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The Love Rectangle

I dream of the bonfire night when I first met Jamie. We watched the vibrant colours make a lot of noise in the sky. The air was cold and crisp. Jamie had gone to get a burger at some point and came back stuffing his face. I got a hot chocolate which tasted like hot water. It was cosy watching the fireworks, I enjoyed the small gestures. Jamie's hand enclosing mine. His arm wrapped around me and my head resting on his chest... well, except when he was stuffing his face with a burger, that is. The best moment was when I saw the flames reflected in his brown eyes. We had many more dates after that. His body... well, for a while it was just all mine. To hold. To absorb the warmth.

'Tessa? Tessa! We need to get up now.'

That deep but soft voice fills my ears and I sink into my pillow even more. I reach for his hand.

'Tessa, we haven't got time for that now.'

I open my eyes and smile at him sleepily.

'What's the hurry? You weren't in such a hurry last night.'

He sighs, running a hand through his ruffled hair.

'I've got something planned. We need to be up.'

I give him a teasing smile.

'Up where?'

He grabs my hand.

'Please just come.'

'OK, OK...'

Jamie hauls himself up off the bed and I admire the muscles in his shoulders as he walks towards the door. When he is out of sight, I sit there staring into space.

'Hurry up, Tess!'

I frown and get out of bed. I go out of the door and he is in the kitchen, fussing over pancake mixture. I creep up to him and put my arms around his waist.

'What's wrong, babe?'

He spins round to face me.

'Tess, for heaven's sake, you're supposed to be in the shower.'

I look at him.

'Since when did you become my Dad? What has changed so much since last night?'

'Get in the shower, Tess.'

I sigh and shrug my shoulders.

When I am in the shower, I use my favourite shower gel, the vanilla one and wash my hair with the herbal shampoo. I really don't understand that man today. I step out, my body steaming and sweet. I dry myself gently. I like to treat the showering and taking care of yourself therapeutically. Not like some people most days, rush, rush, rush...

I open the door, abandoning the towel and feeling the air on my bare skin, the softness of the carpet under my feet. When I get to our bedroom, I approach the chestnut wardrobe, wondering what I am going to wear on this beautiful autumn day. The black jeans work. So do the brown lace up boots. And so does

the blue top and the deep orange cardigan. I drag a brush through my wild black hair. I apply amber eyeshadow and mascara. I'm good to go.

When I arrive at the kitchen, the scene has changed. Jamie is looking very pleased with himself. Roses are placed in the middle of the table and he is serving a batch of pancakes between two plates. He douses the pancakes in syrup. He grins when he catches sight of me in the doorway. Jamie comes over and takes me by the hand to my seat, pulling it out for me.

'Jamie...'

I almost well up with happiness. But I still don't understand what's changed between now and a few minutes ago. I mean, there is a change. One minute he wanted me out of his sight and now he is pleased to see me.

'Wow, this looks good, Jamie. You are really treating me like a queen. I don't know how I'm going to repay you...'

Jamie reaches over and takes my hand. His brown eyes are intent.

'Tess. Love is not about owing. I do not expect anything back.'

Wow. I sit there, gazing into his eyes. His mood is very strange today. Very intense. Deep. I should know. But this is another level. Like something out of a movie. His mood earlier still concerns me though.

His eyes flash up at me whilst he takes a mouthful of his pancakes.

'What's up? Don't you like it?'

His tone has that edge.

'Jamie, it's lovely. I...'

'Because you haven't eaten a mouthful!'

I stare at my plate and look at Jamie again.

'That's because I'm trying to work you out, Jamie.'

'Well don't!'

He crams more pancake into his mouth.

I take a forkful and it is pretty good. Sweet and buttery.

'This is good by the way. I really appreciate the effort you've gone too.'

Jamie nods and eats more pancake.

One minute he's looking into my eyes and the next he's a ravenous horse...

I decide it is best to eat more pancake before pressing Jamie to tell me what on earth is going on in that head of his. Wait a minute. Is he cheating on me? But why would he... guilty conscience? Wow. This behaviour. That's not my Jamie. If he is 'my' Jamie. I'm keeping an eye on this. No rush decisions. My plate is empty, the syrup glazed across it. I gently place my fork down.

'Thank you, Jamie.'

I look up to realise that he had probably finished ages ago and has been staring at me all this time.

'Jamie... I'm going to head to the bathroom.'

Thoughts run through my head as I'm brushing my teeth. What sort of behaviour is that? If Jamie is going to be on edge all day then I just want to curl up with a book in the corner with a mug of hot chocolate. And what is this thing we need to be up for? And he was faffing about with pancake mixture earlier...

'Tess! Tess!'

'What, Jamie?'

'Sorry, sorry.'

I hear him shuffling towards me. This is definitely not my Jamie. Someone has put an alien in his head, I think. He places a hand on my arm, smiling nervously at me.

‘Would you like to go for a walk, sunshine?’

I nod enthusiastically.

‘OK, great. Yeah.’

I fumble for my keys and phone. When I have found them, I place them in my brown bag and sling it over my shoulder.

I flick the pages on a magazine whilst Jamie is in the shower. Load of rubbish really, I don’t know why I buy them...

A few minutes later he rushes through in his favourite baby blue polo shirt and grey jeans. He puts on his black sneakers. When he has finished tying the laces and has shoved his phone into his pocket, he gives me that easy smile.

‘OK? Let’s go.’ Jamie says.

I follow him through the door and we step out into the crisp air. The earth smells fresh. Golden brown leaves float across the paths and I’m swept by the beauty of it. Jamie smiles.

‘I knew you’d like it.’ Jamie comments.

He puts his arm around me as we walk past a row of trees. Some deep red, some partly green still, yellow, burnt orange...

I look up at him.

‘So where are we going?’

He smiles.

‘Your favourite place.’

We walk for ten minutes before coming to the woods.

‘Wow, look at all the colours...’

‘Woah, woah, woah. Stop right here.’

Jamie places himself in front of me.

‘Now, before you admire the leaves, missy, I’m going to have to blindfold you because I want to show you a very special surprise.’

‘What?’

‘Come on.’

Jamie puts a blindfold over my eyes and all I can see is black. I long for the rushes of autumn colours. Maybe this is what it’s like to be blind. My senses are heightened. The earth smells fresher, the air feels crisper, the birds sound clearer and the leaves crunch loudly beneath my boots. All I can do is imagine what I have seen, ten times more vibrant. I feel Jamie take me by the hand and lead me forwards. There is a bit of giggling. My foot kicks away what feels like a pinecone.

‘Are we nearly there, Jamie?’

‘Ah, patience, my love.’

I snort.

‘That’s not very elegant but that is why I love you.’

I burst out laughing.

‘Prat!’

‘Language, my dear.’

‘Don’t you dear me. That’s how you address an old lady.’

‘Do not stereotype.’

'You've got an answer for everything, Jamie Evans.'

Jamie clears his throat.

'Miss Parks.'

He gently removes my blindfold.

I smile. We are at my favourite tree. It is the tree with burnt orange leaves tipped with gold. Next to it is a yellow fir tree. Jamie parts some leaves in the burnt orange tree and I gasp. Hanging from a branch by some string is an emerald ring. Tears come to my eyes as Jamie undoes the string and gets down on one knee with the emerald ring in his hand. I wipe my eyes with my left sleeve. He stares up at me intently with those brown eyes. Above his head are the burnt orange leaves tipped with gold. I am reminded of the flames reflected in his eyes on that bonfire night.

'Tessa Parks. Will you marry me?'

I put my hand over my mouth, gazing at the deep green in the emerald. I move my gaze to Jamie's face.

'Yes!' I gasp.

I practically jump on him as I throw my arms around his neck.

'Woah, woah, woah, Tess!'

A flash of green goes flying.

'Tess, the ring!'

I stare in horror as the ring disappears into the fallen leaves.

'Shit.' Jamie says, frowning.

I release his neck and start tossing up all the leaves.

'Hold on, Tess, we don't even know where it landed.'

An elderly couple stop and look at us in concern.

'Have you lost something, love?' the woman asks.

'My engagement ring.' I say, my eyes filling with tears.

'Oh...' the woman murmurs sympathetically.

'I've only just proposed to her and we've lost the ring already.' Jamie explains, resigned.

The man suppresses a chuckle. His wife nudges him.

'Well... do you know whereabouts it could have gone?' the wife asks.

'How did you lose it, exactly?' the husband enquires.

I wipe away a tear which has just run down my cheek. Jamie puts an arm around me.

'When she said yes, she threw her arms around me which caused me to let go of the ring. Alas, it is lost in the darkness of the leaves.'

The couple burst out laughing at Jamie's theatrical tone. I even manage a small smile. This is why I love the man.

'Oh, Jamie, it must have cost you so much money...'

'It's OK, Tess. We're still engaged, ring or no ring. A ring is just a symbol after all. And yeah, it may have cost a bit but if we don't find this one and that's a big if, then when I can afford it, I will buy you another ring. I'll even put an elastic band around your finger for the time being if it makes you feel any better...'

I nudge him but I am grinning.

'We are going to try our best to help you find this ring. Although we have aged considerably we still like to think we are as fit as fiddles. So we will have

no trouble bending down to part the leaves. Isn't that right, George?' the woman says.

George tries to keep a straight face, still trying to recover from Jamie's clownishness.

'Yes, Betty.'

Betty claps her hands.

'Righto then! Let's sweep these leaves off the floor to see where that ring is hiding.'

We are soon bending down to scoop up an armful of leaves and tossing them in the air. It would be more fun if you took away the fact that we were searching for my lost engagement ring.

I'm going to find my ring. That gorgeous emerald. I start kicking and tossing leaves like mad. A family stops to look and thinks that it looks so fun, they let their kids toss leaves about. Another family comes. A glamorous Mum frowns and turns to her husband.

'Elouise can't do that. She'll get dirt under her fingernails!'

'Oh, loosen up a little, Elaine! A little dirt is good for kids anyway. Didn't it say on the internet somewhere that it is harmless if your child eats a handful of earth?'

Elaine rolls her eyes.

'You're losing the plot, Donald.'

Betty's face lights up at seeing the newcomers.

'Oh, hello! Feel free to join us! It all looks like fun and games but we are tossing leaves about to try and find a lady's lost engagement ring. It would be great if you could help.' Betty explains.

George chuckles.

'You'll never guess how it got lost. When the lady said yes, she threw her arms around the bloke and he dropped the ring! We are searching through a carpet of leaves. I shouldn't laugh but I just can't believe how you can lose a ring straight after a proposal and in such a heat of passion!' George says.

There are a few chuckles and sympathetic murmurs.

A Dad comes over to me and introduces himself as Bertie.

'You alright, love?' he asks, 'you know it could be worse. My wife is a cake lover and I decided to put the ring in a Victoria sponge as it's her favourite. However, my chocolate lab, Rocky, decided to demolish the whole thing and nearly choked on the bloody ring. Then he was sick and the glistening ring, a diamond it was, came out in a delightful trail of his vomit. You can bet that put her off.'

'Ew.'

'Disgusting, I know.'

'So does she wear the ring?'

'Well, it ruined the moment so I gave the ring a good wash and took it back to the jewellers. Just said I'd changed my mind. Then I got her a completely different ring. A ruby. I didn't go for the cake route this time. I took her to the park and made her a daisy chain. She likes to make them so she was making

one at the same time. Then I linked the ring with the daisy chain and put it on her wrist. Then I asked her to marry me. She said I do. Happy days.'

'That's so romantic...'

We are interrupted by a shout.

'Hey!'

We turn around to see Jamie racing after a magpie. In its beak there is a flash of green. *My ring!* Jamie jumps up in the air but the magpie is too quick. It's like we've lost the ring all over again. My heart sinks. Jamie climbs up a tree and grabs a stick, thrashing at the bird.

'*For heaven's sake, lad, you'll hurt yourself!*' Betty shouts.

I rush over to the tree.

'Jamie, I don't expect you to break your back for the sake of my ring. Please. Come down.' I plead.

The magpie flies towards another tree. Everyone looks at me sympathetically. I can't bear it. It is like torture. In the magpie's rush, it collides with a red squirrel. This causes the ring to fall from the magpie's beak. I rush to catch it. We all do, crunch, crunch, crunch on the leaves which then fly everywhere. I cup my hands up towards the sky, fingers outstretched. The ring lands on my engagement finger. I gasp in amazement. I hold my hand out towards the sunlight and the emerald sparkles. There is a thunderous round of applause.

'That was just genius, girl!' George exclaims.

'Oh!' Betty exclaims, her hand on her heart. The Mums look moved to tears, so do the Dads. They clasp each other's hands. The children are staring, waiting to see what comes next.

'Wow, I never imagined this happening when you proposed, Donald.' Elaine comments. She did kind off take part. She kicked around a couple of leaves. Donald shushes her.

'Don't interrupt the moment, Elaine.'

I turn to see Jamie looking at me with pride. Then he flashes me a knowing grin. He walks towards me.

'Tessa Parks,' he announces, 'I know you didn't do that intentionally but that adds to the magic of it, that ring landing on your finger. It's almost like we've relived the moment of before we lost the ring. Hey, I don't even have to put it on now. But I want to.'

I remove my ring and give it to him. He goes down on one knee.

'Tessa Parks. Will you marry me?'

'Yes, Jamie.'

He takes my hand and slowly slides the ring back onto my finger. He stands up and looks into my eyes, his brown eyes shining. I look at his open face in the autumnal light. I can't help myself so I cup his chin with my hands and kiss him softly. Jamie puts his hands on my waist and kisses back. And I know if we didn't have an audience the kisses would be a lot deeper.

We decide that we'll all walk together till the end of the trail. The kids run off ahead. I see Jamie looking down at me. I get the feeling he will want a family. But we'll see. You can't always map out the future, can you? Just being in the

moment counts. I gaze at a holly tree in the midst of the orange leaves. It has not yet got its berries. I can't see any spider's webs yet. Oh, hold on! A web which looks like it is glistening with raindrops. A spider weaving its way in and out. I slide my fingers between Jamie's.

'Look, Jamie.'

'You really do see the beauty in things, don't you, Tessa Parks?'

I smile.

'That's Tess to you, but yes, you have too.'

His brown eyes turn a deeper shade and I have the feeling he wants to kiss me all over again.

We see the fields in the gaps between the trees. They are all being harvested, of course. I remember winning an autumn basket competition when I was at Junior School. My Mum helped me make it. We filled a basket with soil and built a house out of Lego. Then we made little carrots out of playdough. We even had a little Lego farmer. Or was it a family? Don't the good times mature? Like a splendid wine. You remember them fondly. And now I have even more mature things to look forward too. I gaze up at Jamie who is admiring a tree with taxi yellow leaves. The light peeps through them, reflecting the streaks in Jamie's caramel hair and the warmth in his brown eyes. Maybe, just maybe, if we have children, I can relive those moments. But just being here now with Jamie is enough.

'Anything can happen in the woods...' Jamie starts to sing in a deep voice.

It's the one that Prince Charming in *Into the Woods* sings. I smirk.

'Oh, Jamie...'

'I was raised to be charming not sincere.'

I nudge him sharply.

'I'd just like to see you do the wolf, dear...'

We come to a pub which looks like a nice little cottage with roses in the garden.

'Fancy a drink?' George asks.

Elaine is keen to get home and drags Donald and Eloise with her. Bertie, Nancy and their kids, Tom and Rose, stay though. I would love to be alone with Jamie but part of me thinks, hey, why not? I love a drink, these people have been a great help to us and this looks a lovely pub. So in we go. We look at the crisp yellow leaves falling outside. I catch sight of purple and deep red too. A chocolate labradoodle passes outside. The pub has burgundy furniture and dark wood. It is a very rustic setting, with a fireplace. I feel at ease. We choose a table which has one of those sofa like seats against the wall. Bertie and Nancy insist on letting me, Jamie, George and Betty sit there. Bertie, Nancy, Tom and Rose sit in the wooden chairs opposite us. We all order mulled cider, well, except Tom and Rose, who have cherry coke. I savour the warm fruitiness.

'So... how did you two love birds meet?' Betty asks, sipping her mulled cider.

Jamie takes my hand underneath the table.

'It was a bonfire night.' I respond, smiling up at Jamie.

'Young love...' Bertie says, grinning.

He nudges Nancy playfully.

'We were like that once.'

'We still are sometimes!' Nancy comments, laughing.

'Love never dies.' George says softly.

'Good god, Georgie boy, is that your romantic side coming out?' Betty exclaims, slapping him on the knee.

After a while Tom and Rose get tired. Rose ends up sitting on Nancy's knee and Tom fidgets in his chair, struggling to keep his eyes open. Nancy looks at Bertie.

'We'd better make a move.' Nancy says.

Bertie nods.

'OK,' he says, 'it was lovely to meet you all. We had great fun. And congratulations to the newly engaged couple. I'm glad you found your ring in the end.'

Bertie winks at me.

I smirk in response.

Nancy scoops Rose up into her arms and we all say bye to them.

'Maybe we'll see each other again soon.' Betty says.

'Anything can happen in the woods...' Jamie murmurs.

I nudge him under the table.

'Well,' George says a few moments after Bertie and Nancy have gone, 'I'll suppose we'd better get back too. It's getting past my bedtime.'

He gives a hearty laugh.

'Yep and us actually.' Jamie says, laughing.

There is a meaningful look in his eyes.

‘Well, it was lovely to meet you both. What a laugh we’ve all had! I hope we will see each other again sometime, I’m sure we will, we’re often pounding the woods, aren’t we George?’ Betty comments.

We all smile.

‘It was lovely to meet you both, too. Thank you for helping me find my engagement ring.’ I say, smiling.

‘You’re welcome. Thank god for the red squirrel, I say!’ George responds, laughing.

‘So funny. The magpie collided with it...’ Jamie says, smiling reminiscently.

We all say our farewells. When we step outside, the sun is setting. Clouds of pink and swirls of gold. The leaves are bright and still. George and Betty head off in the opposite direction, Betty holding onto George’s arm.

We are alone. I put my arm around Jamie’s waist and he puts his arm around my neck so that my head rests on his shoulder. It is a blissful walk home, watching the robins. A reminder that Christmas is coming. But it is autumn now. My favourite season. Robins aren’t just for Christmas. I have never been able to decide if my favourite bird is a robin or a dove. I quite like blackbirds too. Simple but beautiful. Yet so intricate. The sky is beginning to get purple streaks now. We are coming to our row of trees. The deep red trees and the yellow trees. Our cosy little corner where the flats are. We don’t have to go very far. Our flat is on the ground floor. I take out my key and unlock the door. We step in and as soon as I have locked the door, I turn around to have Jamie kiss me deeply on the lips. I kiss back fast. We are fumbling now. Jamie kicks off his sneakers and I try to do the same, only to remember that I have lace up

boots on so I let myself continue to run my hands over him. We kiss, gasping for air occasionally, all the way to the bedroom where Jamie shoves the door open. Our kisses get hungrier and when I feel the bed behind me I let myself fall, pulling Jamie onto me. I sink into the softness of the duvet as Jamie kisses my neckline, working down to my chest. He buries his face in my breasts. I wrap my arms around his back and pull his polo shirt up over his head. Jamie lifts his head slightly so that I can discard the polo shirt that has fallen between Jamie's face and my breasts. Jamie rises so that I am looking up at his toned, olive body. The chest slim and broad at the same time. His abs are subtle. His brown eyes turn deep with hunger as he unbuttons my cardigan. He pushes it down my shoulders and I wriggle out of it. Next he pulls my t-shirt up over my bra. I stretch my arms and raise my head slightly so that Jamie can pull it off me. Jamie envelopes me in his arms, pulling me up towards him. I breathe in his musky scent. As I tug at his belt, Jamie unclasps my bra and it falls on the bed. Jamie's eyes widen as he stares at my breasts. Taking in their firmness and roundness. He sinks his face into the softness and smoothness. I feel him planting kisses on them. Next we are tugging at one another's waistbands. My jeans are not going down any further than my ankles.

'My boots!' I pant.

Jamie pauses, panting as I untie the laces, take off my boots and then throw them off the bed. Once we ping away socks we remove each other's very last layers. But I don't let him in that easily. Boy, do I tease. He tries to come from the front and I roll over. He tries from behind and I swing my legs off the bed. I stand up, picking up Jamie's discarded polo shirt and holding it over my breasts.

It reaches below my thighs. I cross my legs playfully, a smile curling up on my lips. Jamie looks at me. He is on all fours, panting. His skin is glistening. He raises, the muscles in his arms flexing. I look at him and gasp. Jamie is standing on the bed, his body in full view. I stare up at his face, his eyes are darker now. His jaw is set and so are his abs. I can't stop staring as I come to his waist and then my eyes drop to his long legs. He steps off the bed with purpose and comes slowly towards me, like a tiger. A gentle one. When just an inch separates us, Jamie stops. I look into his eyes. An abyss of dark chocolate. I let the polo shirt drop to the floor and I fall into him, kissing his neck hungrily. Working my way down to his chest. Jamie pulls me in by the bum, his hands running over it to take in the smoothness. I wrap my legs around his waist and he takes me back over to the bed.

The next morning rays of light are peeping through the curtains. I find myself in Jamie's armpit. His eyes are closed. A few moments later he opens them.

'Morning sleepy-head.' I say, snuggling into him.

Jamie yawns. He pulls me closer.

'What time is it?'

'I don't know but apparently time stops when you're kissing.'

'Where did you read that?'

'Matt Haig. *How to Stop Time*.'

'You and your books.'

'I know but you've got a bit of bookworm in you too.'

'Yeah. I like my basketball too. Shooting hoops... scoring.'

I flash him a knowing smile.

'Well, I suppose your biggest goal was last night.'

He chuckles.

'Yeah. In all seriousness though, I do have a game tonight.'

'Really?'

'After work. A few of the lads are playing. Anyway, I'd better get ready.'

His body never fails to amaze me when he gets out of bed. The olive skin, cute pecs, subtle abs... the muscles in his back as he walks away. How can someone be so broad yet so slim at the same time? I have to admit, I am a very lucky girl.

Jamie

Jamie sings to himself as he showers. He is thrilled at the prospect of arriving at work as an engaged man. But part of his singing is to block out any thoughts of someone who will not let go. Once he has finished in the bathroom, he pulls on his standard uniform, black shorts and a dark green tracksuit top. And, of course, his trademark black sneakers. He smirks at the thought of all the lovesick teenage girls and possibly boys who will be heartbroken if they hear the news. Or some will just continue to try to win his affections. But, of course, they will not be reciprocated. It's not really the kids he is worried about though, he is used to them...

When Jamie arrives at work, he sees that all too familiar light blue sports car. He tries to quicken his pace even though he knows he can't avoid the person forever. But sprightly as she is, Simone catches up with him.

'Hello, Jamie.' She says, casting her forget-me-not blue eyes on him.

Simone's burgundy hair is in a French plait. She is wearing a dark green vest which is clinging to all the right curves as well as showing off her slender figure. Simone is wearing black short-shorts and black Adidas trainers. The PE staff wear dark green and black because they think it sets a good example to the pupils as the uniform is green and black. Jamie doesn't mind, he likes dark green. So does Tess actually.

'Hi.' Jamie, responds curtly, continuing at his quick pace.

Simone touches his arm.

'What's the hurry?' she asks, laughing.

'I want a coffee.'

‘Jamie, I’ve always told you that caffeine is bad for your health.’

‘Didn’t realise it had much to do with you.’

‘What is *with* you today?’

As they get to the entrance, Simone rushes in front of him, blocking his way.

Her expression softens and there is a flicker of a smile on her lips.

‘She giving you a hard time, is she?’

Simone takes a step closer to him.

Jamie sucks in his breath.

‘No. No, she’s not actually. She is the best thing that’s ever happened to me and we are happily engaged.’ Jamie states firmly.

Simone can barely contain her gasp as Jamie brushes past her and into the entrance.

‘Hello, Mr Evans.’ The receptionist says chirpily, wrapping a curl around her finger.’

‘Good morning.’ Jamie says.

Simone glares at her as she follows Jamie to the staffroom.

‘When did you plan on telling everyone you were going to propose?’ Simone asks.

‘I didn’t realise it had much to do with everyone.’

‘Is that your line for everything? Jamie, don’t you realise what she is making you do? You’re cutting yourself off from everyone!’

Silence.

‘Jamie, I care about you. I always have.’

Jamie turns to her, his expression stony.

‘Well, you should have thought about that before you shagged that *smoking* Italian.’

Simone grimaces at the memory of being caught out at a party with Antonio. ‘Italians do it better.’ Jamie adds, turning on his heel in disgust.

Ouch. She had used that line too.

‘Oh, Jamie!’ Simone cries, grabbing his arm, ‘he made me do it, I was beyond drunk. You know how men can overpower women. He took full advantage of me.’

Jamie shakes his arm free and strokes his chin in slow contemplation.

‘One. You always say you are a woman who can defend herself. Two. You didn’t look that drunk to me, plus you always look down on women who reduce themselves to that state. Three. Remember when you kicked that perve in the balls. And four... women can take just as much advantage of men as men can take of women.’

‘Jamie!’

Jamie opens the staffroom door. The headmaster, Mr Oliver is helping himself to a chocolate biscuit. He lets out a hearty laugh.

‘Ha ha ha! Caught red-handed by the fitness fanatics.’

‘Morning.’ Jamie says.

‘Hello, Lucas.’ Simone says.

‘How are you both this fine morning?’

‘I’m brilliant.’ Jamie responds.

‘Are you going to tell me why you’ve got that grin on your face?’

‘I’m an engaged man.’

Simone's eyebrows shoot up.

'Aw congratulations! When's the wedding?'

'We plan to get married in about six months.'

'Oh, that's fantastic! I'm so happy for you, Jamie, I really am.'

Mr Oliver's gaze drifts over to Simone.

'How are you, Simone?'

Simone fixes a smile on her face.

'I'm great. Congratulations Jamie.'

Tess

I am face to face with the difficult cat again, the one who usually leaves scratches all the way up my arms.

‘Come on, Spindles...’ I coax.

Spindles is a long haired white cat with mustard coloured eyes which constantly glare at me.

As usual, Molly has hogged the gentlest cat, Marmite.

I watch with envy as Molly lifts Marmite out of his pen without any trouble. Molly strokes his silky, dark brown fur. Marmite is a short haired cat so there is no trouble with combing him. Unlike the bugger in front of me... I feel a stab of guilt. Spindles wasn’t looked after very well before she came here. None of them were. Little Marmite is a rare angel. There are a few that aren’t that bad. But somehow I always gets lumped with the difficult ones...

‘Right, come on, Spindles.’ I say with calm authority.

As I lift her out of the pen, her hook-like claws come out. Within five seconds she is thrashing about wildly. Molly watches with sympathy, cradling Marmite.

‘Aw, poor little thing. She obviously wasn’t treated very well before she came here.’ Molly coos.

I force a smile.

If you feel that sorry for her you could offer to deal with her occasionally...

‘Well, this one’s a little gem. How could anyone not want him?’

Marmite purrs as Molly rubs his ears.

‘You know, Molly, I really don’t know. It could be that it was a person who used to be able to look after Marmite but then for whatever reason they couldn’t cope anymore.’

‘Then they should have handed him in straightaway.’

Molly is holding Marmite protectively to her chest.

‘Or the person wasn’t in the right mental state. Cats are like babies. You don’t want to that them go. Or the person was just an unfeeling bastard, I really don’t know – *ow!*’

I flinch as Spindles sinks her claw into my arm.

‘You are not easy to brush, are you?’

Molly pouts.

‘It’s probably hurting her, she has very long fur.’

‘Well, if she kept still, it wouldn’t hurt as much.’

‘Aw.’

I grin.

‘Molly. Perhaps you’d like to have a go as brushing Spindles. I’m sure she’d take more kindly to you.’

Molly’s eyes flash with alarm.

‘Oh. I’ve got my hands full with little Marmite.’

‘I can take Marmite.’

Marmite jumps down from Molly’s arms and comes over to me.

‘Want a brush, Marmite?’

Marmite tilts up his head and purrs loudly.

‘No! That’s got Spindles’ hair in it.’

'Aw. Don't worry, I'm sure it's not contagious. Here.'

I thrust the brush into Molly's hand and she stands there not knowing what to do with it.

'Treats Marmite!'

I get out the Dreamies packet. Molly's eyes widen in horror.

'Oh no! He mustn't have too many of them!'

I'm not sure whether to laugh or feel irritable. I opt for a knowing smile.

'Ah, I find they are a good persuasive technique sometimes. And good for positive reinforcement which Marmite deserves, doesn't he?'

Molly strokes Spindles' fur and gently attempts to brush it. Spindles lashes out, causing Molly to jump back. I give a smile of satisfaction.

'Oh. You might find these will come in for a good persuasive technique.'

I hand the packet of Dreamies to Molly.

'Good luck!' I sing, dancing in the direction of the ringing telephone with Marmite tucked in one arm.

'Hello, Cats Adoption Centre, how can I help?'

A woman's voice answers.

'We would like to adopt.'

'Great. Well, we have loads of lovely cats and kittens waiting to be adopted. Would you like to pop in and have a look at some point?'

'Actually, we've already decided. The little boy, Marmite.'

I don't say anything for a moment. My heart sinks. I have been hoping to adopt Marmite for ages but I was going to wait until everything was more settled.

'Hello?'

'Oh, yes! Sorry, you want to adopt Marmite? Yes, well obviously we will need to come and assess your home to see if it is suitable for a cat to live in. That will be done as soon as possible. Then should you pass the assessment, Marmite is yours. He is a lovely boy, I'm not surprised you want him.'

'Oh, we fell in love with him the moment we saw him. We can't *wait* to welcome him into our home. The children will *adore* him!'

'Yes, he is very good with children.'

'Oh, yes! He is very cuddly, very playful! Thank you so much.'

'My pleasure. Take care.'

'Bye!'

I let out a sigh as I put down the phone.

'Difficult customer?'

I spin round and see Zac leaning against the doorframe. I take him in. His dyed red hair, the fringe cut just above his turquoise eyes. The cream skin and effortlessly lean body.

'No. They wanted to adopt Marmite.'

'Damn. I was thinking he would be the perfect addition to my little family.'

'But you've already got two!'

'I know.'

Zac smiles, thinking wistfully of his big ginger cat, Reuben and his sleek black cat, Onyx. Zac pauses as he catches sight of my ring.

'Oh. You're engaged?'

I nod.

An awkward silence falls between us.

'Oh, er, congratulations.'

'Thank you.'

'I, er, I'd better go...'

Zac

Zac feels like a deflated balloon as he walks away. There is only one person he needs to talk to and that is his best mate, Harry. He comes across Molly. She is trying to brush Spindles and has scratch marks all the way up her arms.

‘Oh, Zac!’ Molly wails.

‘Here.’

Zac takes the brush from Molly and gives Spindles his most trusting gaze. At first Spindles hisses at him but then after a few of moments she goes still, taking Zac in. Zac brushes out Spindles fur and after a while, her white tangles turn to white silk. It is like a lion’s mane. He spots the empty packet of Dreamies on the floor.

‘Oh, Tess said they were a good *persuasive* technique. But then this little... saw *them* and tipped them all on the floor. She devoured the lot!’

Zac chuckles.

Molly gazes up at him admiringly.

‘Oh Zac. You must be the cat whisperer.’

‘I thought that is what we are meant to be.’

‘I know. But no one can do it quite like you.’

Zac smiles appreciatively. It is true. He does have a charm with cats. He would consider adopting Spindles but it is more a question if she would get on with Reuben and Onyx. But he knows that it is a ridiculous idea. He could live with two cats easily, but three would be taking on a bit much. His home wasn’t a cat charity, he had to remember that.

Jamie

'Hello, Mr Evans!' a girl says, fluttering her eyelashes.

'Hello, Jessica.' Jamie responds politely.

'Go on, in!' Simone commands, pointing towards the changing rooms.

Jessica glowers at her and reluctantly enters the girls changing room.

The lads charge through to the boys changing rooms, thumping each other on the back.

'Great play today, lads!' Jamie says.

One boy with a dark, floppy fringe lingers. His eyes light up mischievously.

'Whatcha, Miss Rodgers!'

'Hello, Todd.' Simone responds, knowingly.

Todd still does not go in. He is taking in Simone from her burgundy hair to her slender legs.

'On your way, Todd.' Jamie says firmly.

When Todd is in the changing rooms, Simone gives a smile of satisfaction.

'So... you do still have feelings for me?' she asks.

Jamie turns to her, his eyebrows knitted.

'What?'

'A hint of jealousy detected there, Mr Evans. Always natural and sexy in a man.'

Jamie's expression hardens.

'You're deluded.'

Simone sighs.

'You're not *happy*, Jamie. You're the one that's deluded, trying to deny what you feel for me. Besides, if you don't feel anything for me, then why did you stop Todd from eyeing me up?'

Jamie throws his arms up in exasperation.

'Oh, don't you make this all about you! Because it wasn't appropriate, that's why. And besides, you weren't stopping him. It's not something that should be encouraged.'

Simone gasps.

'And why would I want to encourage a teenage boy to drool over me, when I could have men drooling over me?'

Jamie rolls his eyes.

'I don't know, Simone. Attention is attention, isn't it? Doesn't matter where it's from. Besides, if that was the case, do you really think I would be jealous of some teenage boy? Or anyone, for that matter!'

Simone's eyes fill with tears.

Jamie sighs and goes in the boys changing room to see if they are behaving.

Zac

Zac heads towards The Russet, the pub where he is meeting Harry. He spots Harry straight away when he gets inside. Harry gives Zac his best toothy grin.

‘How ya doing, man?’ Harry asks, slapping Zac on the back.

‘Not too great, actually.’

Zac’s shoulders are drooped and his eyes are downcast.

‘Oh. Well, I’ll get the pints in and we can have a man to man chat.’

Harry returns with two beers, the golden liquid almost flowing out of the glasses. Harry sips his drink, waiting.

‘She’s engaged.’

Harry’s eyes nearly pop out of his head.

‘*Engaged?*’

Zac nods glumly.

‘Aw, well, she’s a gonner.’

Zac glares at him.

Harry holds up his hands.

‘All I’m saying is that there are plenty more fish in the sea.’

‘Not like her. She’s a rare catch.’

‘Aw, c’mon. That’s how we *all* feel at first.’

Zac looks at Harry, his turquoise eyes burning with intensity.

‘What I’m trying to say is, Harry, is that *I’m in love with her.*’

Harry’s expression is still. He slowly puts his pint down.

‘You and her go a long way back, huh?’

‘Yes...’

Zac remembers her body on his, a sweet flood. He cannot get Tess' image out of his head. Her wild black curls, amber eyes, coffee complexion...

'We never went out properly. We had both been in dark places so we decided a no-strings-attached thing would work and then before I knew it I was falling in love with her... I was going to tell her how I felt but then all of a sudden this Jamie guy comes on the scene.'

Harry frowns with pity.

'He got there first?'

'Well, I was a bit intimidated by him. I mean, how can I compete with him if that's the type she likes? He's broad shouldered, slim, toned, olive skinned, dark eyed...'

'Mate, she's got more than one type. She was clearly attracted to you too. Besides, you've got *turquoise* eyes.'

Zac smiles. One feature he prides himself on is his eyes. It's what women seem to be attracted to most with him. Then it's his dyed red hair which rests just above his eyes. Or his lean body.

'To be honest, I thought I had the advantage at first because I work with her. I figured that maybe this gave me more time to make her realise how much I liked her. I didn't want to rush it, considering the no-strings-attached thing we had before. Tess did mention Jamie but I didn't realise how serious it had got between them...'

Harry bites his lip.

'Mate, are you *sure* you're in love with this woman?'

Zac stares at him.

'I'm pretty sure that if I let Tess marry Jamie without trying to win her over then I will regret it for the rest of my life.'

'Then go and get her, boy.'

Harry reaches over the table and pats Zac on the shoulder.

Tess

It has been two months since Jamie has proposed to me. I would like to say that I feel completely settled but... I'm not. It's Zac, you see. Me and Zac had this thing in the past. We had both been through heartbreak so we wanted a no-strings-attached kind of relationship. But I didn't want to be so naïve as to believe it could develop into anything serious. I did develop feelings for Zac but I couldn't tell if he had feelings for me. Considering the kind of thing we had, I pushed it aside and we've just remained close friends. If Zac felt anything that deep for me, he would say, I told myself back then. Then I met Jamie. When I mentioned Jamie at first, Zac seemed slightly surprised, but not bothered. But I will never forget the look on Zac's face when he saw the ring on my finger. Whenever I try to talk about the wedding, he's just not interested. But I want to be able to talk to him about it because he's my friend.

It is now December, the snow is falling softly on the pavement. Me and Jamie agreed that now would be the perfect time to give out invitations. I have an invitation with Zac's name on it in italic gold letters. I really want him to attend because then that's a sign that everything is alright between us. I arrive at work early to be greeted by a mixture of purrs and hisses, mainly purrs today. I smile at Butterfly, the one who has replaced our boy, Marmite. She is called Butterfly because there are two patterns on her back which look like wings. The wings are white whereas the rest of her is black. She has electric blue eyes. Also, she is always flying around her pen.

'Don't even think about it. I've got my eye on that one.'

I spin round to see Zac grinning at me.

I smile.

'As I keep telling you, Zac, you've already got two cats.'

'So?'

He puts his hands on his hips, his turquoise eyes gleaming.

'I haven't got *any* cats!'

Zac mimics my pout.

'Why?'

'Oh, I'm waiting until everything's more settled...'

Zac frowns.

I hold back a sigh. It was as if I had the old Zac back again until I alluded to settling down with Jamie. Zac looks past me.

'Do you think Butterfly's eyes are like mine?'

I laugh and look from Butterfly's electric blue eyes to Zac's turquoise ones.

'You've both got bright eyes. Yeah, they are the closest comparison I can make at the moment.'

'You've got Thomas' eyes.'

I look at Thomas, a grey tabby with amber eyes.

'That is true.'

'I swear we must have been cats in a previous life.'

I let out a ripple of laughter.

'I wouldn't be surprised, you sneaking around everywhere, Zac!'

'I reckon Thomas and Butterfly would make beautiful kittens, don't you?'

I stare at him. A grin is fixed on Zac's face but his eyes are intent. I crack a smile.

'Ever the joker aren't you, Zac? Do you, er, fancy a drink after work?'

'Sure. The Russet?'

'Perfect.'

I go to fetch Thomas from his pen. I smile, thinking that now Zac is more himself, I couldn't have asked at a better time.

Jamie

'Come on, Kyle, you need to make more use of the space around you!' Jamie shouts.

Kyle dribbles the ball, his eyes darting around the room. To his left is Big Gerry and to his right is Matthew, the athletic one. They are both on the opposition. But they have not fully closed him in yet. Just as Matthew runs to take the ball off him, Kyle dashes forward, bouncing the ball a couple more times for good measure. He looks up, his brow sweating. The net is right above him... if he just reaches high enough... Kyle jumps right off the ground and throws the ball. At the same time, Big Gerry leaps in front of him. The ball goes through the hoop, hitting Big Gerry on the head.

The boys erupt with laughter. Big Gerry's face is flaming and he narrows his eyes at Kyle.

'What's funny?' Big Gerry barks, stepping forward so that he is just an inch away from Kyle. He towers over the boy.

'You gonna apologise for that?' Big Gerry asks, grabbing Kyle by the shirt.

'Gerry, let him go and calm down.' Jamie demands, starting to jog over.

'Leave it out, mate.' Matthew says.

Big Gerry snarls at him.

'Or you'll do what?' Big Gerry asks, still holding Kyle by the shirt.

Matthew punches Big Gerry, causing him to stagger backwards. There is silence as Big Gerry holds his bleeding nose. Jamie puts himself between Big Gerry and Matthew.

'Matthew, outside! Gerry, to the medical room!' Jamie commands.

Matthew storms out and Big Gerry hobbles, still holding his nose. Jamie follows them out to make sure that Big Gerry goes to the medical room and that Matthew remains outside. Jamie stands with Matthew, watching Big Gerry go inside. Matthew leans against the wall, his arms folded.

‘I understand that you were standing up for Kyle, Matthew, but violence is not the answer.’

‘It’s the only language he understands.’

‘I was on my way over to deal with it, Matthew. The punch wasn’t needed.’

‘Doesn’t matter. He got off easy anyway.’

Matthew narrows his eyes at Jamie accusingly.

‘As a matter of fact, Matthew, I will be talking to him later. Now, you can stay here to cool off for a bit and you can come in whenever you feel ready. OK?’

Matthew nods. Jamie goes back inside the gym.

‘Right boys, let’s pick up from where we left off!’

‘But we haven’t got Matthew, sir!’ Noah protests.

‘When Matthew’s ready he will come and join you.’

The boys bounce the ball, feeling freer now that Big Gerry is not charging around, fouling people any opportunity he gets. After a couple of minutes, Matthew strolls in and Matthew’s team cheer now that they have got their star player back. The boys slap Matthew on the back when he reaches them.

‘Alright, mate?’ Matthew asks, giving Kyle a fist bump.

Simone

Simone is in the netball court which is just outside the gym. She had stolen glances at Jamie when he was outside sorting out Matthew and Gerry. He was calm and caring. He dealt with it in the way a good teacher should. Yet she knew it was not just his role that made him like that. It was him all through his veins. She has a flood of memories coming back to her like the leaves turning back to all the colours which you cannot see in the spring or summer. Jamie holding her hair as she was sick. Jamie standing up for her whenever any of the girls were giving her grief just because she happened to be going out with the teacher they had a crush on. Jamie holding her face tenderly at night under the stars and telling her he loved her. Jamie telling her that she was one of the best teachers he ever knew and that underneath all that tough as hell exterior, she was as soft as the gooey marshmallows he liked in his hot chocolate. True, Simone Rodgers wasn't to be messed with but once the right person opened up her heart, her gentler side would come flowing out like a stream.

'Miss! She just fouled me!'

Simone's eyes flit to Andrea who is on the ground clutching her ankle dramatically.

'Did not!' Lacey protests.

'Let me come and have a look at it, Andrea.' Simone sighs.

Andrea rubs her ankle for effect.

'I nearly broke it!'

'Little drama queen! I didn't even touch you!'

Lacey folds her arms and glowers at Andrea.

Simone kneels down beside Andrea.

'There doesn't look to be any bruising, Andrea. Lean on me if you like, and try to stand up for me.'

Andrea smirks.

'Andrea?'

'See Miss, I told you she was putting it on!'

Simone glares at Andrea.

'Shame on you, Andrea. What do you think we are, the wimpy men on the telly who dive on the ground because the slightest hand brushes them?' Simone asks, her eyebrows knitted together in annoyance.

Andrea gets up, her head bowed.

The bell rings.

'Well, 1-1, could have been better if there was less messing around.'

As Simone says this, she looks directly at Andrea who averts her eyes.

Jamie and Simone send their classes into the changing rooms. Simone feels something warm inside her as Jamie smiles at her. It is a common gesture but it means a lot to Simone. Simone turned into the ice queen for two weeks after Jamie said that he wouldn't be jealous of anyone who laid eyes on Simone. They still behaved professionally, of course. Jamie didn't like it any more than Simone. Their love of teaching and an opportunity to harvest minds had bought them together. It was a shame that what had happened had made them forget that. One day Simone could stand it no longer. She hoped behaving like the ice queen would make Jamie want her. It was opposite to what she had

tried before. It did them both no good and eventually, she no longer saw resentment in Jamie's brown eyes, but a sadness.

'Jamie.' Simone said one day, 'I want to apologise not only for what I did to you in the past but for the way I've reacted to you being with Tess. What I want to say is, Jamie, is that I am happy that you have found someone to love. Even though it is not me. I've realised that I care about you too much for us to be cut off from each other like this. I will never try to come between you and Tess again. I want to be there for you as a friend, if you'll let me.'

Jamie was silent for a moment, his brown eyes warm with emotion. And then he gave Simone a hug which melted her like a choc ice.

Jamie and Simone are organising a yoga after school club. They came up with the idea because they know that there are a lot of anxious or angry balls of energy in the school. And by using yoga as mindfulness, they want to try and help them combat that negative energy. They see Alex turn up, a fiery girl who often kicks off at the slightest thing. They also see Logan, a fidgety boy with specs. Of course, Jamie and Simone are not too naïve to think that all the target audience they are aiming for will be interested. But some are and that's what counts. They get a group of around twelve.

'Hello everyone, it's good to see you all at our yoga session.' Jamie says, smiling broadly.

'You will go home feeling super chilled. We've even got some music, look.' Simone adds, bouncing down to turn on the music.

The music that comes out is like velvet. It instantly makes you think of swirling into deep oblivion. There are also other sounds in between the deep melody such as birds, leaves rustling and waterfalls.

‘Right. First we want you to just focus on your breathing. Taking deep breaths, in then out.’ Jamie instructs.

Simone is turned on by Jamie’s voice. It is so husky and soft at the same time.

‘Now we want you to notice any tension you have from you head to your toes, just being mindful of it. Accepting.’ Simone instructs.

Next they work on some moves. Some of the pupils master them perfectly and some of the positons other pupils get themselves in make Jamie and Simone want to giggle. Imogen, for example, has her bum stuck too high in the air. Jamie and Simone help the ones who are struggling to adjust. The girls blush or smile coyly when Jamie helps them. As do the boys when Simone helps them. Near the end of the session Jamie and Simone introduce a new move, one which requires two people.

‘Right, for this move you will need a partner and there are twelve of you so that works out perfectly.’ Simone announces.

‘This move is called the buddy boat pose.’ Jamie explains once everyone has partnered up, ‘me and Miss Rodgers will do the pose with you so that you can follow us.’

Jamie and Simone take turns to explain each instruction. Jamie takes the first turn.

‘Sit facing one another with your legs bent and your knees near your chest.’

Simone takes in the dark intensity of Jamie's eyes.

'Hold your partners hands or wrists and bring the heels of your feet together.'

Simone feels a rush of warmth at holding Jamie's hands once again. They are just as she remembered, manly and smooth. This close, it is hard not to study his caramel hair against his olive complexion. And the way his toned muscles show nicely against his dark green shirt without bulging. His musky scent drifts towards her.

'Slowly straighten out your legs as you bring your feet upward. Release your shoulders, straighten your spine and lean back.'

Simone has to try hard not to gasp as memories of all the intimate yoga moves her and Jamie did as a couple come flooding back to her. Is Jamie remembering the same thing? He has to be, considering that all the moves developed into steamy sex. With all the more creative positions...

Tess

Me and Zac have just finished work. We walk under the dark sky. It is only five in the evening.

‘I don’t mind it when it gets dark.’ I say.

‘Nor do I, it feels fresh.’ Zac responds.

‘Yeah it is fresh, being out in it isn’t that bad.’

We approach The Russet pub. And it literally is russet on the roof. The walls are black. Zac holds the door open for me.

‘Thanks, Zac.’

‘Drinks on me.’ Zac says, turning to me with a warm smile.

‘No...’

Zac puts a finger to my lips. A twinkle comes to his turquoise eyes.

‘Take a seat.’

Zac pulls out a chair for me.

He strolls over to the bar. I sit there, confused. He doesn’t even know what I want to drink. Zac comes back with a tequila sunrise cocktail for me and a rum and coke for himself. I smile with surprise.

‘What’s this?’ I say, laughing.

‘Your drink.’

Zac grins.

‘It is your favourite, isn’t it?’ he adds.

‘Why, thank you. You didn’t have to do that.’

‘No. I didn’t have too. I wanted too.’

‘Aw.’

I smile at him warmly.

'I'll have to buy you one next time.'

His turquoise eyes sparkle like a Maldives ocean.

'Hungry?'

'I would but I'm eating with Jamie when I get home.'

'Oh.'

'It's OK. You go ahead and eat. Don't let me stop you.'

Zac scans the menu with concentration.

'I'll be right back.'

Zac goes up to order.

When he comes back I give him his invitation to mine and Jamie's wedding.

'It would be great if you could attend.'

Zac just sits there, staring at the invitation in his hands.

'Thanks, but I don't feel I can...'

I lean forward, my chin resting on my hands.

'Why? What's wrong?'

Zac sighs.

'I hate to do this to you, Tess, but I can't watch the woman I'm in love with marry someone else.'

I sit back in my chair, lost for words.

'Strawberry and melted chocolate sharing platter?'

I look up to see a waiter holding a large silver plate which holds strawberries and two bowls of melted chocolate.

'Yep, that's us...' Zac says with an awkward smile.

'Thank you.'

'Enjoy.'

For a few moments the two of us just sit there, dipping our strawberries in chocolate.

'Tess, please say something.'

'I can't think what to say, Zac.'

Zac sighs.

'Tess, we helped each other get over a dark time. I know we called it a no-strings-attached thing but to me it ended up being more than that. It was never just sex for me, Tess. Surely, you felt the connection too?'

'Zac... why did you never tell me any of this at the time?'

'I was going too! I'd been trying to pluck up the courage for ages but then I saw that ring on your finger.'

Zac looks at the emerald on my finger as if it has done him serious injury.

'Zac, you've known about Jamie for ages.'

Zac sighs.

'Want me to be honest? I didn't think that you were that serious with him. I thought I was in with a chance. That's why the engagement thing came out of the blue.'

I shake my head and gulp.

'I'm sorry, Zac.'

'Tess. I need to know. Did you ever feel something beyond the no-strings-attached relationship for me?'

I rest my forehead on my palm.

‘Yes. I did. But I pushed it to the side. I was convinced that if you felt the same way, you would have told me. It was all bad timing. We were both vulnerable but we found comfort in each other. It was no-strings-attached and we were still friends afterwards. I wanted it to stay that way.’

Zac raises his eyebrows.

‘Wanted?’

I run my hands through my hair and sigh. I then take a deep breath and look Zac straight in the eye.

‘I’m sorry, Zac. I love Jamie.’

He shakes his head.

‘Zac, I’ve missed you. I’ve missed being able to tell you everything...’

‘Yeah? And I’ve missed you. I don’t feel you’re the same since you’ve met Jamie. Or since you’ve been engaged to him anyway. I mean, I’m not being funny but you were pretty vague when you mentioned him to start with and now you’re engaged you suddenly want to talk about him. Why’s that, do you think?’

I bite my lip and sigh in frustration.

‘OK, I’m sorry, but I didn’t know you felt that way.’

Zac sighs. His eyes are glassy.

‘If I’d have opened my gob sooner things would have been a whole lot different.’

‘Oh, Zac...’

I’m nearly close to tears myself.

Zac reaches across the table and grabs my hand.

'Don't try to push away your feelings for me, Tessa, because if they are as strong as mine then you will be living a lie for the rest of your life.'

I shake my head.

'I should go.'

Zac removes his hand.

'OK.'

We both stand up and put on our coats.

When we walk out the cold air hits us.

'Tess.'

Zac's voice is soft.

I turn to face him. It is then I notice the mistletoe above our heads.

'What is it about Jamie that makes you think he is the one?'

'Zac, this is too much...'

'OK. OK. That's too broad a question.'

'How did Jamie propose to you?'

'In October he blindfolded me and led me through the woods. When he removed the blindfold I was in front of my favourite tree, the one with burnt orange leaves tipped with gold. He parted the leaves to reveal an emerald ring hanging from a branch which was previously hidden.'

Zac's eyes are sad.

'I've dreamt up several proposals. Autumnal ones. I never forgot that was your favourite season.'

I want to ask but I don't feel that it is appropriate. He tells me anyway.

‘I would have set it in October as well, our favourite month. I would have got down on one knee, opened up a conker shell, well it would have already been opened obviously, but you know, so it was like a box. And inside would be an onyx ring. And I would have said, “will you marry me and be my love that conquers all?”’

I stand there, rooted to the spot. He continues.

‘Another one was a Halloween proposal. The room would have only been lit by the pumpkin and candles. There would be colourful leaves scattered on the floor. I would have bought Onyx through and she would have had the onyx ring attached to her collar. I would have got down on one knee and asked you to marry me, holding Onyx out to you.’

Zac comes a step closer and tilts my face up to his.

I am about to resist but then his soft lips kiss me full on the mouth.

Right underneath the mistletoe.

Simone

Simone is just driving by in her light blue sports car when she catches sight of – no, it can't be. *It is*. In front of The Russet pub under the mistletoe is an effortlessly lean guy with dyed red hair and his lips are on... *Jamie's fiancée*. His fingers start to run through Tess' black curls but Tess turns away... guiltily. That's when Tess and Simone meet eyes. Simone stares at her with her forget-me-not blue eyes and drives on when a car pips her from behind. Simone drives around the bend with frustration. She knows she can hardly talk but... what is that woman *thinking*? At least, in Simone's case, Antonio was hot. He had smoky eyes, a neat buzz cut which no doubt used to be dark silky locks, a ripped body and soft lips... Simone shakes her head to get rid of the image.

This guy that Tess was with, well he wasn't *bad looking*, Simone could tell that from a distance. But though it is dark and she was not close up, Simone could also see that this guy was not *a patch* on Jamie. Come on, Simone thinks, Jamie is broad shouldered, toned, olive-skinned, caramel haired, dark eyed... from her car she could only make out a lean body and dyed red hair but she bets that the guy doesn't have eyes that can turn the colour of dark chocolate... nor could he incorporate yoga and sex like Jamie does. Maybe *Jamie's fiancée* isn't so perfect after all. The trouble is, Jamie may not believe Simone if she tells him. After all, she did try to make life difficult for Jamie when he first went out with Tess and when they got engaged. It would just look like a jealous ex thing. And Jamie and Simone have been getting on so well, work is going so much better... Simone imagines the look of anger, disappointment or disdain on Jamie's face should Simone try to tell him what she has just seen. Her recent

acceptance of Jamie's engagement to Tess would then seem so planned, so calculated... and it really isn't. She wants to help Jamie. She doesn't want another woman to break his heart. So what the hell is she going to do? Simone tightens her grip on the steering wheel, wanting to bash her head on it. She curses herself once again for hurting Jamie in the past. For falling for that Antonio... when he was nothing like Jamie who treated her so much better.

Tess

I gasp as I realise what has just happened. I had just breathed in the kiss for a couple of seconds and when I broke away I saw Jamie's ex in her flashy sports car watching. What the hell am I going to do? Simone is going to relish in telling Jamie my betrayal. For god's sake, why did Zac have to kiss me? *And why did you have to stand still?* An annoying voice in my head says. But I broke away, didn't I? *Not straight away*, the voice says.

'Tess.' Zac says longingly, leaning in for more.

No. *No.*

I break away from him and dash down the street.

'Tess, *Tess!*

I hear the cry in his voice.

I run until I get back to the flat. I stop abruptly when I get to the door. I haven't really thought this through. Jamie can't hear this from Simone. It will be better coming from me. I can't deny what I've done. But it wasn't that bad, was it? The images come back to me, fresh ones from only moments ago. The tenderness in Zac's turquoise eyes as he tilted up my face towards his. *Why didn't I move?* Why are all these feelings coming back? I'm marrying Jamie Evans, not Zac Williams. When he took a step forward, why didn't I take a step back? The images blur in my head and I open the door. The smell of toad in the hole hits me, making my mouth water. My lip trembles.

'Tess?' Jamie calls.

I hear the good cheer in his voice. I step into the kitchen.

'Hello, Jamie.'

My voice sounds flat. Jamie doesn't seem to notice though. He is busy dividing toad in the hole between two plates. The table is lit by candles and in the middle are sunset coloured roses. I take a seat, sinking into it. Jamie brings me my plate.

'This looks lovely, Jamie. Thank you.'

I manage to murmur those words at least.

'I had to turn it down a bit. They kept you a bit late, did they?'

I gulp.

'Yes, he – *they* did.'

I glance up at Jamie anxiously but he is preoccupied with munching forkfuls of Yorkshire pudding.

'It must be nice because you're not talking!' Jamie says, letting out a ripple of laughter.

I look up to see his brown eyes are shining like conkers. Zac's words sound in my head: '*will you marry me and be my love that conquers all?*' Images flood my brain. Zac's hand opening a conker shell to reveal an onyx ring. Guilt stabs my heart as I remember Jamie parting the burnt orange leaves to reveal an emerald ring hanging from the hidden branch by a piece of string. Me knocking the ring out of his hands in my enthusiasm. Us searching for the ring in the fallen leaves. Jamie climbing the tree to chase the magpie who had spotted the ring and stolen it. The magpie colliding with the red squirrel, causing the ring to fall from its beak to my outstretched engagement finger. That moment was too good to be true, I can see that now. I nearly lost the ring that day, now I could

lose Jamie. Perhaps the events were a sign: I was always destined to muck it up.

'Tess?'

'Sorry, I need – I need to go to the bathroom!'

I clutch my abdomen to make my lie more convincing.

Jamie raises his eyebrows.

I dash into the bathroom, breathing hard as I stare in the mirror.

When I come out, Jamie is waiting at the door. His features are softened.

'Tess, are you alright?'

I hear the concern in his voice.

'We need to talk.'

My voice wobbles.

His eyes widen and he goes to touch my arm.

I flinch away from his touch and lead him to the living room.

'Sit down.'

Jamie takes a seat, waiting patiently.

I sit down at the opposite end of the sofa.

'They didn't keep me in late, Jamie. Zac had been acting strange with me so I went for a drink with him to work out what was up. He said that he still has feelings for me and I explained that I loved you. When we left the pub...he kissed me.'

Jamie frowns.

'Did you kiss him back?'

'It was only for a couple of seconds... then I broke away.'

Jamie's eyes fill with tears.

'A kiss is a kiss, Tess! It doesn't matter how long it was!'

My own eyes fill with tears. Jamie continues, wiping away a tear which has escaped from his eye.

'You know what? I always suspected something. You always came home and it was Zac this, Zac that. I knew you had some kind of thing with him in the past but you always said that it *meant nothing!* That was why I was so edgy before I proposed that day. In fact, that was why I proposed because, I knew that if your love was mine only, then you would say yes! You lied to me, Tessa Parks! *Why did you lie?*'

Oh, Jamie. And I wondered if he was cheating on me that day until he proposed.

I let out a sob.

Jamie lets out a breath.

'You can't stay here.'

I nod, my heart heavy.

The air between us is thick with tension.

I go into our bedroom and pack my things, tears rolling down my cheeks.

Then I go to my parents.

Simone

The headmaster notices Jamie enter the staffroom.

‘How are the wedding plans going?’

Jamie puts on a false smile.

‘Alright.’

Satisfied with the answer, the headmaster pinches another chocolate digestive and nips out of the staffroom to get something. Now it is just Jamie and Simone. Simone doesn’t say anything. She just looks at him briefly with her forget-me-not blue eyes. She has had her hair cut short above her shoulders and has gone back to her natural colour, ash blonde. Jamie is not looking at her though, he is staring down into his cup of coffee.

‘I’ve always told you that caffeine is bad for your health, Jamie.’

Simone says the words softly and Jamie looks up, his eyes bloodshot.

‘She kissed another guy.’

Simone looks at him, waiting for him to continue.

‘She’s moved back to her parents. Obviously.’

‘I’m sorry, Jamie.’

Jamie looks at her properly. She genuinely does sound sorry. She is not triumphant like she would have been if something like this happened two months ago.

‘OK.’ Simone says, nodding sadly.

She holds up her hands.

‘Obviously, I can’t talk but I’m here if you know...’

Simone feels a pang of shame that she had done more than kiss Antonio and jealously that Tess had only kissed the mystery bloke.

'Thanks.'

Jamie sounds as if he truly means it. He gazes at Simone gratefully.

Tess

I go into work, forcing the door open. Sitting there, stroking Butterfly, is Zac.

'Tess.'

There is relief in his voice.

He puts down Butterfly to come over to me. He sees that my eyes are bloodshot. His face softens.

'Oh, Tess...'

He is about to envelope me in his arms and hold me close. He wants to breathe in my wild curls and tell me that it's alright like he used to... but I hold up my hand and glare at him.

'Don't you dare.'

Zac lowers his arms and they flop by his sides.

My amber eyes pierce him.

'You're selfish!' I say, my eyes full of tears.

Zac's jaw drops.

It is only after I storm past him that he finds his voice.

'Tess, I love you!'

I spin round.

'Yeah? And you only decide to declare your feelings when I'm *engaged* and in love with *another man*?'

Zac's eyes widen with annoyance.

'Tess, *you kissed me back!*'

'Don't you remind me! For two seconds at the most! It wasn't going any further.'

Zac's face hardens.

'So what's Jamie got that I haven't?'

I raise my eyebrows.

'Oh. I see. Higher salary, classic version of handsome...'

Zac gives a bitter laugh after he has said the words.

I give one in return.

'Well, you clearly don't know me as well as you think you do, Zac. Last night was a mistake. *We* were a mistake.'

I say the last words clearly enough but I cannot quite bring myself to meet Zac's eye.

Jamie

'Kyle! How many times do I have to tell you to make use of the space around you?'

Baffled by the absence of Mr Evan's usually supportive tone, Kyle does not anticipate Big Gerry rugby tackling him to the ground. Kyle is flattened under Big Gerry's weight but still he holds the ball close to his chest. Big Gerry pinches him, trying to make him give in. Matthew, who is in a spot where Kyle can push the ball back to him, suddenly protests.

'Sir, he's pinching him!'

'Right then, Matthew's team get the ball! Gerry, off!'

Big Gerry reluctantly gets off Kyle whose face is buried in the ball.

Jamie sighs with pity but then his head aches with frustration.

'You see, Kyle? If you give them the opportunity, they will take advantage of you!'

Kyle gets up and throws the ball down in temper. He walks off the pitch.

Jamie puts his hand to his forehead, realising what he has just done.

'Kyle, wait...'

Jamie looks up to see Simone frowning at him from across the field.

Then her attention is turned back to her rounders' team.

Simone

Once all the kids have disappeared, it is just Jamie and Simone. She can feel his hot breath and burning eyes from where she is standing. He has been staring at her all day. Hungrily. Finally, she gives in and turns to him.

‘You look like you need to do some yoga or at least have a massage...’

Jamie’s brown eyes fix on her. They are like autumn leaves being set alight.

‘No class today, is there?’

His voice is low, husky...

‘No.’

He looks up and down the corridor. It is empty. He stares straight into Simone’s eyes.

‘Then how about we do some... back at mine?’

Jamie and Simone enter the car park, keeping a respectable distance from one another. Simone notes that there is no chance Jamie’s bike will fit in the boot of her sports car.

‘Race ya!’ she suggests, winking.

Jamie turns to her with a saucy look in his eyes. Boy, would he chase her.

As he follows her car up the road, he pushes down harder on the pedals. Beads of sweat emerge on his forehead. When he arrives at his flat, Simone has parked her car. He locks up his bike. As soon as he has removed his helmet, he unlocks the door. When they are inside, Jamie comes at Simone, kissing her neck hungrily. Simone gasps with pleasure. Jamie scoops Simone up in his arms, causing her to giggle with delight. When they are in the

bedroom, they cannot undress one another quick enough. Simone is grateful to feel Jamie's masculine hands all over her again.

But for the rest of the week, Simone feels odd about her relationship with Jamie. It's the sex they had that troubles her. It was quick and passionate but it never used to be like that. He used to caress her, he used too... Simone shakes her head. The only yoga position she managed to incorporate that evening was the downward facing dog. Jamie's words afterwards troubled her even more.

'Simone, that was great... but do you mind if we keep this as a no-strings-attached kind of thing?'

Although Simone had agreed, her heart sunk a little.

Zac

Days have passed since Zac kissed Tess. He is sitting in The Russet, staring gloomily into his pint.

'Williams the Conqueror!' Harry had exclaimed, roaring with laughter.

That was when Zac had recalled himself telling Tess how he would ask her to be Mrs Zac Williams. He remembers it all too clearly, how he would have opened a conker shell and replaced the conker with an onyx ring. Then on an October day in the woods, he would have it ready to offer. His words would have been, 'Will you marry me and be my love that conquers all?'

'She won't talk to me.' Zac states, sighing heavily.

Harry's expression is serious now.

'Mate... I think you need to let this one go. She's confused. She's not in the right place.'

Zac looks up.

'She wouldn't be confused if Jamie had never appeared.'

Harry frowns.

'Well, possibly. We don't know for sure. But what I'm saying is she has feelings for both of you. You've shown her how you feel but now you need to take a step back to let her work it all out.'

'We can both work it all out.'

Zac and Harry look up to see that the voice has come from a woman in her twenties, the same age as them. Her little black dress shows off her toned, slender body. She has ash blonde hair cut above the shoulders and forget-me-not blue eyes.

'Listen... I'm a... close friend of Tess' and I'm pretty sure that I can get through to her. I can persuade her to meet you, if you like.'

Zac's turquoise eyes widen.

'Oh, er, yeah. Great. Thanks! Has she said anything about me recently?'

'She is still very confused, not just about you, but about Jamie. I can sort this though, don't you worry. So should we say...Saturday at seven? Meet here?'

'Sure, thanks so much. What's your name?'

'Alana. But listen. You mustn't breathe a word of this to Tess. Understand?'

Zac nods.

Simone

Simone breathes a sigh of relief as she walks out of The Russet. Operation number one had gone smoothly. Now all she needed to do was get Tess to join the meeting. And she knew exactly how she would do that. She could see what Tess saw in Zac now. From close up, she could see how good looking he was. But in a different way to Jamie. Zac's skin is creamy and he has turquoise eyes which remind her of a Maldives ocean. He has ditched the red hair dye and the straighteners. His natural hair is more ruffled and is the shade of pinecones.

Simone stays at Jamie's that night. After they have had sex, Simone waits until Jamie has fallen asleep. She hears his deep breathing. She peers over Jamie to see that his eyes are closed. Next, Simone creeps out of bed and tiptoes over to the desk where their phones are both charging. Simone knows the pattern which unlocks Jamie's phone because she has seen him draw it. So she has no trouble putting Tess' number into her phone.

Hi Tess, this is Jamie. This is my temporary number as my phone is playing up. Will you meet me at The Russet on Saturday at 7? Love Jamie x

Simone clicks send and goes back to bed.

Tess

Saturday has arrived. I look in the mirror, applying gold eyeshadow which I know complements my amber eyes. What should I wear? I don't know why I'm worrying about this. Jamie has seen me in tracksuit bottoms with messy hair, for goodness sake. I just want to look like I've made an effort, I suppose. I want him to desire me the way he did on that bonfire night when we first met. Although flames may not be reflected in his brown eyes this time, at least my gold might be. I opt for a floaty gold dress with gold sandals. I nearly put my hair in a sophisticated bun but then I note that he prefers my curls down. Black and wild.

Mum is hovering outside the door.

'Alright, love?' she asks, when I come out.

I nod.

I go down the stairs and Dad is waiting.

'I'm sure it will be alright. You just need to... show him how much you really love him. And, anyway, I'm sure he can't resist you, looking like that!' he says.

He gives a hearty chuckle.

I thank him and head out into the night.

My heart is pounding when I get to The Russet. I have not ever gone without seeing or talking to Jamie for days before. When I enter the pub I scan the room for him and my eyes fall on... *Zac*. Sitting at a table which is a rectangle shape.

'Tess.' A voice says softly behind me.

I look round to see it belongs to *Simone*. And next to her is Jamie who is looking as perplexed as I am. Simone is dressed in a slinky, silver dress. With her short ash blonde hair and forget-me-not blue eyes, she shimmers like the

moon. Jamie is wearing a dark red shirt and black jeans. I look from one to the other and am about to walk out. But Simone grabs my arm.

'Please.' She whispers.

The pleading look in her eyes makes me stay. She leads us over to where Zac is sitting. Zac is wearing a lime green shirt and black jeans. He looks up and his eyes widen in horror. Simone motions for me and Jamie to sit down at the rectangular table.

'Alana, what the—' Zac says, his mouth gaping open.

'*Alana?*' Me and Jamie say in unison.

'You'll thank me in the long run.' Simone says firmly.

Me, Jamie and Zac look at each other.

'Tess, Jamie is in love with you and so is Zac. This is the only way I can think to help. Now, I'm going to get lost and leave you three to it.'

And with that Simone gets up and leaves, giving us a little wave.

Jamie and Zac look at me, both waiting.

Four months later

I sit there, my insides simmering with a mixture of nerves and delight as I have my hair done. My Mum is a hairdresser. Mum does my hair in a twisted bun but in places she lets little curls escape, creating a wispy effect. I am wearing a floaty, floor length dress which is rose-gold. My veil is the same colour and so is my make-up. Mum applies the finishing touch: my headdress of rose-gold flowers. Mum puts her hands on my shoulders and leans her head close to mine.

‘You look beautiful, darling.’ She says, a tear rolling down her cheek.

When me and my parents arrive at the registry office, I step out of the car and the fresh April air hits me. The grass is covered in daisies and there are blossom trees everywhere. We walk into the registry office, Dad taking my arm. I hold my bouquet of rose-gold flowers. Jamie is standing at the end of the aisle waiting for me. He is handsome in his black tuxedo. There is a rose-gold flower pinned to the breast of his suit jacket. His caramel hair has been done in a classic tapered style. Dad walks me down the aisle and goes to take his seat just before I reach Jamie. I take a step forward. We are only inches apart. His brown eyes are full of warmth.

‘You look beautiful.’ Jamie whispers.

The registrar clears his throat.

‘Do you, Tessa Parks, take Jamie Evans to be your lawfully wedded husband?’

‘I do.’

A tear nearly escapes from my eye.

‘And do you, Jamie Evans, take Tessa Parks to be your lawfully wedded wife?’

‘I do.’

I can hear the lump in Jamie’s throat.

The amber wedding bands are given to me and Jamie. Jamie takes my hand and slides a ring onto my finger, right next to my emerald engagement ring. I do the same, sliding a ring onto Jamie’s finger.

‘I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.’

We tilt our faces at the right angle and have what feels like the longest, most tender kiss.

Zac

The after party is at The Russet. They have a private function room. Zac sips his vodka and coke, looking round at all these faces he doesn't know or never got to know rather. Tess' family, friends... Zac is wearing a black suit with a turquoise tie. He knows that it matches his eyes. Tess didn't look at him once when she was being married to Jamie. That hurts him and relieves him at the same time. At least Tess will have no regrets and at least everything is OK between them now. They get along as best friends, work buddies... as Zac is thinking about these things Simone approaches him.

She is wearing a deep purple dress. Her ash blonde hair is short and bouncy. She has purple eyeshadow on which makes her forget-me-not blue eyes stand out.

'Hey.' She says.

'Hey...'

Zac glances at Jamie and Tess who are now slow dancing to 'When You Say Nothing At All' by Ronan Keating.

'Want to dance?'

Zac grins.

'Why not?'

Zac takes Simone's hand and they walk to the dance floor.

'Today has been hard for me.' Zac admits as they slow dance.

Simone gazes at him thoughtfully.

'Well, maybe I can make it a little easier.'

Zac looks at her. Simone tilts her face up towards Zac's. Zac leans in nearer. They kiss one another softly on the lips. Jamie and Tess look at them with warm smiles. The pair do not notice. They kiss each other again, this time more deeply.

Commentary

Introduction

In this paper I analyse how my modern romance story, *The Love Rectangle*, shares themes such as love, desire and rivalry with Milly Johnson's *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*. These themes are common and appealing in modern romance fiction and theories by Maria Agthe, Andrew Bennett, Nicholas Royle, Suzanne Ferris, Kristin Ramsdell and Susan Ostrov Weisser support my analysis of *The Love Rectangle* and Milly Johnson's work. I compare Milly Johnson's imagery of autumn in *An Autumn Crush* to the way I use autumn as a romantic backdrop in *The Love Rectangle*. I discuss how each novel utilises the natural world to symbolise love and desire. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's theories about desire¹ are used to explore some of my comparisons.

Another aspect I draw upon is the descriptions of characters in *The Love Rectangle* and the different ways they arouse desire. I explore how these descriptions are similar or different to those in *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*. Maria Agthe's theory of physical attractiveness being highly valued for mating selection and at the same time being viewed negatively because it can be seen as a threat will be analysed in relation to *The Love Rectangle*, *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*.

An important theme in modern romance fiction I use in this analysis is rivalry. In *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*, Sedgwick

¹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016)

would state that, 'desire is structured by a triangular relation of rivalry.'² There is rivalry in *The Love Rectangle*, but I would say that this was a rectangular relation of rivalry. There are popular themes in romance fiction which *The Love Rectangle* contains. These themes, as Kristin Ramsdell calls them, are 'reunion stories'³ and 'the protagonists starting out as friends.'⁴ I employ Kristin Ramsdell's theories to show why these themes are popular.

Suzanne Ferris explains how modern romance fiction involves 'funny fiction' as well as 'everyday struggles.'⁵ I think that this applies to *The Love Rectangle*, *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*. I apply this theory to my comparisons of each novel. *The Love Rectangle*, *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman* all have dominant female characters which is popular in modern romance fiction. I explore how this fits with Susan Ostrov Weisser's reflection of Virginia Woolf's theory that 'the Angel in the House had to be done away with in order for modern literature to be born.'⁶

² Bennett and Royle 256.

³ Kristin Ramsdell, 'Romance' (Library Journals, LLC, 2017) 70.

⁴ Ramsdell 70.

⁵ Ferris 195.

⁶ Susan Ostrov Weisser, *The Glass Slipper: Women and Love Stories* (Rutgers University Press, 2013) 105.

Using nature to represent love and desire

In *The Love Rectangle*, I use autumn as a romantic backdrop in significant love scenes, such as Jamie and Tess' engagement:

'Jamie parts some leaves in the burnt orange tree and I gasp. Hanging from a branch by some string is an emerald ring. Tears come to my eyes as Jamie undoes the string and gets down on one knee with the emerald ring in his hand. I wipe my eyes with my left sleeve. He stares up at me intently with those brown eyes. Above his head are the burnt orange leaves tipped with gold. I am reminded of the flames reflected in those brown eyes on that bonfire night.'

I have chosen autumn as a romantic backdrop for my romance story as the bright colours of autumn leaves as well as the cooling, crisp air represents autumn as a calming, colourful and beautiful season. For these reasons, I think that autumn signifies passion and settling down, which mirrors the situation Jamie and Tess are in. Milly Johnson uses the same technique in *An Autumn Crush* when describing an autumnal wedding:

'It was the most beautiful-late autumn day. The leaves were blowing in the air like confetti and the sun was like a big scoop of Cream of Cornish. I've always thought autumn was the loveliest season.'⁷

It is common in modern romance fiction to romanticize nature, especially nature which is attractive. I think that my description of 'the burnt orange leaves tipped with gold' being above Jamie's head in *The Love Rectangle* is effective as because fiery colours are often associated with passion and gold is often associated with goodness or love, the colours therefore highlight the richness of

⁷ Milly Johnson, *An Autumn Crush* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011) 94.

the romantic moment. I deliberately make the engagement ring an emerald as this colour contrasts with the autumnal backdrop of colours. Milly Johnson is also playful with her description of an autumn wedding, particular with the similes 'the leaves were blowing in the air like confetti' and 'the sun was like a big scoop of Cream of Cornish.' This description very much romanticizes autumn as it links autumnal beauty to the romantic atmosphere of a wedding.

Romanticizing nature comes from romanticism, an intellectual and artistic movement which started in the eighteenth century. Romanticism was a response against the scientific rationalisation of nature during the Enlightenment and the material changes in society. The romanticizing of autumn links to the time when romantics saw the solution as going back to nature which was viewed as a 'spiritual source of renewal.'⁸This was to prevent the objectification and commodification of people and nature.

In *The Love Rectangle* and *An Autumn Crush*, there is a wedding which takes place near the end of the story. Both weddings use the beauty of nature to heighten the romance of the story. In *An Autumn Crush*, Milly Johnson continues with her autumnal theme: 'Juliet in her classy golden gown holding a teardrop of gold flowers and leaves.'⁹ I use a similar technique when describing Tess' Bridal outfit in *The Love Rectangle*, only at this point time has passed from the autumnal engagement which means that Jamie and Tess have a spring wedding as 'the grass is covered in daisies and there are blossom trees everywhere' signifies. Like Juliet, Tess is wearing co-ordinating bridal gear

⁸ K.Jan Oosthoek, "Romanticism and nature" Environmental History Resources <https://www.eh-resources.org/romanticism-and-nature/> (1st August, 2015)

⁹ Johnson 408.

which is not the classic white gown, but one which symbolises the beauty of nature: 'I am wearing a floaty, floor length dress which is rose-gold. My veil is the same colour and so is my make-up. Mum applies the finishing touch: my headdress of rose-gold flowers.' I chose the colour rose-gold as roses symbolise everlasting love and gold represents when the romance first took place in the autumn.

This symbolism of nature, particularly autumn, links to Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's idea of every literary text being 'in some way about desire.'¹⁰ Of course, modern romance fiction has to be about desire in some way. Characters in *The Love Rectangle* and *An Autumn Crush* read desire into the nature around them, especially autumn. The imagery contributes and intensifies the romantic atmospheres of both stories. Tess' autumnal engagement and Juliet's autumnal wedding are perfect examples of this, as I have shown. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle state, love is not just an 'object, subject or theme'¹¹ although it is what many stories are about. Love is 'inextricably tied up in the speaking in how the text is written.'¹² In this case, in *The Love Rectangle* and *An Autumn Crush*, love is inextricably tied up in the character's descriptions of nature, particularly autumn as these descriptions function as a romantic backdrop. When we think back to when we are in love, we romanticize the setting around us because it was part of that moment. Autumn, for example, was where much of Tess' romance with Jamie first took place in *The Love Rectangle* as was Juliet's romance to Steve in *An Autumn Crush*.

¹⁰ Bennett and Royle 251.

¹¹ Bennett and Royle 241.

¹² Bennett and Royle 241.

Desire and dominance

The Love Rectangle has four significant characters which are Tess, Jamie, Simone and Zac. The main character is Tess, as we see her narrate in the first person whenever the story is in her perspective. When we are reading from Jamie's, Simone's or Zac's perspective, the narration is in third person. I have made my four characters highly attractive and dominant in their own ways. Zac describes a memory he has of Tess: 'Zac remembers her body on his, a sweet flood. He cannot get Tess' image out of his head. Her wild black curls, amber eyes, coffee complexion...' I have chosen the lexis 'wild' as it is associated with freedom and I use it to represent sexual freedom as well as personal freedom. This suggests that Tess is the opposite of 'the Victorian angel figure' ¹³who was 'elevated by stifling her own needs and desires.' ¹⁴Dominant female characters are effective in modern romance stories as it represents the women in society today more than the Victorian angel figure does. As Susan Ostrov Weisser explains, 'by the twentieth century, so much had changed that many women not only wanted rooms of their own but were revealed to have sensual desires of their own as well.' ¹⁵ We certainly see that Tess does not stifle her desires or show 'passive submission to the man's power to choose'¹⁶ as she takes an active role in the bedroom with Jamie, even taking charge at some points:

'But I don't let him in that easily. Boy, do I tease. He tries to come from the front and I roll over. He tries from behind and I swing my legs off the bed. I

¹³ Ostrov Weisser 108.

¹⁴ Ostrov Weisser 108.

¹⁵ Ostrov Weisser 106.

¹⁶ Ostrov Weisser 108.

stand up, picking up Jamie's discarded polo shirt and holding it over my breasts. It reaches below my thighs. I cross my legs playfully, a smile curling up on my lips. Jamie looks at me. He is on all fours, panting.'

Tess is not just going to let Jamie have what he desires in a passive manner. She is going to take pleasure in making him earn it. The sex is going to be all the more rewarding because he has worked for it. The fact that Jamie is chasing her and is at one point on all fours, indicates that Tess is playing master. Tess is reducing Jamie to a hungry, animal like state because he is craving to fulfil his sexual desire more and more.

Juliet in *An Autumn Crush* is also far from the old-fashioned Victorian angel as Piers Winstanley-Black's perspective of her does not suggest that Juliet has an 'inborn gift for self-denial.'¹⁷ Piers Winstanley-Black describes Juliet as follows: 'She was the full package really – body like an earth mother, fab knockers and long shapely legs, a thick sheen of black hair, full red lips, sparkling slate-grey eyes.'¹⁸ The characteristics 'full red lips' and 'sparkling slate-grey eyes' suggests that Juliet oozes sexual confidence. Like Tess, Juliet displays sexual dominance: 'suddenly they were kissing ferociously and rolling around in a lot of crushed poppadoms. Then Juliet was pulling him towards her bedroom, ripping off his shirt.'¹⁹ This dominance is reinforced when Juliet says 'not rough enough, big boy'²⁰ during sex with Steve. Similar to Tess, Juliet is taking lead in the bedroom at some points.

¹⁷ Ostrov Weisser 105.

¹⁸ Johnson 224.

¹⁹ Johnson 162.

²⁰ Johnson 163.

Marnie in *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman* is a very dominant character and this is portrayed in her appearance. This is evident when Marnie dresses in 'one of the power-suits she used to wear for work' and wears the 'don't-fuck-with-me' red lipstick.'²¹ This highlights how the 'Angel in the House'²² has been executed and has been replaced with females who take active roles like Marnie. As Susan Ostrov Weisser would argue, this execution was necessary for modern literature and modern romance fiction to emerge. A power-suit suggests authority and wearing suits has been more associated with masculinity, an assumption which Marnie shatters. Marnie's lipstick is a bold colour and portrays a powerful message. The power-suit and daring lipstick are things which a typical 'Angel in the House' character would be unlikely to wear. It is also hinted that Marnie could easily display sexual dominance as she tells Kay Sweetman: 'If I want to snog Herv Gunnarsen till his lips fall off, then I will, subject to his compliance of course. And if I want to move Herv Gunnarsen into my house and have naked orgies with him and invite half of Skipperstone along to watch, then I will.'²³ Marnie's sexual confidence is a stark contrast to the Victorian angel figure who would be expected to take a passive sexual role and wait until the man chooses her. I make this comparison because modern romance fiction emerged from the changes in history. In the Victorian times, women were represented as passive with their duty being to tend to the man's needs, especially domestic needs if she was a wife. However, this has changed

²¹ Milly Johnson, *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2018) 315.

²² Ostrov Weisser 105.

²³ Johnson 279.

and women in modern romance fiction are represented as independent, sexually confident and active. This major change is partly due to the women's rights movement in the nineteenth century and the feminism movement in the twentieth century.

Rivalry

Tess, Jamie's fiancée, and Simone, Jamie's ex, are painted as rivals. Simone wants Jamie's heart again but Tess is in the way. At one point in the story, I dress Tess and Simone in contrasting outfits to highlight their rivalry. For Tess' outfit, I use imagery which relates to the sun:

'I look in the mirror, applying gold eyeshadow which I know complements my amber eyes. I want him to desire me the way he did on that bonfire night when we first met. Although flames may not be reflected in his brown eyes this time, at least my gold might be. I opt for a floaty gold dress with gold sandals. I nearly put my hair in a sophisticated bun but then I note that he prefers my curls down. Black and wild.'

In contrast, for Simone's outfit, I use imagery which relates to the moon:
'Simone is dressed in a slinky, silver dress. With her short ash blonde hair and forget-me-not blue eyes, she shimmers like the moon.'

It seems that Tess and Simone are clearly playing on their positive physical attributes which arouse desire. Tess is trying to win Jamie back after her kiss with Zac she told him about. She does not just wear gold to complement her physical attributes, she wears it because she thinks it will cause sentimental

nostalgia on Jamie's part: the bonfire night when they first met and the autumnal proposal.

Simone, of course, also knows that the colour she is wearing complements her ash blonde hair and forget-me-not blue eyes. I have described Simone's eyes as forget-me-not blue to highlight her role in the story. For the majority of the story, she does not let Jamie forget her. We learn that 'he (Jamie) is thrilled at the prospect of arriving at work as an engaged man. But part of his singing is to block out any thoughts of someone who will not let go.' Shortly afterwards, we learn that Jamie means Simone and it is at this point we first discover the effect of her forget-me-not blue eyes:

'He tries to quicken his pace even though he knows he can't avoid the person forever. But sprightly as she is, Simone catches up with him.

'Hello, Jamie.' She says, casting her forget-me-not blue eyes on him.'

There is point when Simone happens to catch Tess sharing a kiss with Zac: 'In front of The Russet pub under the mistletoe is an effortlessly lean guy with dyed red hair and his lips are on... *Jamie's fiancée*.' We then see the effect of Simone's eyes again: 'That's when Tess and Simone meet eyes. Simone stares at her with her forget-me-not blue eyes and drives on when a car pips her from behind.' This description reinforces the rivalry between Tess and Simone. Simone is staring at her because she does not want Tess to forget that it is Simone, who is wanting to capture Jamie's heart, who has caught her kissing another man. Simone will not let Tess forget that she has one over her now.

It is not only the other characters Simone has an effect on, but the reader as well. From then on, the story does not quite play out how we would expect.

Although Simone 'is grateful to feel Jamie's masculine hands all over her again,' she realises partly from the sex they have that Jamie does not love her, he loves Tess. This is also hinted by Jamie's words to Simone afterwards: 'Simone, that was great... but do you mind if we keep this as a no-strings-attached kind of thing?' and Simone's reaction: 'Although Simone had agreed, her heart sunk a little.' Simone, in contrast to the 'Victorian angel figure', becomes an even stronger character. Rather than choosing to continue her rivalry with Tess, she chooses to mend the situation. This shows that Simone is strong because she now cares about Jamie enough to let him go and desires more than a no-strings-attached relationship.

Near the end of the story, we realise that Simone is fixing the love rectangle: 'Tess, Jamie is in love with you and so is Zac. This is the only way I can think to help. Now, I'm going to get lost and leave you three to it.' The love rectangle is symbolised by the rectangular table Tess and Jamie join Zac at: 'Simone motions for me and Jamie to sit down at the rectangular table.' Although at this point, you could argue that it is a love triangle because Simone has removed herself from the equation, in the end it ends up being a positive love rectangle as opposed to a negative one.

At Jamie and Tess' wedding, everyone ends up happy. We know this when Simone and Zac 'kiss one another softly on the lips' and when 'Jamie and Tess look at them with warm smiles.' The reader will 'forget Simone not' as she is the one who mends the love rectangle and unexpectedly so as she was previously the antagonist. As Jamie and Tess are reconciled, *The Love Rectangle* is a

'reunion story'²⁴ which is popular in modern romance fiction. The kisses between Simone and Zac displays an 'enduring motif'²⁵ where the characters begin as friends and 'passion ensues.'²⁶ This reunion story 'demonstrates strong character growth'²⁷, particularly for Simone as she gets Jamie and Tess back together, even though she loves Jamie. So although Tess' gold outfit and Simone's silver outfit (the former represents the sun and the latter represents the moon) does symbolise their rivalry in the story, it also shows how you need such opposite forces of nature to come together.

There is a clear rivalry between Jamie and Zac for Tess' heart. We see this when Zac confesses to his friend, Harry, 'I mean, how can I compete with him if that's the type she likes? He's broad shouldered, slim, toned, olive skinned, dark eyed...' I have made Jamie sound similar to the classic version of tall, dark and handsome, though his hair is a caramel shade. The reason for doing this is because the classic tall, dark and handsome can be popular in modern romance fiction. In contrast, Zac does not fit the classic tall, dark and handsome as well as Jamie although he is attractive in a different way. Tess describes his body as 'effortlessly lean' which contrasts to Jamie's broad shouldered and toned build. We also see Zac from Simone's perspective: 'Zac's skin is creamy and he has turquoise eyes which remind her of a Maldives ocean. He has ditched the red hair dye and the straighteners. His natural hair is more ruffled

²⁴ Ramsdell 70.

²⁵ Kristin Ramsdell, 'Romance' (Library Journals, LCC, 2016) 70.

²⁶ Ramsdell 70.

²⁷ Ramsdell 70.

and is the shade of pinecones.’ Again, Zac’s creamy skin and turquoise eyes is a contrast to Jamie’s olive skin and brown eyes.

During an argument with Tess, Zac asks ‘what’s Jamie got that I haven’t?’ and answers his own question with ‘higher salary, classic version of handsome...’ In modern romance fiction, it is common to have highly attractive characters as ‘men and women tend to desire highly attractive, as compared with less attractive partners.’²⁸ Although Harry points out to Zac, ‘she’s got more than one type’ and ‘besides, you’ve got *turquoise eyes*’, Zac sees Jamie as a threat because he suspects that Jamie’s classic good looks give Jamie an advantage over him in attracting Tess. This fits with the theory that in modern romance fiction, ‘because individuals often compete with one another over access to potential mates, highly attractive members of the same sex may be perceived as threatening.’²⁹ Being intimidated by Jamie does not stop Zac from trying to win Tess from Jamie as he confesses: ‘I’m pretty sure that if I let Tess marry Jamie without trying to win her over then I will regret it for the rest of my life.’ In modern romance fiction, this brave declaration may be considered heroic and readers always thrive off guessing which highly attractive man the woman will end up with.

An Autumn Crush also has two highly attractive male characters. Guy, Floz’s love interest, fits the calibre of tall, dark and handsome. This is clear when Floz

²⁸ Maria Agthe, ‘When Romance and Rivalry Awaken: Attractiveness-Based Social Judgement Biases Emerge at Adolescence’ *Human Nature* (Springer US, 2013) 183.

²⁹ Agthe 183.

describes Guy as 'square-jawed, tall,'³⁰ and 'muscular.'³¹ In addition to this, Guy has 'jet-black floppy curls'³² and 'grey eyes fringed with thick, dark lashes.'³³ In contrast, Steve, Juliet's love interest, is fair: 'the strong lantern chin, the white-blond hair and eyebrows, whilst his skin was light olive, which set off his ice-blue eyes beautifully.'³⁴ This demonstrates that in modern romance fiction, it is popular to have more than one kind of beauty, as we have seen with Jamie and Zac in *The Love Rectangle*.

This time there is not a rivalry for a woman's heart but a rivalry for a man's heart which proves Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's theory that 'love stories often concern the rivalry of two men for a woman'³⁵ wrong. It is becoming common that it is not always women who are being fought over in modern romance fiction, men can be fought over too. This gives female characters an active role as opposed to them always being prizes for whichever man that wins them. In this case, Gina wants Guy Miller and sees Floz as a rival: 'Once she was under his skin, she would drive Floz totally and utterly out.'³⁶ Guy describes Gina as 'long and leggy and pretty and blonde.'³⁷ He also thinks that Gina is 'everything on paper that would have made his ideal girlfriend.'³⁸

³⁰ Johnson 19.

³¹ Johnson 19.

³² Johnson 19.

³³ Johnson 19.

³⁴ Johnson 134-135.

³⁵ Bennett and Royle 256.

³⁶ Johnson 385.

³⁷ Johnson 24.

³⁸ Johnson 24.

Guy's perspective of Gina's physical appearance makes Gina sound very elegant in contrast to Guy's perspective of Floz: 'somehow the combination of that silly dressing-gown, her large watery eyes and that perfumed cloud of strawberries around her had set off a primal explosion inside his chest cavity.'³⁹ Despite Gina being Guy's physical type, she fails to have any effect on him and Guy 'often wished he felt something for her.'⁴⁰ Floz, who is short and red-haired, is far from Guy's physical type yet it is Floz he desires. We see Gina's disbelief at this as she claims that love 'had laughed at her efforts and chosen a short red-head who couldn't cut up carrots to be Guy's object of desire.'⁴¹ As Guy has chosen Floz, over his usual physical type, Gina, this contradicts the theory that 'biased judgments of others based on their attractiveness serve adaptive functions associated with mating and intrasexual competition.'⁴²

Concerning the love triangle of Gina, Guy and Floz, Guy has not picked the long, leggy, pretty and blonde Gina who should on paper make his ideal girlfriend. Instead, Guy has picked the opposite of his physical type which means that he has no biased judgements of Gina based on her physical attractiveness.

The Perfectly Imperfect Woman portrays tall, dark and handsome in a very different way. Marnie describes her exes as 'tall, dark, handsome, complicated arseholes.'⁴³ Herv Gunnarsen, who ends up being Marnie's love interest, is 'far

³⁹ Johnson 56.

⁴⁰ Johnson 24.

⁴¹ Johnson 401.

⁴² Agthe 183.

⁴³ Johnson 9.

from her usual slim, suited, dark-haired, executive, dickhead type.’⁴⁴In contrast, Herv’s ‘leonine blond hair fell past shoulders wider than a double wardrobe.’⁴⁵ Marnie describes Herv’s eyes as ‘knicker-meltingly blue.’⁴⁶She also says that Herv’s eyes are ‘infinitely warmer’⁴⁷than the Salt family eyes, ‘the difference between a Caribbean sea and a bloody cold Artic one.’ Herv’s eyes are a contrast to Justin’s ‘tobacco-brown eyes.’⁴⁸ This suggests that Herv’s eyes are a good, natural kind of warmth and Justin eyes are the wrong kind of warmth as tobacco-brown suggests an addiction to tall, dark, handsome men who have broken Marnie’s heart.

Milly Johnson is turning the image of the tall, dark and handsome man on its head: not all men who look like this behave like fairy-tale princes. Although Herv is different from her tall, dark and handsome exes, Marnie is still wary. We see this from Marnie’s perspective: ‘Not every handsome man was a git, she knew, but – without exception so far – the ones who made her own pupils dilate seemed to be.’⁴⁹ Marnie’s wariness of handsome men challenges the theory that, ‘attractive members of the opposite sex are generally viewed in a positive light’⁵⁰as even though Marnie’s positive descriptions of Herv make him sound naturally full of warmth, she is still wary and does not want to ‘hop from a Justin frying pan into a Herv fire.’⁵¹ In modern romance fiction, although it is desirable

⁴⁴ Johnson 140.

⁴⁵ Johnson 108.

⁴⁶ Johnson 112.

⁴⁷ Johnson 112.

⁴⁸ Johnson 10.

⁴⁹ Johnson 140.

⁵⁰ Agthe 183.

⁵¹ Johnson 140.

to have highly attractive characters, not all these characters are painted as good as a world where all highly attractive characters are good does not reflect reality. This challenges the “what is beautiful is good” attractiveness stereotype.’

⁵² There is a love triangle which involves Ruby, Herv and Marnie which supports Sedgwick’s theory that ‘desire is structured by a triangular relation of rivalry.’ ⁵³ Marnie thinks that, ‘if Ruby Sweetman wasn’t here to warn her off Lilian’s rugged Viking gardener, Marnie would not only have eaten someone else’s hat, but the head inside it as well.’⁵⁴ The ‘rugged Viking Gardner’ description of Herv contrasts to the classic description of a groomed, handsome prince. In modern romance fiction, some writers, like Milly Johnson, come up with such unique imagery to avoid cliché.

Ruby’s mother, Kay Sweetman, even tells Marnie, ‘You stay away from Herv and stop coming between them.’⁵⁵ Love triangles are popular in modern romance fiction as they create climaxes which draw the reader in. Marnie gets drawn into love triangles without meaning to which is suggested by her saying, ‘Yes, well, Cupid is a bit of an arse, Lilian. He fires his golden arrows into some and his lead ones into others for the hell of it.’⁵⁶ This adds further appeal as a character with innocent intentions like Marnie and a character with calculated intentions like Ruby are both perfect to put in a love triangle as most readers will be siding with Marnie and despising Ruby. This will build up tension in the narrative and make the readers feel more involved with the characters.

⁵² Agthe 183.

⁵³ Bennett and Royle 256.

⁵⁴ Johnson 152.

⁵⁵ Johnson 279.

⁵⁶ Johnson 142.

Escape in modern romance fiction

Modern romance fiction is often popular with readers wanting an escape from everyday life. My story, *The Love Rectangle* provides this escape as it has a lot of funny and light-hearted moments. One example is when the magpie flew off with Tess' engagement ring and 'Jamie climbs up a tree and grabs a stick, thrashing at the bird.' George reflects on how funny the episode was later on in the story as he comments, 'Thank god for the red squirrel, I say!' to which Jamie responds, 'So funny. The magpie collided with it...' We know that the magpie colliding with the red squirrel 'causes the ring to fall from the magpie's beak.' I think this scene shows that modern romance fiction is about 'finding the humour in a variety of situations, exchanges and people.'⁵⁷

Much later on in the story, Tess remembers this scene in a different light sometime after Zac's 'soft lips kiss me (her) full on the mouth.' Tess views the scene negatively: 'The magpie colliding with the red squirrel, causing the ring to fall from its beak to my outstretched engagement finger. That moment was too good to be true, I can see that now. I nearly lost the ring that day, now I could lose Jamie.' Tess' perspective here shows that love is not all roses and reflects upon 'everyday struggles with love'⁵⁸ as modern romance fiction does. This allows readers 'a safe haven to explore their own anxieties and assuage their fears with fantasies'⁵⁹ which is an appeal in modern romance fiction.

⁵⁷ Suzanne Ferris, 'The Post-Feminist Mystique' (College Literature, 2007) 195.

⁵⁸ Ferris 195.

⁵⁹ Ferris 237.

Milly Johnson also uses 'fantasy and escape'⁶⁰ which 'fuels much of the audience'⁶¹ for modern romance fiction. In *An Autumn Crush*, Guy describes the harvest moon as 'huge and low and pink as rose champagne.'⁶² This imagery is symbolic as Guy 'hoped that it was a sign that tonight he was going to harvest the affections of Floz Cherrydale.'⁶³ The colour and the size of the moon represents the passion which Guy feels for Floz. The harvest moon's colour being compared to rose champagne symbolises how love is something that should be celebrated. The fact that Guy wants to harvest the affections of Floz suggests that love is a process which should be taken with time and care so that a good future can be built.

An Autumn Crush creates a world where love is a slow, beautiful and rewarding process which may provide readers with an escape from the complications of their own lives. On the other hand, throughout the story, not everything about Guy and Floz's romance is straightforward. In this modern romance fiction story, Guy has one foot, as Suzanne Ferris would call it, stuck in 'the reality of workplace drudgery'⁶⁴ as he admits that 'buying the restaurant would put paid to all of his savings'⁶⁵ so 'a house would have to wait.'⁶⁶ Guy's other foot is stuck in fantasy as 'he had a picture in his mind of him and Floz and Hallow's cottage and really everything else would be second-best.'⁶⁷ I think

⁶⁰ Ferris 197-198.

⁶¹ Ferris 197-198.

⁶² Johnson 248.

⁶³ Johnson 248.

⁶⁴ Ferris 197-198.

⁶⁵ Johnson 187.

⁶⁶ Johnson 187.

⁶⁷ Johnson 187.

that this would appeal to readers of modern romance fiction as the obstacles Guy is facing reflects the reality of everyday life. We have a fantasy of what we really want in life but obstacles such as financial situations can get in the way of that. In this case, Guy's financial situation is preventing him from reaching for what he really wants: to live with Floz in Hallow's Cottage.

The Perfectly Imperfect Woman involves 'funny fiction,'⁶⁸ an important element in modern romance fiction. This is demonstrated when the protagonist, Marnie, pranks one of the antagonists, Una: 'Marnie had picked up the cheesecake (thank goodness for the thick base she favoured) and slapped it straight onto Una's face like a clown's pie.'⁶⁹ The readers would be drawn in by this as most people have people who are antagonists in their lives and some may fantasize about standing up to them in some way. The imagery of Marnie slapping the cheesecake onto Una's face is so comic that it is powerful. Although standing up to someone in such a way may not be considered appropriate in everyday life and is less likely to happen as a result, in fiction anything can happen. This means that the reader is allowed to escape from their own reality and relate to the character of Marnie.

The story also deals with the more complicated side of Marnie's life. For example, Marnie is afraid to let Herv Gunnarsen in despite really liking him because of the things that have gone wrong in her past romances. Marnie's fear is evident: 'Herv Gunnarsen could make her the most vulnerable she'd ever been; then all sorts of things would come out of the woodwork and he'd hate her

⁶⁸ Ferris 195.

⁶⁹ Johnson 306.

for what she was, what she'd done.⁷⁰ Having the complications of love as well as the highlights of love is important in modern romance fiction as this reflects relationships in everyday life. The fear of being made vulnerable by someone else or worrying about things coming out from our past is very effective in modern romance fiction as these are common things people fear which may stop them from developing relationships with others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Love Rectangle*, *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman* all explore the themes of love, desire and rivalry in modern romance fiction. This is shown as the descriptions in the stories are supported by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's theories about desire, such as every literary text being about desire in somehow and how desire is structured by a triangular relation of rivalry. In *The Love Rectangle*, however, desire is structured by a rectangular relation of rivalry. Jamie and Zac desire Tess and Simone and Tess desire Jamie. In the end, Jamie ends up with Tess and Zac ends up with Simone.

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's theory of love stories always involving a two men fighting for is women is proven wrong. In *An Autumn Crush* and *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman* there is a rivalry between two female characters for a man. Also, in *The Love Rectangle*, Simone tries to win Jamie from Tess before she decides to fix the love rectangle and let Jamie go. I aimed to show strong character growth in my story by having a reunion between Tess and

⁷⁰ Johnson 302.

Jamie. Reunion stories, as Kristin Ramsdell comments, are popular in modern romance fiction, as are stories where two character's friendship blossoms into romance. Simone's character grows stronger as she lets Jamie go and develops an unexpected romance with Zac.

All three modern romance stories have highly attractive characters which is important in modern romance fiction as Maria Agthe claims that people value high physical attractiveness over low physical attractiveness in a partner. In *The Love Rectangle*, I make sure that I represent different types of beauty. Jamie with his brown eyes, olive skin and broad shouldered, toned body represents tall, dark and handsome. Jamie does have caramel coloured hair but this is to make his looks slightly different. Zac, with his effortlessly lean body, turquoise eyes and ruffled hair the shade of pinecones (but initially dyed red earlier in the story) is attractive in a different way to Jamie.

Milly Johnson also represents two different kinds of beauty. In *An Autumn Crush*, Guy represents tall dark and handsome as he has jet-black curls and has a tall, muscular body. He has grey eyes which give his look a different edge. Steve also has a tall, muscular body but his long hair is white-blond and his eyes are ice blue. Tall, dark and handsome is represented in a completely different way in *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman* as Marnie ends with Herv who has leonine blond hair, blue eyes and a muscular body. Herv is different from Marnie's tall, dark, handsome and complicated arsehole exes, as she calls them. This challenges the 'what is beautiful is good' stereotype, as Maria Agthe would say. In *The Love Rectangle*, Zac is threatened by the tall, dark and handsome Jamie as he is his rival for Tess' heart which fits with Maria Agthe's

claim that highly attractive members of the same sex can be viewed negatively as they are seen as a threat. All three stories I have analysed portray different kinds of beauty as it is popular in modern romance fiction for the protagonist to have more than one highly attractive character to choose from.

The Love Rectangle, *An Autumn Crush* and *A Perfectly Imperfect Woman* all contain dominant protagonists. In *The Love Rectangle*, Tess takes charge in the bedroom with Jamie at some points and has wild black curls which highlight her sexual freedom. Juliet also takes charge in the bedroom with Steve in *An Autumn Crush*. She also has qualities such as sparkling slate grey eyes and full red lips which suggests sexual confidence. In *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*, Marnie wears a power-suit and don't-fuck-with-me red lipstick which suggests that she is not to be messed with. She also tells Kay Sweetman that she will do exactly what she wants with Herv when Kay tries to warn her off him.

As Susan Ostrov Weisser would comment, none of these protagonists are like the Victorian angel figure who was vanished in in order for modern literature to be born. In modern romance fiction, there will be sexually dominant females like Tess, Juliet and Marnie who do not stifle their desires or passively wait until a man chooses them. In *The Love Rectangle*, Simone is also dominant as she does not settle for just a no-strings-attached relationship and realises she needs to do what is best for Jamie which is to fix the love rectangle.

Escape is an important element in modern romance fiction. In *The Love Rectangle*, the reader is allowed to imagine a beautiful autumnal proposal where Jamie has tied an emerald ring to a hidden branch on the tree with burnt orange leaves tipped with gold. Readers can then get lost in the comedy of

Tess knocking the ring out of Jamie's hands in her enthusiasm, people throwing up leaves to search for the ring, Jamie chasing the magpie who took the ring and the magpie colliding with the red squirrel which causes the ring to drop onto Tess' finger. Readers can also escape to the world where the harvest moon is like pink champagne and Guy takes it as a sign that he will harvest the affections of Floz in *An Autumn Crush*. When Marnie slaps the cheesecake onto Una's face like a clown's pie in *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*, readers can indulge in the hilarity of that moment.

However, as Suzanne Ferris would argue, as well as escape, all three stories also show the everyday struggles of love. After Tess shares a kiss with Zac in *The Love Rectangle*, she remembers the drama of the proposal but in a more serious light. She interprets the sign of her knocking the ring out of Jamie's hands and the effort it took to get the ring back as a sign that she was destined to muck the romance up. In *An Autumn Crush*, Guy wants to live in Hallow's Cottage with Floz but he cannot afford it because he needs to buy the restaurant he is going to own. In *The Perfectly Imperfect Woman*, Marnie likes Herv but she is afraid of being made vulnerable again and of things coming out from the woodwork about her past romance with Justin which went wrong. All three stories provide an escape for readers as well as reflecting the complications of love everyday life as is common in modern romance fiction.

I have been inspired by the autumnal scenery of *An Autumn Crush* and the fact that modern romance fiction has stories that romanticize the nature around them. Autumn is an effective season to portray for a modern romance story as its fiery colours and crisp, cooling winds represents a calming season. This sets

off a feeling that you should take time to grow and harvest love. In *The Love Rectangle*, I use autumn colours such as burnt orange and gold in the proposal to signify passion and love. I also picked an autumn setting as it represents settling down, which is what Tess and Jamie are doing.

I believe that Milly Johnson had the same intention in *An Autumn Crush* when she described the autumn wedding Juliet's colleague had and Juliet's autumn wedding. Tess' wedding and Juliet's wedding make autumn seem even more like the image of love. Even though Tess', wedding is in the spring, her rose-gold wedding dress is reminiscent of autumn, the roses signify everlasting love and gold gives an autumn feel as autumn leaves can be gold. Juliet wears a golden gown and holds a teardrop of leaves and flowers at her autumn wedding. The romanticizing of autumn in both stories links to Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's theory about how every literary text is about desire and how love is inextricably tied up in things, such as these two modern romance stories.

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