

She had him at hello, but what happened next...?

After Hello



'Hilarious'
JENNY COLGAN



MHAIRI
McFARLANE

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF YOU HAD ME AT HELLO

After
Hello

MHAIRI
McFARLANE

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Prologue

Then ...

It's quarter past eleven on an unremarkable and stereotypically rainy Friday night in Manchester. Except it is remarkable, and everything beyond the water-flecked windows of my flat, the night-lit Manchester, is made of magic and hope and promise and also I might be a little bit drunk.

There are foil lid boxes of food from the Yang Sing strewn around the coffee table in this poser's sprawling city flat full of mirrors and string lights, because I didn't make it as far as the fridge when we stumbled through the door. (My mum would be saying: 'Don't touch the egg fried rice now, it'll be ridden!') I don't know who we thought we were fooling by going to a restaurant instead of just heading straight here, to be honest.

It's our first night together – second, if you're being picky, although Ben didn't stay over after the ill-fated previous tumble – and we're in the stupidly large bed in my flat which doesn't feel oversized with both of us in it, propped up against each other on the pillows, legs tangled together, listening to the soothing hum of the traffic and the post-pub passers-by outside and enjoying a moment of perfect happiness.

I don't even remember any conversation over dinner, just a lot of grinning like loons at each other and pushing food around our plates and holding hands under the table and generally being obnoxious. Until the bill arrived and I said to Ben, 'Would you like to come back to mine?' and he said: 'Nah, it's been a full on sort of day. Would you like to go to WrestleMania with me a week on Wednesday though? Work has a corporate box.'

And for a percentage of a split second I believed him and we both laughed far too much for such a crap joke and I thought: I will never tire of this

friendship. Can it really have happened? A couple, at last? It feels so right but so strange.

We were both nervous beforehand, given the amount of anticipation, until Ben accidentally jabbed his elbow in a stray portion of General Tso's Chicken when we were kissing on the sofa. While laughing at his radioactive red patch, I decided to address the elephant in the room.

'What if we don't worry about this being perfect? It happening is enough for me.'

'I was hoping you'd say that,' Ben said, starting to unbutton his stained shirt which makes my stomach go *whoosh*. 'Then I have a chance of meeting or exceeding expectations.' I laughed, delighted and delirious. 'Seriously. I agree. It doesn't need to be perfect. It already is.'

Yeah. We didn't need to worry.

'Do you think we've changed much since we were twenty-one?' I say, in the post-coital peacefulness.

'Er. In what way? You more than lived up to fond memories, if that's what you—'

'Not like that! In general.' Though I'm glad to hear I don't look like I've melted. That said, this flat has dimmer switches.

'I hope so,' Ben says. 'I look back on that age and want to give myself a good slap.'

'I wasn't any better,' I say.

'You were. You were loyal to your boyfriend and decent and honest and annoyingly northern and not about to run away with the show off from London.'

This ability to see me clearly, but see the best in me before all the bad bits, this is Ben's unique gift.

'Hah, that's crazily magnanimous,' I say.

'Yeah well, it's easy to be the bigger man when I'm the one in bed with you.'

'Ah you're not the bigger ...'

'SHUT UP YOU MOO!' Ben shouts and we start laughing. 'No, honestly,' he continues, 'I'm not sure what kind of boyfriend I would've been back then, either. And I was off travelling, imagine that as our maiden voyage. There was an outdoor toilet situation in Cambodia that I'm pretty sure would've broken us.'

I laugh but it makes me wonder: is it true, or are we comforting ourselves? Were we actually best off not getting together for another ten years after that one-night stand? Would we still be as much in love now? He's here, he's next to me. After all this time and against all the odds. I slide my arm around Ben to prove to myself once again: he's warm and solid and he's *actually here*.

There's so much excitement but some fear, too, as I look out on a future at last with Ben. What did Caroline say, of my Forever Ben fixation? 'It's perfect because it's a fantasy and it's a fantasy because it's perfect.'

'I had Caroline and Mindy in this bed ...'

'Oh aye?' Ben ruffles my hair.

'... For a sleepover. When I had that flat warming.'

'Oh, yeah,' Ben says, with a sigh.

I pause, for a moment, as we both silently ride the bump of remembering that the last time Ben was here, it was with his ex-wife. I may not be the reason they split up, but I hardly helped.

'Caroline said that night that if you and I were meant to be, we would've happened at twenty-one. I felt so bleak. Everything I felt told me we *had* been meant to be, every single piece of logic went against it. And, you know. Morality.'

Ben's quiet and I worry that referring to the now defunct marriage at this point is distasteful.

'... I don't know what "meant to be" means, really, do you?' he says, eventually. 'It suggests there's some sort of God and a grand plan and life happens the way it's supposed to, with or without input from you. Which is a pretty depressing notion, if you think about it. We don't have any free will, if things are *meant to be*.'

'I don't know if that's it. Perhaps it just means, if things mess up, there's usually deeper reasons than the ones you acknowledge.'

'So you're changing your story entirely and saying you didn't like me enough?' Ben laughs.

'No! Oh, I don't know. I didn't mean there were reasons. I wish I'd never raised it.'

Ben squeezes me. 'Say anything you like. Things unsaid have done us enough damage.'

I squeeze him back.

'I'm just in shock that I get another chance.'

‘Me too,’ Ben says.

‘And,’ he adds, adjusting his arm around me, ‘part of you is fretting what if we’re not soulmates. We’re just two people who met at university and still fancy each other and this whole “giant love affair at last” thing is going to go horribly wrong?’

‘Yes, maybe,’ I smile.

‘Well I’d rather have things go wrong with you than right with anyone else,’ Ben says. ‘I think that’s pretty romantic, Chicken Little.’

‘God, that’s it, isn’t it!’ I say. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ I pause. ‘The phrase is *hopelessly* in love. It’s easy to miss the hopeless part.’

‘I’ve accepted your potential hopelessness as a partner,’ Ben says.

‘Likewise.’

‘Also,’ Ben says, ‘kiss me like that again, and then tell me we’re not soulmates.’

And I do, and I can’t.

Two years later ...

While we always thought any Mindy wedding would go *supersize with curly fries*, we didn't anticipate it would extend to falconry.

The four of us – me, Mindy, Caroline and Ivor – are having a Thursday-night dinner at The Grill On The Alley, which is basically a poshed-up TGI Friday.

It's a weekly catch-up tradition that Caroline and I put in place when our friends Mindy and Ivor got together. As great as it was and as pleased as we were for them, we didn't want factions and politics developing and this seemed a good way of 1) ensuring the democratic state of the four of us as equal friends continued and 2) not having to worry about what to cook for dinner 1/7 of the time.

We needn't have worried it would imbalance anything though: the pairing up has made them even more like themselves, somehow. She's still a rainbow of nonsense and he's her straight man and (now not-so-secret) biggest fan. They pecked at each other endlessly as friends until the penny dropped they were smitten.

Ivor proposed last Christmas, and while we were overjoyed we were also aware that a period of rank insanity would commence. Because Mindy.

'I was thinking ...' Mindy said, as she forked her steak around the plate in the fashionable murky gloaming.

(She's been on various fad diets since the announcement, the latest is the Paleo. 'Did Prehistoric women have mashed potato?' she had asked our confused waiter.

'Sir Walter Raleigh found the potato,' Ivor said to her. 'A bit later.'

'Oh my God yes, I remember that *Blackadder* now,' she said. 'Did he also invent the bicycle?')