

**Jen is on the telephone to her cousin, Cressida, out in Hollywood and Cressida has worked out that something, or more specifically someone, has grabbed Jen's attention. Now all she has to do is try to persuade Jen that she mustn't run away from her feelings.**

‘He's called Matt Harper, Cress. He's young. He dresses like he's walked into a nerd's washing line, but he's seriously, seriously sexy.

‘Ah, I see.’

‘He's got these really expressive brown eyes. And brown hair too that's usually mussed up.’ She looked at the wall again. ‘Rugged good- looking rather than smoothly handsome, if that makes sense. Kind of intelligent face.’

‘Tall? Muscled? Lean?’

‘You said you wouldn't ask questions.’

‘Well, it's like listening to paint dry.’

‘He's my height and...lithe...daft word. From all that walking, I suppose. Good legs, Cress.’

‘Good bum too, I'll bet. You always had an eye for those.’

‘Oh. Yes. Indeeeeeed.’ As they both laughed, Jennifer remembered a strip of photos lying around in a box somewhere of her and Cress in a photo booth in Newcastle when she was about thirteen. They'd been giggling about some boy they both fancied.

‘So, pretty hot, then?’

‘Lisa was practically sitting on his lap.’

‘Lisa’s sat on a lot of things.’

‘When I first saw him, I thought he looked a bit like a pirate.’

‘What? Syphilitic and with an eyepatch and a hook?’

‘No, idiot. Like he just needed an earring to be a bit, naughty, you know.

But then he’s also slightly dorkish, not in a train spotter way, just very enthusiastic about everything. And considerate too - he stuffed up his audition on purpose because he didn’t want to put the other men’s noses out of joint.’

‘Heathen! Doesn’t he know the most important rule of acting is to kick the competition to the floor? So... let me see... he’ll be playing Sebastian, I guess, whether he wants to or not? That’s Lisa scuppered: tell her Viola can’t shag her own brother.’

The idea of Lisa doing anything to Matt Harper made Jennifer stop before saying, ‘He seems a bit detached at times, as if there’s something disturbing him and he can’t quite hide it.’

There was a groan from Cressida. ‘Oh no, not a tortured soul with brown eyes, they’re soooooo hard to resist. He sounds almost too good to be true.

Where did you say he came from?’

Jennifer didn’t miss the change in Cressida’s tone. ‘I’ve checked him out already, Cress. Don’t worry. He’s written two little books on the West Country. Lives in Bristol now.’

‘OK... OK, as long as you’ve looked him up, done a bit of digging. So...you fancy him and I’m guessing that’s disturbing for you as that hasn’t happened since the accident.’

Jennifer nodded.

‘Jen, if you’re nodding you have to tell me.’

‘Yes.’

When Cressida spoke again, Jennifer sensed she was going carefully, like a person carrying a large piece of delicate china over a pebbly beach. ‘Jen... about this Matt Harper...will you promise me something?’

Jennifer started to slide under the duvet.

‘Will you promise me that you won’t decide, right from the start, that he’s not going to be interested in you? Don’t let the fact that you’re unsettled morph into you somehow feeling...inadequate.’ Jennifer had almost heard the big breath Cress had taken before saying that last word, the word that had got the piece of delicate china safely over the pebbles.

*Easier said than done, Cress.*

‘Promise me, Jen?’ Cress repeated.

‘I promise... but, Cress, it doesn’t matter anyway. He’s got a girlfriend.’

‘They can fall off their perches.’

*And then men normally trade up.*

‘All right, I promise, O Wise One, not to write the script for this beforehand. I will lust after him and see what happens.’

When Cress had rung off because, as she put it ‘Beelzebub in a leotard’, had just turned up for her fitness training session, Jen pulled the duvet right up over her head. That conversation had been like having a tooth extracted. And she wasn’t sure she’d been entirely truthful about seeing where it led with Matt Harper because she already knew: the exciting, all-singing, all-dancing destination of friendship. Laughy, jokey, conversational friendship, when what you really wanted was to put your hand on someone’s bare chest and feel what you did to their heart.

