

I

This isn't happening.

'I'm serious,' Alex is saying, except that he's had a few drinks so it comes out more like 'I'm sherioush', which almost makes me laugh, but then I remember the awful melodrama that I've somehow found myself starring in.

'You're drunk,' I say, getting up from the sofa to put more physical space between us. 'You should go to bed.'

Alex stands up and makes a move towards me. 'Just because I've had a couple doesn't mean that what I'm saying isn't true. It just means I've finally got the courage to say it. I love you, Rebecca. I always have.'

Oh God. There it is again, that statement that makes my stomach turn over and not in a good I've-been-waiting-for-you-to-say-that kind of way. More like I could be sick from a combination of the wine and the very idea that Alex is saying these things. Daniel, my husband, is asleep, by the way, upstairs in our bedroom. Why wouldn't he be? It's one in the morning and he's never had any reason to worry about leaving Alex and me alone together. Until now. Suddenly I'm angry with Alex. It's bad enough that he could be saying this at all, but with Daniel – the evidence if any was needed that I'm not available to be propositioned – asleep above our heads? Sweet, funny, clever Dan who has never been

anything but loyal to both of us. I decide that I want this conversation to end now.

'Alex, you're being ridiculous. It's late and we're drunk and you don't know what you're saying. Go to bed, OK?'

Alex leans forward, puts his hand on my arm. I shrug it away. 'Don't tell me you don't feel the same,' he says, and for a second I think, Is this my fault? Have I somehow allowed him to think this might be true? Did I catch his eye and hold his gaze for too long one night after I'd had a couple of drinks? And then I realize no, definitely not, because I have never for a moment in our twenty-year friendship thought about Alex as anything other than a friend. Fancying him would be like fancying my brother. It has literally never occurred to me.

I ought to let him down gently. He's been through a lot lately – all of his own making, but nonetheless – and he's obviously losing his mind, but I'm angry with him. How dare he read something into our relationship that simply isn't there? How dare he be disloyal to Dan like this?

'Absolutely not,' I say, slightly too loudly. 'You're my friend, Alex. I'm not in love with you. I couldn't . . . just the idea of it . . .'

OK, I tell myself, he must have got the point by now, but I can't stop. I want to punish him. 'It makes me feel sick. I mean, really, it's . . . perverse. God, I could never . . .'

Alex looks like he's sobered up in an instant. 'Fine,' he says curtly. 'I get it.'

He turns on his heel and walks out, and a few seconds later I hear the front door slam. For a moment I start to worry about where he's going to go at one in the morning and without his coat, which is still draped over the back of one of the chairs, but then I think that's his problem. He's a grown man; he can take care of himself.