

*DING!*

"That's it for tonight everyone! Thanks for coming out to Speed Dating! Feel free to exchange numbers with anyone you clicked with, and if you were unsuccessful, we're here same time next week!" With that, the emcee clicked off the mic and descended the stage into the crowd of muttering bachelors and bachelorettes. Sighing, Jo pushed herself out of her seat and began to quickly advance to the door. She was abruptly stopped by a tall, heavysset man. "Oi, Jenny!"

She bit back a retort. "Hi, Lester. What's up?"

"I think we really had a special connection tonight...I want to explore this. Take things further."

He pressed a piece of paper into her hand. It felt sticky. She looked down and realized his palm was drenched in sweat. "Call me sometime, yeah?"

She forced her mouth into a wry smile. "Sure. Excuse me, I'm going to be late for my appointment." "Eh? But it's 10pm!" She didn't respond and burst into the lobby. She threw the paper into the nearest trashcan, ducked into the restroom to wash her hands several times, and then quickly departed.

It was a warm night, odd for the winter. The heat didn't help Jo gather her thoughts. As she walked along the quiet streets she reflected on what was likely the worst decision of her life. It had been a month since Anya suggested these speed dating events. 4 nights of agony once a week repeating the same surface level conversation with a different man or woman somehow more desperate than she was. She tried not to be too critical. If she was going to do this, she might as well try. But it felt like a looming curse, with every potential partner being more pathetic than the previous. Bad odor, concerning hobbies, brazen fetishes...each person seemed to have something distinctly wrong. Was this what she had come to? Were these the people she would have to settle for? Surely there had to be something better, *someone* better, who made her feel okay with the world, who made her feel-

"WATCH OUT!"

Her thoughts were interrupted as she felt herself yanked backwards. She opened her mouth to yell but was silenced by the car that sped past her, mere inches from her face. She looked down and saw the worn paint of a zebra crossing. She had almost walked blindly into the street.

"Are you okay, love?"

She couldn't even turn around before melting. That *voice*. It wasn't one she knew yet it felt so familiar, so safe. Warm and smooth, gliding across her ears and into her soul like butter in a sauna. She couldn't help herself and sighed in bliss. Then she came to her senses and turned around blushing. "I'm so sorry, tonight's been awfully strange and horrible for so many reasons and I guess I wasn't paying attention and I just-"

She felt herself be pulled into a hug. The embrace was tight but not suffocating. She felt protected, cherished, if only for a moment, and let herself be hugged by this stranger. Every thought in her mind was SCREAMING about how dangerous this was but somehow...she felt okay. For the first time all night, she felt a small sense of happiness. After what felt like decades but was surely less than a minute, she felt the embrace loosen and she pulled away to meet this entrancing man.

"You just seemed like you needed that. I'm James."

"Jo...and thank you. You likely just saved my life."

He flashed her a smile. "Just call me an angel then."

Her knees almost buckled. That voice was intoxicating. She fought back the urge to say "Please talk forever," and instead forced out the words. "Care for a cuppa?"

He laughed. It was the most perfect laugh to ever bless her ears. "Not this late I'm afraid. I appreciate your confidence, however. Perhaps tomorrow? I live just across the street here."

Slowly she nodded, not registering that he was agreeing to a date...that she had just initiated.

She felt another piece of paper pressed into her hand but it was a lot less sticky. This man, this crazy wonderful stranger, had no doubts or fears in his mind. "See you tomorrow then. Sally's Kettle, 10am?"

"Right. Yes. Sure. I mean, yes! Absolutely!" She couldn't stifle her laugh. He laughed at her laughing. It made her laugh harder.

"You are a delightful person. I will see you then, Jo." Giving her a quick wink, he crossed the street and left Jo dazed, excited...and completely and utterly smitten.