

Blind Date 3

‘My best two dresses ruined and you want me to try again? I may as well let him loose in my wardrobe with a pair of scissors and a barrel of hot tar.’ Petra held her face in her hands and looked at Stella pleadingly. ‘No, Stella, you can’t be serious. Tell me you’re just playing games.’

Stella put on her best sad face. ‘Pretty please?’

Petra shuddered. ‘No, and this time I mean it. He’s a very likable chap, he has no major personality faults, he’s good looking, he’s charming, he’s... I’m sure we’ve had this conversation before. He’s a Jonah, Stella. Bad luck follows him round like a faithful hound.’

‘It wasn’t really his fault your dress got stuck in the car door, Petra. You were both in a hurry to get out of the rain.’ Stella held out her hands, palms up. ‘It could have happened to anyone.’

Petra glowered. ‘It happened to me. You should have seen the state of my dress when we finally got to the theatre. Cinderella would have thrown it out.’

Stella busied herself with making coffee. ‘He offered to buy you a new one. He was so looking forward to spending time with you. He was heartbroken at work on Thursday.’ As she poured hot water into the mugs, she took a furtive look over her shoulder.

‘Was he really? The poor man. What did he say?’

Stella clenched her fist and whispered, ‘yes,’ then turned to face her friend. Using all her amateur dramatic skills, she put on her tragic face and relayed the conversation she had had with Martin in the office.

‘He said that he was totally and utterly devastated. He said he wouldn’t hurt you for the world. He said he thought you were the most wonderful person he had ever met, and he doubted he would ever get a chance to be with anyone like you again. He said he had ruined his undeserved extra chance, and he thinks he’ll become a monk.’

Petra’s eyes brimmed with tears. ‘Oh the poor man, tell him not to be so hard on himself, it was only a dress... Okay, two dresses. He’s a lovely person, it’s just that poltergeist that follows him everywhere.’

Stella patted Petra’s knee. ‘Tell him yourself, love. I said I’d try to get him an opportunity to apologise in the flesh. Shall I tell him Saturday night? You two were made for each other.’

Petra cursed and hit the steering wheel hard. ‘Stupid bloody car.’

She took her mobile phone from her bag, pressed 9 on the speed dial and spoke to the RAC helpdesk. *If it were anyone but me, it would be funny. Who else has the RAC on their speed dial?*

The girl on the desk promised that the van would be with her in twenty minutes. An hour later, the now familiar orange van pulled up in front of her. The mechanic opened her door and stuck his head inside. ‘Hi Petra, long time no see.’

‘Hello Colin. It’s been two whole days now, hasn’t it?’

Colin laughed, pulled the lever to open the bonnet and busied himself with the engine. After trying a couple of starts, he gave her the bad news. ‘Your alternator’s had it.’

Petra groaned. ‘That must be the only original part of the car left. Is it going to be expensive?’

‘Define expensive. It could be worse, I suppose. It could have been the gearbox.’

‘Been there, done that,’ Petra replied. ‘Can you get me going? I’ll get the local garage to pick it up again. They are talking about fitting a homing device.’

Martin was waiting at his gate as she pulled up. ‘Not the car again?’

Petra nodded sadly. ‘It’s always the bloody car. My life revolves around the RAC man and the mechanic. People are beginning to talk.’

Martin laughed quietly. ‘Why don’t you let me have a look at it for you? I’m still a dab hand with the spanners.’

Petra shook her head quickly. *If he can ruin dresses like that, what could he do to a car?*

‘It’s Okay, Martin,’ she said. ‘The garage I use has had it so many times now, I get mate’s rates.’

Martin led her into the house. ‘I thought we might have a quiet dinner, then watch a DVD. Nothing messy, just prawn salad, then fish and veg. No gravy to spill all over you.’

Petra grinned. ‘Jeans and jumper tonight, spill away.’

Martin led her outside onto his patio and handed her a glass of Merlot. Petra sipped the wine and wandered down the garden past rows of neat flower beds. At the bottom was a large shed. Parked outside, on a small lawn, was a gleaming motocross bike.

‘I didn’t know you were into motocross, Martin.’ Petra turned, wide eyed, as he strolled down towards her.

‘I’ve been into it since I could first ride a bike,’ he said. ‘I Got my first one at sixteen.’

‘Both my brothers had trial bikes,’ she said happily. ‘They used to let me ride them sometimes. I got quite good.’

Martin was delighted. *At last, something we have in common.*

‘Would you like to have a go on this one?’ he offered. ‘There’s a track on the waste ground over the back. We could go after dinner.’

Petra grinned. ‘Fabulous,’ she enthused. ‘I’m so excited. It’s been years since I rode a bike.’

Over dinner, Martin asked Petra to bring her car round to his garage. ‘Let my lads have a look at it,’ he pleaded. ‘We have a fully computerised testing system. I think it’s high time someone sorted that thing out for you once and for all. I’ll throw in mate’s rates too.’

Petra thought about it for a moment, then agreed. ‘Thank you Martin. Between them, that bloody car and my wardrobe are bankrupting me.’

After dinner, Martin and Petra walked the bike round to the wasteland behind his house. 'What do you think?' asked Martin. 'Pretty cool, hey?'

Petra was amazed. Laid out before them was a vast expanse of grass and mud. Here and there were small hillocks, old piles of earth that had been left behind when the estate was built. A greasy muddy track ran through the whole area. She turned to Martin, her eyes wide and bright. 'They couldn't have built a better track if they'd planned it.'

Martin grinned. 'Me first. I'll show you the best way round. Hang on, she takes a bit of kicking up.'

Petra stood aside while Martin tried to start the bike. It took four attempts before the engine burst into life. Martin lifted the front wheel, revved the engine, and pulled away with a roar. Mud, grass, and worse, flew out from under the back wheel, covering Petra from head to foot in greasy, clinging slime.

Oblivious, Martin raced off. He was in his element. After a hundred yards, he planted his foot, skidded, and bought the bike round to face her. The rebel yell froze in his throat as he stared at her. She looked a picture of misery.

Martin closed his eyes and cursed. *I must have broken a hundred mirrors to get luck like this.*

Slowly, he made his way back across the muddy ground. As he got closer, he realised Petra wasn't crying. The tremors that racked her body were not brought on by tears, but laughter. Martin dropped the bike and walked over to her.

Petra scraped a handful of mud from her jeans and threw it at him. 'Okay, Martin,' she laughed, hardly able to get her breath. 'I give up. Let's take on this poltergeist together.'