

Une Rencontre

We meet on the crowded observation deck of the Eiffel Tower. It's a cold, sunny morning in the Easter holidays and we both wear thick coats against the wind.

'Saffy?'

She turns. 'Ted! What are you—'

'What are you doing here?' he says at the same time.

There's silence for a moment.

It was at Alice's party. We were in the kitchen, each trying to see if there was any wine left. One of us wore a strappy red dress that showed off her smooth shoulders, the other a bright white shirt, tight and narrow-waisted. We introduced ourselves, then found half a bottle of warm chardonnay and snuck into the garden to finish it together.

He rubs the back of his neck. 'Oh, I'm here with my family. On holiday. Th-they're over there.' He gestures behind him. Through the crowd they see a dark-haired woman in a padded jacket. She's helping a small boy push a euro into the binoculars slot. A little girl hangs on to her sleeve.

'Yes,' she says quickly. 'I'm here with Justin.' She has her hands firmly in her pockets, perhaps because of the cold. She swivels to her left, indicating with a nod. A tall, balding man in a woollen coat is concentrating on his phone. 'He's doing his socials,' she adds, and rolls her eyes.

He's bending towards her, like he used to do. She takes a step forward, then stops herself.

A warm, quiet night on the beach in Bali. As the partygoers all turned in, we slipped away along the white sand, and made love. Then we lay on our backs, watching the shooting stars and listening to the rolling breakers. We made love again, then fell asleep holding each other.

He glances over his shoulder again. 'Are you, er, here for long?'

'Oh,' she says, quickly tilting her head, 'no, we're flying back tomorrow.'

'Ah,' he says. Another pause. 'We're off to Disneyworld. Not going back till Sunday.' She nods.

A year later, at Devi and Sharon's wedding. We had a row, straight after the speeches. We shouted and swore at each other, and when we stopped, we realised everyone had gone quiet. They'd heard it all. We hurried out, separate.

'Look,' he says, 'd'you mind if we're not seen together? I mean, er, Martha—'

She nods. 'It'll look like we planned this...'

'Yes.'

She glances back at Justin, who's still scrolling. 'That wouldn't be good.'

They hold each other's gaze for the briefest moment, then look away.

'Well,' he says. He half-extends his hand to shake, then thinks better of it. 'Bye.'

She puts her hand back into her pocket. 'Bye. Good to see you.'

'Yeah.' He smiles. 'You too.' He looks over at Justin. 'All the best, hey?'

'Bye,' she whispers, blinking.

The last time we shook hands was the day we cleared out the flat. We hardly spoke, except to ask about the garlic-crusher, or the Hockney print. We didn't fight: if one of us said, is it okay if I take this, the other always replied, yeah, fine, whatever.

Our cars were parked together in the street. We didn't look at each other as we shook hands. Then we drove off in opposite directions, crying.

He hurries back to Martha and takes her elbow. 'Look, love,' he says, 'I, uh, I'm not feeling very well. I think I'll go down.'

'Oh, darling!' she says, peering into his face. 'We'll come with you. Come on, you two, we don't want to get cold up here.'

In the lift, they hold the children's hands. 'What is it?' Martha asks quietly.

He can't pretend he's ill. She knows him too well. 'Saffy was up there.'

She turns her head. 'Saffy? Here?'

He's blushing. 'Yeah. I'm sure it was her. She was with some bloke. I couldn't – I didn't want to meet her, you know?'

'Oh, Ted,' says Martha, and gives his arm a squeeze.

For a minute Saffy gazes out over the city, towards Montmartre and Sacre Coeur. Then she makes her way back to Justin and nudges into his side. He throws a bear-like arm around her. 'You all right, sweetie?' he asks.

'I don't know,' says Saffy. 'I feel – well, a bit emotional, you know?'

Justin nods. 'Ah,' he says. 'Paris.'

Tonight, in our separate hotel beds, we remember each other. Then one of us reaches for Martha's hand, and the other snuggles closer to Justin.