

**The
Man
of
Her
Dreams**

SARRA MANNING

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I

The last Saturday in February, 2022

Esme Strange hated getting up early. She especially hated getting up early on a Saturday morning.

Sunday mornings were reserved for a legendary lie-in. Esme would set her phone to 'do not disturb' and refuse to surface much before noon.

Whereas on Saturdays, she had things to do and places to be: a yoga class at the local church hall or walking her elderly neighbours' equally elderly pug. Meeting friends for a stroll on Hampstead Heath, then lingering over a long brunch and the papers at one of the many cafes in NW3 and NW5 that did a decent shakshuka. A trip to the local farmers' market, where Esme would have every intention of buying in-season organic vegetables and cold-pressed sunflower oil but would always end up with quite a lot of cake and cheese. None of those wholesome activities meant she had to stir much before nine.

But this Saturday was different. When Esme had got up for her usual four in the morning wee, knowing that she had only another two and a half hours in bed had made it impossible to get back to sleep. Even though she'd set her old-fashioned alarm clock and a series of alarms on her phone she was lying in the dark, listening as the seconds ticked by, occasionally sitting up so she could grab her pillow, turn it over, thump it and rest her head on the newly cool surface.

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Esme tried a little trick she'd learned from a sleep therapist whom she'd interviewed back in her days as a magazine journalist. She worked her way through the alphabet, naming vegetables as she went. She started strong with artichokes, asparagus and arugula but by the time she reached l for lettuce, Esme got sidetracked as she pondered whether lima beans were vegetables or legumes. Though in French, of course, legume was the collective word for vegetables and oh my goodness, she was never going to get back to sleep.

There was nothing else for it but to start rifling through what she thought of as her rich inner life Rolodex to come up with an agreeable little fantasy to take her mind off things and lull her back to sleep.

Her current top three fantasies, the ones she had in daily rotation, were, in no particular order:

Esme and Harry Styles on a yacht moored off the coast of Southern Tuscany. Harry looking lean and foxy despite his shit tattoos, with a devilish glint in his eyes when Esme approached him. She was svelte and lightly but attractively tanned in high-waisted navy bikini bottoms and a matching bikini top, her hair cascading down her back in artfully tousled beach curls. Esme dismissed this one before she and Harry could even embrace because thinking about being on the open water would make her want to get up for another wee.

Then there was the one where she was a high-ranking witch on the run from dark forces within MI5, ably assisted by her really good-looking bagman, who resembled vintage Tom Hiddleston before Taylor Swift ruined him. It was a fantasy that had persisted through various permutations for decades and a rewatch of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* over Christmas had brought it back to the fore. But Esme was trying for a sleepy vibe, which wouldn't be achieved if she

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were having to wreak complicated magic on a troop of black ops SAS types.

There was only one option. Her favourite fantasy. Number one with a bullet. She settled back under the covers with a happy little sigh and conjured up the imaginary boyfriend who was never that far away from her thoughts.

‘Christ, woman, stop wriggling,’ rumbled a voice in her ear. ‘Go back to sleep.’

‘Easy enough for you to say,’ Esme pointed out.

‘Not that easy when you’re doing a good impersonation of a whirling dervish.’ He kissed the side of her neck, gently scraping her skin with his teeth, and now Esme wanted to squirm in a way that had absolutely nothing to do with her insomnia. That was the thing with having an overactive imagination. It often overruled the sensible bit of her brain. She’d wanted to go back to sleep and yet now she was wanting something else entirely.

‘It’s far too early for *that*,’ she murmured as one of his hands snaked into her pyjama bottoms and began to trace figures of eight against her belly.

‘Are you sure?’

‘I haven’t got time.’

Esme opened one eye to confirm that it was five minutes since she last opened one eye. Yet, somehow it was now only ten minutes before her alarms were due to go off. How could that be? She was sure she had at least another hour of staying in her warm, cosy bed.

‘I don’t need long to get you off,’ he drawled in her ear, then bit down on the plumpness of her earlobe. When he used his teeth, God, it made Esme shudder. In a good way. In a very good way.

‘You’ll get me all messy,’ she said, even as she arched against him.

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‘But you’re going to have a shower anyway so I might as well make a mess of you first, sweet girl.’

Esme sighed, shut her eyes again. Just for a moment. His touch was causing havoc. Maybe if she was really quick . . .

‘Fuck me!’

Her alarm clock clanged into life, the first of her phone alarms following close behind, and Esme jerked fully awake, her heart pounding. She groped for the clock on the bedside table, then for her mobile phone.

Her dozy, dreamy, not-quite-in-the-land-of-the-living fugue state was gone. She was at one with reality. Which meant that she was alone. His arm was her own arm curled round her stomach. It had been her hand loosely tucked into the waistband of her pyjama bottoms, not his. The rumbly voice in her ear provided by her own fevered imaginings.

Then the second alarm on her phone beeped urgently and with a groan Esme forced herself upright and, with an anticipatory shudder, pulled back her duvet.

Twenty minutes later, Esme was racing down the stairs from her little attic sanctuary with its sloping ceilings. It was on the fourth floor of a mansion block a stone’s throw from Parliament Hill Fields. Literally. If Esme stood at the southern end of her road with a large pebble in her hand, and if she could actually throw with any degree of accuracy, it would land with a triumphant splash in the middle of the Lido.

She reached the ground floor, wrenched open the door that led to the basement and tore down the steps to retrieve her bike from her tiny storage space.

There wasn’t another soul in sight on her street full of imposing Victorian edifices, described by the late, legendary poet, Sir John Betjeman as ‘red brick gloom’ because he’d been born in one of them. A shameless snob, he’d famously

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declared himself 'glad that I did not live in Gospel Oak' even though Gospel Oak Station was another thing that Esme could hit with a stone, if she felt so inclined.

It was a chilly five-minute cycle down Highgate Road to her dentist in Kentish Town. Esme's body bowed against the bitter February winds, hanks of hair blowing in her face. The only good thing about cockcrow on a Saturday morning was Esme being spared the usual heavy traffic and exhaust fumes. All too soon, she was chaining up her bike and only five minutes late for her dental appointment.

'You are an absolute piss-taker,' said Sunil, as Esme arranged herself in his chair. She'd been coming to the same dentist surgery since Sunny's father had been in charge and Sunny was a nervous dental school graduate only allowed to operate the suction machine. 'I opened early to fit you in and you're not even on time.'

'I'm sorry. Not sure how that happened,' Esme said as Sunny handed her a very attractive pair of orange-tinted glasses to shield her eyes. 'I think maybe subconsciously I didn't want to be on time for my own torture.'

'You'll be fine,' Sunny assured her. 'Do you want numbing gel before I give you the anaesthetic?'

'Yes please, very much so,' Esme said. She was here at such an ungodly hour to have a wisdom tooth out. It was of no use to anyone and shunted right up against her back molar, where it kept causing gum infection and intense jaw ache. 'I'm not going to be brave. I have a *really* low pain threshold.'

'Look, Esme, maybe you should go to hospital and have a general anaesthetic . . .'

'No, let's get it over and done with. Just yank it out!' Esme gave Sunny a tremulous smile, which was the last thing she'd

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do with her mouth that didn't cause her untold agony for the next forty-eight hours. 'How bad can it be?'

Fifteen minutes later, even after numbing gel and Novocaine, Esme wished like she'd never wished for anything before for a lovely general anaesthetic, which would render her unconscious.

That was right about the time that Sunny had one hand braced on the countertop to get purchase, the other hand gripping some fucking medieval instrument of torture that was wedged deep in her mouth.

He had to *break* the tooth to get it out – the roots were embedded – and it was very traumatic. Very, very bloody. Esme could hardly get out of the chair because her muscles had been locked rigid for the last half hour.

Finally, she was standing on her own two feet as Sunny gave her a long lecture about not eating or drinking for the next couple of hours, and not getting something called dry socket, which sounded absolutely horrific.

'Go to the chemist, don't fanny about with paracetamol or ibuprofen, get co-codamol; it's got codeine in it. Take it, go back to bed.'

'Won't I be all right now that the bleeding has stopped?' Esme asked thickly as the hurty part of her mouth was still thankfully numb.

Sunil shook his head pityingly. 'Oh sweet summer child.'

'It's just that I'm going out tonight,' Esme said as she followed Sunny out to the reception area.

'It's good to have goals,' Sunil agreed as his receptionist handed Esme an invoice that made her want to cry all over again. 'When you take your tablets, remember no rinsing. No spitting. You really do not want dry socket. In fact, just try and avoid doing anything with that side of your mouth for the

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rest of the weekend and, it should go without saying but I'm going to say it anyway, absolutely no alcohol.'

'I can see that I'm in for a brilliant evening,' Esme said forlornly as she tapped her PIN into the card reader.

At least her legs weren't wobbling anymore by the time she found a chemist that was open at such a godforsaken hour. As instructed, she bought a box of co-codamol, though the pharmacist wouldn't relinquish them without an interrogation and a dire warning that if Esme took them for more than three days in a row, she'd end up constipated. Fun times!

'I doubt I'll even need them,' Esme declared, because now she was over the initial trauma she felt surprisingly fine.

So fine that, after cycling back up Highgate Road, instead of going straight to bed as planned Esme made an unscheduled stop at the farmers' market, which was slowly coming to life.

It was impossible to go more than a few metres without bumping into someone she knew. Esme had lived in and around the area for over half her life so, within the space of ten minutes, she said hello to her old art teacher from school, cooed over the newly hatched twins of a woman from her yoga class, waved at assorted neighbours and hugged her friends Marion and Jacinta, who lived on the ground floor of her block with their elderly pug, Buster, who also wheezed a greeting.

'I feel like my mouth is twice its normal size,' she said to Marion as they stood in a shaft of weak winter sunlight while Jacinta queued for sausages. 'Do I sound weird? Am I dribbling?'

'You sound perfectly all right to me, but I would get home before the anaesthetic wears off,' Marion advised. 'And I'd steer clear of sourdough bread. I lost a crown from a piece of sourdough toast.'

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‘Good advice. Though I feel much better than I thought I would. I might even go to yoga later,’ Esme said, which made Marion snort like a little dragon.

‘Ah, the optimism of youth!’ she said, though Esme was thirty-three and didn’t feel very youthful. In fact, she’d started making a strange huffing sound when she got up if she’d been sitting down for too long. Which was one of the reasons why she was making such a determined effort to go to yoga after booking a block of lessons.

After she said goodbye to Marion, Esme didn’t even bother with the pretence of sizing up a few organic courgettes but made a beeline for her favourite stall, where she bought two slices of their carrot cake with lemon mascarpone icing. She deserved cake, even if she wasn’t allowed to eat it for at least another two hours.

Before a mug of tea and cake, she was definitely going to her yoga class, Esme decided as she threaded her bike through the crowds of people.

But by the time Esme got home, put her bike away then climbed the stairs up to her flat, the anaesthetic was wearing off.

She’d been so worried about the bleeding, then potentially missing yoga, that she’d forgotten about the pain. The fucking excruciating pain, like someone had punched her violently and repeatedly in the face.

What an idiot she was!

Esme pulled off her jeans and jumper and got back into bed. Then she had to dry swallow two co-codamol because she was terrified of taking even one sip of water in case she washed away the scabs forming in her mouth wound.

Could this day get any worse? Esme doubted it.

It was decidedly one of the worst Saturdays that Esme could remember. A monotonous cycle of: try to get some sleep. Wake up in pain. Dry swallow more pills. Try to get some sleep. Repeat to fade.

At 5 p.m. she gave it up as a bad job. After staggering to the bathroom to pee, she steeled herself to look in the mirror.

Sunny had warned her that she might end up with a black eye from all the tugging and yanking. Esme had been spared that, but her face was swollen and bruised, and all she wanted to do was stay home. Make a cave of cushions and blankets and throws on her sofa. A nice true crime documentary about a serial killer on Netflix. Maybe choke down some soup.

She headed back to her bedroom to retrieve her phone. There was a message from her best friend Lyndsey checking to see that Esme hadn't bled out on the dentist's chair. But mostly, while she'd fitfully slept, the Seren Hen WhatsApp group had been busy. Very busy indeed.

Seren Dipity

Don't forget to bring your crystals tonight, goddesses! Hope you all remembered to recharge them during last night's full moon.

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Kemi Udo

Crystals fully loaded. Can't wait!

Allegra Dickenson

Might have to forgo the clubbing. We're having lunch with Oliver's godfather tomorrow and I'd rather not do that with a hangover.

Seren Dipity

Completely understand, Ally. But this is meant to be good vibes only. Don't harsh the mellow.

Muffin Spencer

Coming in hot with an attitude of gratitude. Tonight is going to be lit.

Seren Dipity

Esme, why are you not replying?

Seren Dipity

Esme, where are you?

Seren Dipity

Esme, stop being such a Leo!

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Esme Strange

Sorry, guys! Had my wisdom tooth out but I'm back in action and raring to go! Wouldn't miss it for the world! Really looking forward to it! Can't wait to see you all! X

'Fuck my actual life,' Esme muttered, which made her mouth hurt even more.

She was under no illusions – if she didn't attend this hen do, then Seren would hunt her down like a dog. They'd actually had a hen party back in November 2019, a weekend at the Soho Farmhouse, which had nearly bankrupted Esme. Then the April wedding had been postponed because of Covid. There'd been a hen Zoom the night before the wedding that never was, where they'd all helplessly watched Seren cry while offering platitudes.

Since that unhappy unoccasion, Seren and Isaac had got married twice ahead of their rescheduled 'official' wedding this coming Saturday. There'd been a legally binding civil service at Marylebone Registry Office between lockdowns with very few guests. Then a second, three-day wedding celebration in Lagos with all of Isaac's extended family last summer. Now third time was the charm, though, as far as Esme was concerned, one wedding was bad enough, two was foolish and three was absolutely batshit insane.

As was having a second full hen party, especially one which involved the crystals Seren always gifted for Christmas and birthday parties; Esme would have much preferred Liberty vouchers.

Esme wasted valuable time searching for said crystals, which were scattered around her tiny flat. Seren had an elephantine

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memory and would know at once if Esme was missing any crystals, such as the hunk of black obsidian she'd received last Christmas with a note that read, 'This will hopefully balance some of your negative energy.'

Eventually Esme assembled a respectable pile of crystals, which she dumped into a sink of hot water and Fairy Liquid so they could soak while she had a wardrobe panic.

The dress code was 'granola glam', though Esme didn't really know what that meant. She opted for comfy over stylish: black velvet corduroy jumpsuit with a black and red polka dot long-sleeved tee underneath. No heels because, since the pandemic, her feet refused to be squashed into shoes that caused them pain. It had been hard enough to transition back into clothes that didn't come with an elasticated waistband as standard. Even bending down to put on socks and trainers put pressure on Esme's battered face.

She then attempted to hide the horrors of her wisdom tooth extraction with a lot of make-up but with very little success. Lipstick, even the lightest lip gloss, wasn't going to happen. Her pasty face was red and swollen, and now it looked as if her left eye was starting to bruise. Her body didn't feel much better. Like Allegra, Esme decided that she'd try and bow out early from the evening's festivities. Then, as if she'd summoned up an evil spirit, there was a buzz on the intercom.

'Why aren't you down here waiting for me? You're not even ready, are you?' enquired the querulous tones of Esme's older sister Allegra, who preferred to forgo the social niceties and just get right down to business.

'Almost ready. Come up.' Talking was definitely going to be a problem this evening.

There was a hiss of annoyance. 'I'm not climbing all those stairs in heels. Come down. And be quick, it's bloody freezing.'

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Esme stuffed her still damp crystals into her handbag and, with heavy tread and heavy heart, mentally prepared herself for what was going to be a night for the ages.

Her heart grew even heavier when she opened the street door. Allegra had interpreted ‘granola glam’ to mean a gorgeously soft and expensive-looking camel coat, little black dress and ridiculously high black suede heels, which had to be responsible for the petulant expression on her face. An expression that Esme knew only too well and which meant that Allegra was absolutely determined not to have a good time tonight.

There were eleven years and an ocean between them. The last thing Allegra had wanted just as she’d started secondary school was a baby sister. No longer was she an only child, plus here was undeniable proof that her constantly warring parents had actually stopped arguing long enough to have sex.

When they were growing up, Esme had imagined that, one day, they might become friends. She’d idolised Allegra, who seemed infinitely glamorous because she had lovely joined-up handwriting, was allowed to stay up very, very late, wore make-up and had boyfriends. Allegra was a far more inspirational role model than their mother Debbie, who lived in paint-splattered dungarees and was forever trying to teach Esme how to change a plug or unscrew a U-bend. Skills which would come in pretty handy in later life but not when Esme was eight and far more interested in writing elaborate stories where she was the sixth and most talented member of the Spice Girls.

Esme had always hoped that Allegra might realise that there was more to her little sister than a constant thorn in her side. Sadly, that had never come to pass and, in the end, Esme had stopped trying to make Allegra love her.

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‘You all right?’ Esme asked, brushing past Allegra. They’d never been a family of huggers or kissers and besides, Esme’s mouth was too sore to even think about air kissing.

‘Why can you never be on time?’ Allegra asked as she fell into step with Esme. ‘It’s so arrogant. You assume that your life is more important than mine and that I have nothing better to do than wait for you.’

Esme made a big show of pulling her phone out of the pocket of her squashy faux fur. ‘Oh my God, I’m a whole two minutes late. Call the police!’

She waited for Allegra to ask her how the dentist had gone. Was she in a lot of pain? And actually, it was very brave of Esme to soldier on. But . . . tumbleweed.

Allegra sniffed. ‘Anyway, now that you’re *finally* here, I’ll order an Addison Lee.’

‘I’m not going halves on a car when the bus will literally take us door to door,’ Esme said, gesturing at the bus stop, which had come into view as they stepped out onto Highgate Road.

‘But hardly anyone wears a mask on the bus and it’s Saturday night, it’ll be really crowded . . .’

‘We’ll be wearing masks and we’ll crack open a window,’ Esme countered, though she doubted that Allegra would expect her to chip in for the car. Even so, it would be just one more thing that Allegra would hold over her. Yet more proof that Esme was an agent of chaos who couldn’t look after herself properly. ‘I’m not getting a car. End of.’

‘Fine!’

‘Fine!’

They crossed over the road, then waited at the bus stop in a silence that grew more tense until Allegra couldn’t bear it any longer.

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‘You might have made more of an effort, Esme. A jumpsuit and trainers!’

‘These trainers were very expensive.’ It was Esme’s turn to cast a carefully cultivated dismissive glance at her sister. ‘Anyway, how is what you’re wearing granola glam?’

Allegra put a beautifully manicured hand to her heart, her nails a perfectly understated shade that was somewhere between pink and beige, the diamonds on her engagement and wedding rings glinting from the glow of the streetlights. ‘I’ve worn everything several times before so technically all my clothes are recycled.’

‘Whatever.’ The cold was making Esme’s mouth hurt even more or maybe it was the way she was clenching everything because Allegra was being even more annoying than usual.

‘Have you even combed your hair?’ Allegra asked as the bus came into view. Instead of answering her, Esme pulled her Air-Pods from her coat pocket and stuck them in her ears, but still managed to hear the indignant huffing noise that Allegra made.

It was a short trip into town. Ordinarily, Esme liked the route, which took them along the outer edge of Regent’s Park and the white stucco Nash terraces, but it was too dark to really see anything and every time someone moved past them to get on or off the bus, Allegra drew herself in and turned her head away like they were all riddled with Covid.

Allegra had had Covid before Christmas, and not even a bad case of it, so Esme didn’t know what the theatrics were for.

They still weren’t speaking when they got off the bus at Oxford Circus and crossed over Oxford Street.

‘Are you OK to walk to Soho?’ Esme asked in a vaguely conciliatory tone as she looked down at Allegra’s shoes, which had to be killing her by now.

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‘I suppose.’ Allegra pulled a face but then she leaned in towards Esme and nudged her with an elbow. ‘Tonight is going to be awful. You’re the creative one; can’t you think of some excuse to get us out of this? Preferably in the next five minutes?’

Esme shrugged helplessly. ‘I got nothing. Sorry.’

Allegra straightened her shoulders. She was half a head taller than Esme but they still looked unmistakably like sisters. They had the same delicate features: arched brows and prominent cheekbones softened by wide-spaced blue eyes. But Allegra had their father’s aquiline nose before it had grown red and bulbous from all the booze and Esme had a small pouty mouth while Allegra had full generous lips, though they were looking pretty tight right now.

They even had the same fine neither-here-nor-there hair that wasn’t straight or curly, but wavy with a tendency to frizz. It wasn’t blond or brown either but some indeterminate in-between shade, darker in winter then lighter in summer. Of course now Allegra could afford expensive straightening treatments and every six weeks she got her highlights and her roots done, whereas Esme would get a half head of highlights sometime before Christmas and by now, in late February, they’d mostly grown out and faded.

Allegra pushed back a strand of her glossy hair with an impatient hand. ‘It’s just ridiculous. A second hen night before the *third* wedding. Who does Seren think she is? Meghan bloody Markle?’

‘She’s your sister-in-law. You married into the Dickenson family,’ Esme helpfully pointed out. ‘I’m just Dickenson adjacent, but I’m here, I’ve made an effort . . .’

‘It doesn’t look like you’ve made an effort,’ Allegra sniped.

‘I had my wisdom tooth out this morning and I feel like death warmed over but I’m going to this hen and I’m going

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to pretend that I'm happy to be there because that will make Seren happy and you're going to do the same.' It was Esme's turn to nudge her sister. 'What did Gran always say when we had to do something we really didn't want to?'

Allegra smiled reluctantly. 'Tits and teeth, girls. Tits and teeth.'

Esme stuck out her chest and bared her poor aching teeth in a vague approximation of a smile. 'It's one evening out of our entire lives. We can do one evening, Ally.'

'I suppose so,' Allegra agreed as they began to walk down Carnaby Street. 'And in an hour or so, your mouth will be hurting . . .'

'My mouth really is hurting . . .'

'Imagine how much more painful it will be in an hour or so,' Allegra said cheerfully. 'So you'll have to go and I'll come with you just to make sure you're all right. Deal?'

Esme was tempted to point out that Allegra hadn't cared how much pain she was in until she'd realised that she could use her little sister's agony to her own advantage. Then again, she and Allegra were always at their best when they had a mutual enemy. 'All right, deal. But you owe me one.'

'I'm sure if you counted up all the favours I've done you over the years you'd find that actually you owe me, but fine, OK, I owe you one,' Allegra said, as they arrived at their destination.