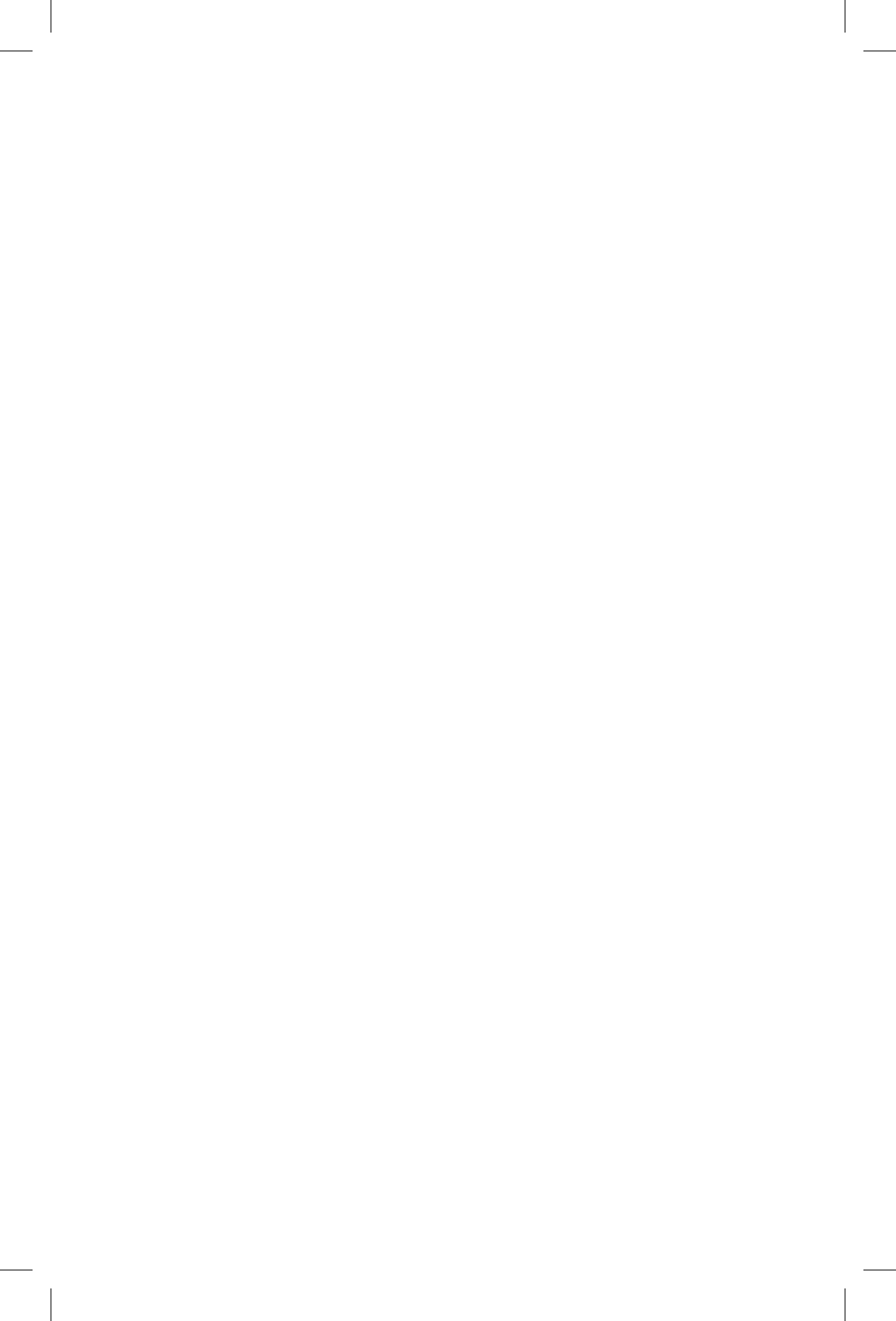


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SIMON JAMES GREEN

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For my nephew, Alfie Green



I

So I'm just standing there, in the doorway of the event space at this private members' club on Greek Street, clutching my bag of Tesco doughnuts (raspberry jam filling), because I'm not sure if there'll be food.

"Dress to impress," Mum told me when I asked if there was a dress code. *Dress to impress*. Instructions only ever given by the most malicious and vindictive of party hosts, knowing damn well it's open to massive interpretation. I've opted for the suit I wore for year eleven prom back in July. Ditched the jacket in the cloakroom because it was too hot, then caught sight of myself in a mirror and realized I looked like I was in my old school uniform. And it turns out everyone else is in jeans and T-shirts anyway. Yay, me!

Mum, meanwhile, is nowhere to be seen, even though she *knows* I don't know anyone here, but OK, this is her night, she's probably busy schmoozing other TV people, and quite honestly, that's for the best. Mum left her job as

head of drama at Pink Wafer Productions last summer, setting up her own production company, Purple Smurf, “to produce the sort of telly she loves” (according to the press release that no press were interested in). Several months later, every single one of her projects had been rejected by broadcasters, the house had been remortgaged twice, and my grandparents were paying all our bills.

Then, in what she called “a final roll of the dice”, she pitched *Cherries*, an edgy teen drama with a cast of impossibly sexy characters having an impossible amount of very successful sex. OK, I’m basing that “impossible amount” on my own (lack of) experience in the sex department, but still. If that’s you, if you’re my age and doing it *that much* and *that well*, then goddammit, *how?*

“They’re all sixteen, just like you!” Mum told me proudly as I flicked through one of the scripts one day.

“Uh-huh?” I replied. “But played by twenty-six-year-olds, no doubt?”

“Wrong!” Mum trilled. “Part of what the broadcaster loved about our pitch was the fact the cast are all the real deal. Real teenagers. Actual sixteen-year-olds.” She grabbed fistfuls of my cheeks in her hands. “Mm! You just can’t beat the vulnerability of your real teenager! The gangly awkwardness! The pathetic fuzz on the top lip. The way the hormones just sort of . . . seep out of you and make your face all shiny.”

“Ow!” I said, batting her away. “And also, all of that

sounds gross.” Then I went upstairs, stared in the bathroom mirror and realized she was right.

Nevertheless, I’ve scrubbed up as best I could for this “meet and greet” event where they’re introducing the cast to the press after a nationwide search. I’ve shaved my top lip, spent a day eating protein (well, some chicken nuggets – sort of counts?) to try and be less “gangly” and here I am, Billy No-Mates, a knob in half a suit, with every ounce of me screaming to turn back around, get the hell out of there, and go and eat my doughnuts in Soho Square until it’s all over, when I’ll turn up and tell Mum sorry but the Tube got delayed; *c’est la vie*.

“You!” A very stern, very angry-looking woman with a ponytail so tight it appears to be giving her a facelift is suddenly clicking her fingers at me.

I raise my eyebrows. Does she work for Mum?

“This way!” she barks, pushing me back out through the door and shepherding my compliant arse down a narrow corridor to the left, through a flapping door and into a steam-filled kitchen. Before I know it, a large silver platter is placed in my hands by a harangued young chef.

“Tempura prawns!” he says, in a Polish accent. “Shellfish! Gluten!”

I open my mouth to speak.

“Go, go, go!” the ponytail woman says, turning me around again and pushing me back out of the door.

I glance helplessly over my shoulder as I emerge into

the corridor, juggling the platter with my bag of doughnuts underneath, hoping the ponytail woman will follow me out and I'll have a chance to explain the misunderstanding. Instead, another waitress flaps through the door, holding a platter of smoked salmon blinis. "Sorry, can you move?" she says.

"Yes, but—" I sigh. The corridor is too narrow for her to get by. "Huh, OK."

So I have no choice except to head into the main room, where my plan is to use the extra space to turn around and go back into the kitchen, where I will firmly, but politely, explain the mistake. Unfortunately, no sooner do I enter the room than guests flock around me:

"Ooh, lovely!"

"Cool, food's here!"

"Love prawns!"

On the plus side, at least I have something to do now. And maybe it's better to be the guy handing round the snacks, instead of the one dying of awkwardness in the corner. In fact, never have I felt so popular. These tempura prawns are going down a storm! After the initial flurry of interest, I take the platter further into the room, weaving through the throngs of effortlessly cool, insanely beautiful TV people.

"Tempura prawns!" I announce, waving the platter about. "Shellfish! Gluten!"

A tall, middle-aged woman rocking skinny jeans, a

designer T-shirt and the confidence of being one of the most important people in the room turns towards me, then freezes.

“Freddie? What the fuck are you doing, darling?”

It’s my mother.

“I don’t know, they gave me these to hand out.”

My cheeks start to burn as Mum hoots with laughter (because I’m nothing if not ridiculous to her), shakes her head (because I’m so disappointing she can’t even) and beckons the ponytail woman over. “Sorry,” Mum says. “This is my son, Freddie, I don’t know why he’s. . .” She gestures helplessly at the platter, her words tailing off, giving everyone in the vicinity (and they’re already all staring due to Mum making such a fuss) an opportunity to complete the blanks: *I don’t know why he’s . . . so useless! I don’t know why he’s . . . such an utter knob! I don’t know why he’s . . . my son, I seriously think he might have been switched at birth with some other child and clearly doesn’t share any of my DNA.*

“Son?” the woman says, squinting at me. “Oh my god!” She extracts the platter from my hands. “Sorry! You’re dressed like a waiter and I just thought— Well, because everyone else is so. . .” She glances across the vista of magnificent people, then looks me up and down, and no further comment is necessary, really. “My apologies.” And off she goes to blatantly share the story with another staff member, while pointing at me.

“Why *are* you dressed like a waiter?” Mum asks.

“I’m not.”

“I mean, you sort of *are*.”

“It’s my prom outfit!” I hiss at her. “*Dress to impress*, you said!”

“And why have you got a bag of doughnuts?”

“In case there wasn’t food!”

“Which there transparently *is*.”

“How could I have known that?” I bow my head to avoid eye contact as two very glamorous girls and a cosmically pretty boy squeeze past us. Who *are* all these kids, and why don’t they go to *my* school? Literally, there is one hot boy at my school – Harrison Kane, who is completely epic, beyond gorgeous, and not the slightest bit gay.

I look back up and Mum rolls her eyes at me. “Well, anyway. At least you came. That’s a miracle in itself.” She blinks at me, then smiles.

I honestly don’t see what the problem is if some of us prefer to spend our days in our bedrooms, shut away from society, when the alternative is to commit some awkward atrocity in front of hundreds of people, which is exactly what I’ve just done. Anyway, I don’t bother arguing about any of this because it’s impossible to win against my mother, so I just give her a smile back.

“That reminds me,” she says, glancing at my mouth. “Laura’s son is here and he’s had the most brilliant work done on his teeth.”

I glare at her.

“I’m happy with my teeth, Mum!” I snap. “They’re not that bad!” They’re really not, though. One of them is maybe a tad wonky, but you wouldn’t really notice.

“OK, but the ones you can get now—”

“Mum!”

She gives me a tight smile. “Well. Come and meet Jasper.”

“Who’s he? No.”

“He’s one of the leads.” She leans in. “He’s gay.”

“So?”

Mum straightens my tie a bit, screws up her face, then loosens it again. “He’s adorable.” She steps back and considers me a moment, then waves her hands vaguely around my head. “What’s all this?”

“Um . . . my hair?”

“Yes, but what’s it *doing*? Why’s it all sticking up? Haven’t you got a comb?”

“It’s my look, Mum.” I’m telling her that, but it’s not like I have a choice. My hair won’t really do anything except stick up in tufts, despite me trying every hair product under the sun.

Mum looks doubtful. “Maybe Jasper can give you some tips? He’s got *great* hair – you just want to run your fingers through it. Come, see!”

I sigh as Mum starts pulling me towards the other side of the room. I’m resigned to yet another one of her

attempts to set me up with someone, *anyone*, because she has been insanely excited about me being gay ever since I told her, but insanely disappointed I've never actually kissed a boy, let alone brought one back for her to meet. Literally, she'll be scrolling through Instagram (she has five thousand followers – four thousand nine hundred and fifty-three more than me – another blow to my self-esteem), showing me pictures of random shirtless boys and saying, “What about him?” even though the boy in question is a model, with hundreds of thousands of followers, who lives in Brazil. Or, even worse, I'll be in town with her, and we'll pass some boy between the age of fifteen and twenty, and she'll be nudging me, occasionally also horrifically adding sounds of appreciation, like, “Phwoar!” which are not words anyone ever wants to hear their mother saying about teenage boys. To be clear, it's not that *she* thinks they're attractive, she's just trying to encourage me, I suppose a bit like when parents are trying to get their little kid to eat his food, so they pretend to eat it themselves and say, “Mmm! Yummy!” even though they don't personally find pureed banana appealing.

Mum manoeuvres me around and through assorted groups, all the while providing commentary as though it were a nature documentary: “They're some of the writers' room – Octavia just had a play about working-class lesbians on at the Royal Court, five stars in the *Guardian*, no real surprise there. . . That's Candice O'Connell, head of youth

programming at MegaFlix, completely real tits, would you believe? No, don't look, Freddie! Jesus, I don't want her to think I've raised a pervert. . . *Megan Hurst* – and I'm not saying this to wind you up, Freddie, but the straightest, whitest teeth I've ever seen."

So far, so "classic Mum". Everyone else is amazing. Everyone else is brilliant. It's just gangly, messy-haired, wonky-toothed, wearing-all-the-wrong-stuff *me* who's letting the side down. I should have stayed at home with my doughnuts.

We push through a group of very loud men and emerge into a small patch of open space. "Jasper!" Mum calls as we approach a boy with his back to us, chatting with two women my mum's age.

Jasper turns around.

Honestly, I nearly choke on my tongue.

He's insanely beautiful. *Insanely*.

I grip more firmly on to my bag of doughnuts. Anything to ground myself.

His dark blond hair is short at the back and sides, longer on top, falling over his forehead, perfectly and adorably. And yes, *fine*, I would like to run my hands through it. Perfect (like airbrushed perfect), smooth skin – not a blemish in sight. Skin that doesn't have that pasty hue of too much time spent indoors and not getting up until lunchtime (basically my existence since exams finished), but rather a healthy glow, as if he's the type of person who

eats fruit for breakfast, before doing yoga and having a green tea. He's about my height, but not remotely gangly or awkward; rather, he seems. . . *confident*. Like he doesn't look in the mirror every morning and want to cry. They may have cast *actual* sixteen-year-olds in this show, but I'm not convinced they've cast *real* ones.

"Freddie, this is up-and-coming star of the screen, and teen sensation, Jasper Perry!" Mum beams. She indicates me. "Jasper, this is my son, Freddie. He's a schoolboy."

Schoolboy?! I try not to scream. "Sixth form now, Mum," I say, trying to keep my voice light, like I'm not mortified.

"That's still school, darling," Mum replies.

Jasper holds his hand out for me to shake. "Hey," he says.

"Hey," I reply, a ripple of actual pleasure radiating through my body when I feel his warm, soft hand in mine. Also, he smells *divine*. Something expensive.

"I've got to catch up with Laura at the channel, so I'll leave you boys to . . . get to know each other!" Mum smiles, like that pause before "get to know each other" wasn't in any way mortifying, then prises the bag of doughnuts out of my clammy hands. "The canapés were nineteen quid a head, so I think not." She squeezes my shoulder. "He's *hilarious*." And off she goes, leaving Jasper Perry and me staring at one another.