

THE FIRST DATE

Marley fiddled with the napkin and glanced around, pushing down the nerves bubbling in her stomach.

First dates were exhausting, and awkward, and so utterly terrifying. Even if you had a good time, it was hard to relax and, to be honest, she hadn't had many that involved a good time. At least not for her. She'd had plenty where her date had enjoyed himself thoroughly, knocking back lager as if the restaurant was about to run out of booze. But no, on balance, she'd definitely had more bad dates than good ones. Yet, she kept going. She just wished she could skip forward to the third or fourth date where the nerves were less, the small-talk easier and you didn't have to worry about having spinach in your teeth. Mental note, don't eat anything with spinach in.

Nerves fizzed again and she checked her watch. Kye was late.

Resisting the urge to drum her fingernails on the table, she checked her reflection in the window and tidied her hair.

Ten minutes.

A horrible thought that he might not turn up niggled in her brain and she sipped the free water the waiter had delivered to her table.

She and Kye had met briefly at a mutual friend's party, and he'd asked her out then and there. Marley had been wildly flattered because not only was he handsome, he'd also been kind, funny and intelligent. It had proved a rare combination lately.

The last date she'd been on had been an exercise in endurance. She'd never known it was possible for someone to chew their food so thoroughly or with such determination. Watching every mouthful had been torture and she'd almost bailed halfway through when he got onto the subject of women's careers (which he clearly didn't approve of). It had only been the rather excellent pizza that had kept her glued to the spot and happily, her mouth closed.

Marley had high hopes of this date though. Kye had made her laugh and seemed one of the nicest guys she'd met in a long time. But where was he?

At the party, he'd seemed the punctual sort with his cute glasses and shirt and sweater combo. Not to mention his mop of curly black hair. A sigh escaped from her lips, and she distracted herself by nibbling on a breadstick. Thank God for breadsticks. Her stomach grumbled loudly, and she demolished a second. If Kye didn't turn up soon, she'll have eaten the lot.

After half an hour, annoyance began to mount as the other diners stared at her pityingly. Her stomach was now making very odd noises and she felt slightly sick with hunger, frustration and disappointment.

Suddenly, the restaurant door burst open and Kye rushed in. He seemed flustered but smoothed back his hair as he took a seat. 'Sorry.' He waved his hands in the air. 'Sorry I'm late.'

'That's okay,' Marley replied, because what else could she say.

'Haven't you ordered a drink?' he asked, eyeing her glass of water.

'No, I thought it'd more polite to wait for you.'

Without replying, he signalled to a waiter and ordered a beer for himself and asked her what she wanted. Marley ordered a glass of white wine and tried to relax, but when he didn't even thank the waiter, her frustration at how the night was turning out, escalated. As a rule, she didn't like people who couldn't be bothered to thank waiters or baristas. It was unnecessarily rude as far as she was concerned and a definite no in her book. She hadn't put Kye down as the not thanking sort and chewed the inside of her cheek in annoyance.

'So,' she began, trying to start the date again. 'How—'

'You will not believe the amount of traffic I had to face to get here. I'd ordered a taxi and it didn't show up, so then I had to sort out another.'

'Right, well—'

'And then he was late as well, and I was absolutely frantic.'

Had he realised he'd spoken over her twice? Did he know how rude that was? Marley bit back her anger and analysed the menu. Who was this man in front of her? He couldn't have been more different to the kind, funny guy she'd met at the party. Had that been an act? She didn't think so, but she couldn't match this version with the other. Kye's face was quite red, and she decided to give it a little more time. Perhaps he was just nervous or embarrassed. Normally it was her who was the anxious one who couldn't stop talking.

When he finished telling her about his journey, she said, 'Have you decided what you'd like to order? I think I'll have—'

'You should have the mushrooms al forno. They're gorgeous. I had them here on my last date and—'

'Your last date?' she said, unable to keep the surprise from her voice. It wasn't that she hadn't expected him to have dated, but more that there was an unwritten rule that you

don't talk about previous dates when you're with the new one. She thought everyone knew that? Kye brushed his hand back through his hair. Was he annoyed at her interruption? This wasn't going well at all. In fact, it was fast turning into one of the most disastrous dates she'd ever been on. 'Actually, I was going to have the bruschetta, thanks. What about you?'

He put the menu down. 'Mushrooms for me. Like I said, they're amazing.'

Luckily, the waiter came over and offered a few moments respite while they ordered. How had she got Kye so wrong? She was sure he'd have been the type to arrive at the restaurant first, pull her chair out for her and not tell her what she should be ordering. And she'd worn her best dress tonight. What a waste of a dress. At least if she didn't order desert, she could get away sooner. She could always grab a bar of chocolate from the supermarket on her way home. That might go some way to stemming her disappointment.

Once the waiter had gone, she tried again to start a conversation. After all, she had to get through starters and a main first. 'What is it you do again, Kye? Lecturer, wasn't it?'

'That's right.'

Though she waited for him to elaborate he seemed disinclined to say anymore. 'What do you lecture on?'

'History.'

'That's interesting,' she replied genuinely. She loved history.

Kye's head lifted a little. 'Really?'

'Yes. What do you specialise in?'

'The First World War.'

'Wow, that's one of my favourite periods to study. It's so interesting.'

Another silence descended and Marley had a glimpse of the man she'd met at the party. The kind, funny, intelligent one. But then he fiddled with his napkin, unspeaking and Marley took a deep breath. Was he bored? Did he think she was boring? Is that why he was acting this way? After all, he hadn't even asked what she did for a living.

'I'm an accountant,' she offered. 'It's not very interesting, but—'

Just then his phone rang and Kye answered it before she could say anymore. 'Hello? Right, that's brilliant. Wow! Amazing. Totally amazing. I'm thrilled. Well done, you!'

As his conversation continued, the waiter delivered their food. Kye kept talking and unsure what else to do, (and annoyed he was being such an idiot) Marley began to eat hers. She was, after all, starving and if she drank any more wine on an empty stomach she was likely to keel over as soon as she stood up. By the time she'd finished eating her bruschetta, he was still saying how brilliant and amazing everything was into his phone, his food barely touched.

That was enough for Marley. She'd been patient enough, but she wasn't going to sit here any longer. She blew out the romantic tea-light in the centre of the table, stood up and picked up her bag, finding her wallet to pay her half of the bill. She'd ask the waiter to put her food in a takeaway box and she could eat it at home in front of the telly in her pyjamas. Right now, that was a much more attractive prospect than sitting her watching Kye chat away on his mobile.

Seeing her move, he hurriedly hung up and stood. 'Sorry, I've got to go. I'll speak to you tomorrow. What's happening?' he asked Marley, as if it wasn't clear what her intentions were. 'What did I do?'

Seeing his sappy, shocked expression, she softened for a moment, but then she remembered being talked over, told what to order and generally ignored all evening. 'Listen

Kye, I'm sure you're a really nice man, but I didn't agree to this date so you could arrive half an hour late and spend the whole time ranting about your journey or on your phone talking to someone else.' He stared at her, mouth hanging open. 'So, I think we should just leave it there. I'm going to get my food to take away and I hope you have a nice life.' She'd actually meant that last remark nicely, but it had come out rather sarcastically.

Kye flopped back down in his chair looking crestfallen. 'I've really mucked this up, haven't I?' The sadness in his voice took her by surprise. 'I'm so bad at first dates. They're so awkward and nerve-wracking. I wish we could just skip straight to like the third or fourth date where you feel so much more comfortable and you've got all the nervy getting to know you bit out of the way.'

Hearing her own thoughts spoken back to her made Marley paused.

'I'm sorry,' Kye continued. 'I was so looking forward to meeting you again.'

'You were?'

'Yes! You're funny, smart, beautiful.' He blushed as he said this and Marley's stomach fizzed. 'It's just all gone wrong today. That call...that was my brother-in-law. My sister went into labour today. She's just had the baby. A boy.' His face glowed with pride. 'I was in such a spin I didn't know what to do. And I didn't mean to tell you what to eat. I was just trying to impress you by recommending something, but it came out wrong. And as soon as I mentioned my previous date I knew I'd said the wrong thing. The trouble is, I don't actually date much, and that last date was such a disaster I was hoping to make you laugh. I was going to tell you how she talked over me all the time and when I started talking about my job and history, she palled and ran to the loo. Ten minutes later she got a phone call and left. I'm guessing she made an emergency getaway call on the toilet. Perhaps I should go and you can continue your meal in peace?'

Marley placed her bag back on the floor and sat down again. She was finally seeing the shy, sweet man she'd met at the party, and it did sound like he'd had a bit of a day. He watched her, hopefully.

'Congratulations on becoming an uncle.' He smiled and her insides somersaulted. 'Listen, why don't we try and start the date again?'

'Really?'

'Why not?' Perhaps she'd been too hasty in judging the situation.

The waiter delivered their mains and attempted to collect his uneaten mushrooms. 'Don't worry,' Kye said, smiling at the waiter. 'I'll eat those now if that's okay?'

'Of course, sir' he answered, a little bemused.

'Thank you.'

Marley smiled. So she hadn't been wrong about him after all. Perhaps he was just as nervous of first dates as she was.

'Shall I re-light the candle?' asked the waiter before he left.

Kye looked at Marley. 'Yes, please,' she answered, finally relaxing.

Sometimes you had to give things a second chance to see if they'd work out or not and she had a sneaking suspicion that this time it would definitely be worth it.

THE END