
THE SECOND MEETING

In One Night Only, Eloise and Theo have both had heartbreak in their previous relationships. There are no specific spoilers for One Night Only as the below takes place before the story, but this is more about Eloise and Daniel's relationship.

I wake in the morning to the bright light streaming in through the bedroom window. I groan to myself and regret not putting up curtains last night, or rather, not noticing until it was too late in the evening to see the previous homeowner had taken the curtain pole. I'd like to roll over, throw the covers over my head, get some more sleep, but I know it's far too bright to do that. I check my watch, scowl at the time, and reluctantly get out of bed.

I step over some of the remaining boxes in the bedroom, half of them already unpacked and needing to be flattened down for recycling, the others still needing to be unpacked and items put away.

There was a point last night about midnight when I realised that I'd underestimated how much I had to unpack, and I regretted my stubbornness turning down not one but two offers of help. Three if I counted my dad's offer as well, but he'd already moved in some of my larger pieces of furniture like the dresser in the living room, the sofas, the bed, and wardrobe in my bedroom. I didn't want to ask too much of him.

I grab an outfit from one of the boxes, some skinny jeans, an over-sized shirt, and clean underwear to wear for going to the shops. I change in the bathroom to avoid accidentally flashing my new neighbours, another reason to make sure I put the curtains up today.

Once dressed, I potter down the stairs to the kitchen, my focus on the idea of coffee, or rather, going to the shop so I can pick up the things required to make a necessary coffee. Some things in life I can go without, coffee is not one of them.

I look around for my handbag but then the box of photographs catches my eyes. I'd left it last night, too tired to let myself get emotional over my photographs. I open the box, pulling out some of the frames. I've always loved taking photographs, I've album after album of them and then my favourite pictures are in frames that I like to have on display. Most of my favourites are ones I've displayed in every home I've lived in, like they're an essential thing to be placed in my living space.

I look at one in the silver frame, the one of me, my mother and father when I was a teenager, before my mum got sick. For a second, my heart aches in the nostalgia, the happiness we'd felt then. Back then, I thought the universe was full of happiness and excitement, and I thought it would always be like that. Until that point, nothing bad had ever touched me. I'd performed well at school, had easy going friendships, never got into trouble, fit in well with every group I was

in, and my mum and dad showered me with love and affection, I couldn't imagine my life changing into anything unhappy. Not until my mum got sick, and I realise that the world wasn't always the glittery happiness I'd experienced before, but tinged with despair, sadness, and pain.

I pop the frame that contains the image of me, Mum, and Dad onto the dresser, swiftly following with the photograph of me and Fiona. I don't know what night we took this photograph, I'm not even sure which of our friends took it, it's just us two, standing on the karaoke stage, cocktails in one hand, microphones in the other. In the picture, you can tell we're singing. I can't remember the night, but I know I would have been really off-key, just by how much Fiona looks like she's in hysterics. It's one of my favourite pictures of us together, it belongs front and centre with me and my parents.

I pull out some more frames, looking at another of my mother but then the knock at the door startles me. I pull myself out of the touch of sadness and smile to myself, thinking of Fiona. I wonder if she'll dramatically flounce in when I open the door, telling me I missed the best night but asking if I have painkillers for her hangover. There's a small part of me that regrets not going out with her last night, but I got a load of my unpacking sorted, even if it feels like there are still a hundred boxes to sort through today.

I put down the photo frames and walk to the front door, wiping my hands on the jeans to get rid of some of the stickiness from the tape that had been around the boxes. I fling the door open, a big smile on my face, but then I take a step back as it isn't Fiona on my doorstep. Instead, it's Daniel from last night.

"Hi, Eloise, how was the first night in the new house?" he asks, smiling at me.

“Well, I regretted not putting up the curtains last night but other than that, it was a good start.” I smile back at him. “Did you leave something yesterday?” I wonder.

“No, sorry, nothing like that. I just wanted to come by and give you some information about the neighbourhood,” he says.

“Do you live around here?”

“No, but I know the area well. I made you this.” He pulls an envelope from his back pocket, handing it to me. Across the envelope are the words ‘useful information.’

I open the envelope and take out the sheets that are inside. The sheets are in the same handwriting as the envelope. The first page is general information about the street, things like the day the bins are collected, what the name of the street group chat is, how to apply for a parking permit if I haven’t already, the bus schedules that service the area. The second page is more about food and drink, what the best local restaurants are, which ones deliver if you phone in your order, which Indian take-away is the best out of the three in the local area. There is a small section titled ‘do not risk it,’ including the places with low hygiene ratings, the burger place that was accused of giving customers food poisoning. The third page covers area of interest, all the fun things that are in the vicinity.

“Well, isn’t this sweet of you,” I muse, folding the papers and putting them back into the envelope.

“It’s silly, I know,” he apologises. I look at him and he looks almost bashful, embarrassed at turning up here this morning.

“No, this is sweet. Thank you. So, what is the price of this useful information?”

“A cup of coffee would suffice, I think.” His smile gets wider.

“I’d love to oblige but I haven’t got milk or anything yet,” I apologise.

"I wouldn't expect to be invited into your home, not when it is just me by myself, given you don't really know me. There is a coffee shop down the road if you want to join me."

"Your girlfriend doesn't mind you turning up on my doorstep and going for a coffee with me?" I wonder.

"Girlfriend?"

"The woman from yesterday," I elaborate. I'm quite sure he's flirting a little with me, and I have no interest in flirting nor going for a coffee with him if he's got a girlfriend. That's not my style.

He laughs and shakes his head. "Eleanor isn't my girlfriend. She's my best friend. We've been friends since we were little kids. Definitely not my girlfriend," he explains.

"Oh, right. Sorry, I misunderstood."

"So, to answer your question, the girl from yesterday wouldn't be concerned about me turning up on your doorstep and going for a coffee with you."

My mobile phone beeps so I pull it out of my jeans pocket, looking at the message on the screen. It's from Fiona, announcing she's on her way over to help me, and then she's taking me for Sunday brunch. There's a second message that comes through immediately after, noting that she hopes I have painkillers. I look back at Daniel.

"I'm so sorry, my friend is on her way over. She won't be long, so I don't have time for a coffee this morning," I apologise.

"Okay, well, I hope to see you around," Daniel replies. He turns and takes a step away from me, but then he stops, turning back to me. "Eloise?"

"Yes?"

"How about Friday night? Are you busy?"

"I'm not busy on Friday," I say, leaning against the doorframe and staring at him, a small smile on my face. That boyish charm I'd noticed

last night seems to have come on in full force this morning. He's cute as hell.

"What would you say if I asked you for a date on Friday night?" he wonders.

My smile gets wider. "I guess you'd have to ask me and see what I say."

He leans a little closer. "Would you like to go out with me on Friday?"

"I think I would," I confirm.

"Then I'll pick you up at six and take you out to dinner."

"Looking forward to it."

He gives me another smile, one that shows off his teeth, and I notice he has little dimples in his cheeks when he smiles broadly. It suits him, it adds to the overall charm he has.

"I can't wait," he says, and then he turns and saunters off down the path, leaving me staring after him with a goofy grin on my face, and an excited fizz in me about a Friday date.