tess had gathered her strength, quit her job and filled the cracks from within. It meant she recovered quickly, far quicker than I ever did, but her heart had hardened in the process. Now she treated dating like a life-sized chess game; men like recreational drugs.

'But don't you want to fall in love again?' I'd asked her more than once. And each time her answer had been short and clear: 'No'.

Like I said, Tess wasn't like me: she didn't fall apart over men and she wasn't looking for 'true love'; she was looking for 'fast love'. Which is how the three of us – me, Tess and some dark-haired girl whose name I'd forgotten – ended up squished onto one of those velvet sofas, tipsy and swiping our way through a dating app. It was fun for the first five matches or so. Having gone straight from a six-year relationship with Josh to Oliver, I'd bypassed the entire Tinder revolution so everything I knew about ghosting, slow



fades, the tyranny of two-blue-ticks, gathering intel via Instagram comments and faking a butt shot (close-up of a closed inner elbow – try it) for sexting had been through Tess. And so it was interesting, informative, to hear her explain how she'd used two different filters for her photographs because it improved both her complexion and her matches. How she'd set her 'radius' to three miles because she liked the catchment area. 'Oh,' I said, 'clever.' Then I sipped my wine, checked the time and issued silent gratitude for the fact that *I* wasn't single. That *I* didn't need to fake anything to get a date.

And I'm pretty sure that was it: the smug thought that irritated the gods.

Or maybe I'm giving myself too much credit and someone else too little.

But I wasn't really paying attention: just vaguely aware of her thumb swiping left, right, then left again, wondering inane things like: is my nail polish just a shade too dark? It was almost black; I'd had a manicure that day. And then, with no prior warning, there it was: *bam*.

The antidote to smugness.

Oliver.

My husband.

I only glimpsed the image for a splinter of a second. *Maybe it was just someone who looked like him*. But here's the thing: I recognised the picture. I'd *taken* that picture. It was him, at a distance, walking back to me from the swimming pool on our honeymoon. Lake Como. My chest grew tight. My breath caught in my throat.

And a kickdrum flared up in my chest: *ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom*. But by the time I registered what was happening Tess had already swiped ‘No’.

‘Can we go back?’ I asked through a Malbec haze as she continued to swipe.

‘Huh?’ the other girl asked, slurping her drink. ‘Why?’

‘I just—’ I started. ‘That looked a lot like Oliver.’

Tess burst out laughing. ‘Charlie, don’t be silly,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Which one?’

‘The one by the pool. Can we just check?’ *Ba-boom. Ba-boom. Ba-boom*. My vision was white at the edges and adrenaline pulsed through my veins. What was happening? But Tess shook her head again, her short dark pixie cut catching the light as she moved in what seemed like slow motion. ‘There’s no way to un-swipe, babes. Sorry.’

I looked at her. Pleading.

‘It’s fine,’ she said slowly, drawing out the syllables. Her brow was tensed in a concerned frown and she was touching my arm with reassurance. ‘Charlie, it wasn’t him. He’s a good guy.’

And she was right: he was.

But that didn’t change the fact that the walls were swaying towards me and my breathing had all but stopped.

I needed to go home. I needed to talk to him. So I paid my part of the bill, said I was tired and, as I made my way out the doors into the cold night air, I remember feeling like my entire life was mid-implosion. Little did I know infidelity was the least of my problems.