

# **EXTRAORDINARY TIMES**

**By Rosemary Jenkinson**

## **CHAPTER TWO**

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Aimee Ervine's head is hanging. It was the three-for-one shots she downed in the Students' Union last night as part of the Rag Week challenge. It was the best of craic but why, oh why, did she ever take on a rugby player who was about three stone heavier and used to drinking games. It was only lucky she was able to disgorge most of the vodkas into the toilet afterwards, otherwise she'd never have made it home. She takes another guzzle from her water bottle. The seminar room is roasting and she has a thirst on her a reservoir couldn't slake.

Angelina Murphy puts her blond head winsomely to one side and recites the main points of her power point presentation. What a dick, no, a dweeb, give her an American term, thinks Aimee, glazing over. What is it with these young lecturers who think they're the bee's nipples, smiling brightly, imagining all their students are in love with them. Makes you want to boke, though the nausea is partially induced by last night's drink. This is her favourite module in her whole degree: 'Feminism from the French Revolution to the Twenty-First Century', but she can't concentrate on a word. She decides to bale out of her next lecture. Something about alienation of loyalists, but sure they alienate themselves by being callous sexist brutes. Besides, she can't stand that David Donnan. Up his own arse, pompous as a stuffed frog, although he can't be more than forty. They all call him Dr Dave behind his back.

After her last essay, she'd met Donnan in his office where he elucidated its numerous failings.

'It's not permissible to quote personal sources,' he'd exploded. 'What is this, first year? This is unacceptably sloppy work.'

He proceeded to mansplain exactly how to construct an academic essay, from setting out the intent to the summation. His caustic parting shot had been, 'I've heard you're going out with a famous YouTuber but I expect you to devote more time to my essays than you would to a six-minute video.' What a bastard, citing her personal life against her. If she complained to her student rep, she could probably file a case over it.

However, she could do without the aggro or the rep as a troublemaker. Dr Dave had a point and she spent three days revamping that essay, managing to scrape up a stingy 2:2, though surely after that much work it deserved a 2:1. Only three months till her finals and every essay counts.

A text comes through from Tyler.

**See you @ 3 x**

She can't wait and, a few minutes later, exits the seminar with the other students. The heat and humidity of that corridor. The old Queen's buildings are like rabbit warrens. What is it up ahead, a funeral cortege? There's always a bottleneck at the stairs – all those Friday farewells at the stairwells.

Just then, she notices the office door half-open. 'Dr David Donnan' says the sign, but he doesn't seem to be at his desk. On a wild impulse, she retreats a few steps and hangs back till everyone's walked past. She knocks on Donnan's door, but there's no answer and when she pokes her head in, the office is empty.

Look at the state of your desk, Dr Dave, she thinks to herself and devilment is in her mind, a quick route to revenge. Steal something, she tells herself, and hold it to ransom for Rag Week. It's the perfect way to get even. She casts her eyes around, but she's hardly going to nick his computer - now that really would be theft. But it thrills her that she's about to outprank Tyler who is always up to mischief and she's fed up with being the goody two-shoes in the relationship. She turns the key in the lock of Donnan's drawer (what an eejit he is to leave the key in!) and there it is, an old digital recorder – perfect. She quickly scribbles a note.

'A hundred quid for charity and you can have your recorder back. Signed, The Recordnappers'.

She chuckles to herself and slips the recorder into her bag, but just as she leaves, she catches herself, wondering if she's being mean. She's always beset by self-doubt,

always being pusillanimous, but not this time, she tells herself, heading out, closing the door behind her. She bounces down the stairs thinking revenge is sweet, suck on that, you pernicky asshole. The front door is wide open and the sun is streaming in. She walks out into a breezy blue-sky day. The last of the rain is wrapped up in a few cloudy parcels disappearing into the distance. She fishes out her blue sunglasses. Tyler always teases her about them but why would she want to see the world through the brown autumnal filter everyone else wears? Blue is ice-cool.

Here he comes, engine revving. His white Ferrari, the black top down, hip-hop tunes blasting out, lyrics banging on about bucks and women's butts. Not exactly fitting after her feminist module, but she'll let it fly. A few knots of students, hanging round after the seminar, turn their heads to watch.

'Jump in, babes,' goes Tyler.

She places one hand on the door, the other on the back of the passenger seat and leaps in, smooth as a hurdler. She'd practised it last weekend at Tyler's house, just to look cool - and they're off. He nearly gives her whiplash as he slams his foot to the floor, then his left on the brakes; it's like being in a fairground ride. Every woman, man, dog on the street is staring at them as they crawl bumper to bumper down Botanic Avenue. She finds it gratifying, this novelty of feeling young and rich. She's only been going out with Tyler three months but they've already been on a copter ride and flown first class to London. It's just so good getting out of her shared house at the weekend. A student nurse from Dublin moved in last Christmas and makes their lives miserable. Not only does she stomp around with a Lurgan spade face, but the last time she had a skinful she flung a pan of noodles down the living room wall. Only this week, Aimee arrived to find the heat on full blast. It was like the tropical palm house in Botanic! She suspects the nurse is trying to use up all the oil before doing a runner.

Tyler is resting his left wrist, adorned with a limited edition watch, on top of the steering wheel, flinging his bling in everyone's face. And sure, she knows it's a bit crass, but who cares, she's dating the Great Gatsby and she can see herself in the wing mirror,

tangle-haired, cheeks rouged from the ragged wind, sunnies on. When she glances across at Tyler, his blond hair is tousled like he's just got out of bed, his tan is like he's been sunkissed on a Californian beach and his gold-rimmed aviators make her hot for him. Not that reality quite lives up to the image. The exhaust fumes and dust thrown up in the breeze start making her cough.

'You'll get used to it,' laughs Tyler.

So this is how the rich suffer for their ostentatiousness, thinks Aimee.

Tyler pulls in at a terraced house off Newington on the Antrim Road.

'Here you go, film-maker.'

He passes Aimee the video camera, takes a wad of notes out of his puffa jacket and shakes it in front of the lens.

'This is what everyone deserves for being a selfless mum,' he smiles as Aimee films him. 'A thousand smackeroonies. Tyler Zac is bringing treats for single mums all over Belfast.'

He hops out of the Ferrari and knocks on the door. A woman answers, the kid who nominated her for the cash prize lurking in the hallway behind her. She has clearly dressed up for the occasion in full makeup and a bright lemon jumper.

'Aahhh, I can't believe it,' she exclaims, and there's a tear in her eye when she holds the money in her hand. 'Tyler, thank you so much. You're a godsend.'

'You deserve it. Anything I can do to make your life easier,' says Tyler, 'just ask.'

The local kids are already flocking to Tyler, gawping at his Ferrari in amazement. 'Tyler Zac,' they all utter in hushed tones. Sensing that the street is about to descend on him, Tyler jumps back in the car.

'Let's go,' he tells Aimee.

She switches off the camera and they're off from the mean streets, having distributed their largesse, and on their way to the wealthier environs of Cave Hill. The yellow gorse is glowing all the way up the mountainside. She doesn't fully understand how Tyler makes money from giving it away, but guesses he earns so much from YouTube and corporate sponsorship he can afford it. Still, it's generous of him. She can't help thinking of the thrilled look on the woman's face and her teary eyes.

Aimee met Tyler six weeks ago at a student party in Stranmillis. He was there as a friend of a friend, just chilling for an hour without the ubiquitous camera. Girls were either throwing themselves at him or trying to play it cool. She was squeezing past when someone jolted her arm, splashing red wine all over his white trainers.

'Hey, thanks for giving me pink laces!' he said, mock-annoyed.

There was something restless in his eyes and she could tell he was bored by the party or a bit zonked out, probably both. It wasn't a meeting of minds as she was off her head, but it was a definite meeting of spirits.

They turn into Tyler's steep drive and the wheels rev uphill, then screech to a stop. Through the trees above his house, she can see the cave where the United Irishmen hid themselves from the British soldiers, that big gray mouth in the hillside proclaiming its history. She remembers Dr Donnan giving a lecture on it last year.

'Hey, Tyler.' She pulls the recorder out of her bag. The whole journey, she's been dying to show him. 'Y'know, the mansplainer I told you about, Dr Dave? His door was wide open so in I went and pinched this.'

'Yeah? Great! What are you going to do with it?'

'I've written a ransom note, telling him to donate a hundred quid to charity if he wants it back.'

Tyler seems nonplussed. She's suddenly aware of how lame it sounds.

'That's chicken feed if it has important info on it,' he says in a rebuking tone. 'You should have asked for a grand at least.'

God, he's right. What's the point of doing anything unless you milk it big style? Tyler has what her mum would call 'an eye for the main chance' and only indulges in big extravagant ideas. Not that she's told her mum she's going out with a vlogger as it's far too early to introduce him. Her mum would be the sort to call in the wedding planners straightaway.

Tyler fixes them two g & ts and they walk out to the decking, looking down at the hazy city, the blue neck of Belfast Lough and the cool green Castlereagh Hills in the distance. Up here, she can't help feeling that Belfast is theirs for the taking. The first drink hits her with a concussive power as her head hasn't fully come round from yesterday's binge. He's telling her about his plans to build a new luxury crib in the country with an eight-seater hot tub, inspired by those of Californian YouTubers. She tries to sound enthusiastic but she envisages all these perma-tanned babes in swimsuits lounging around and wonders where she fits in. She loves it here, tucked in the lee of the mountains.

The sun is being swallowed by the darkening mass of Cave Hill, leaving a ring of pale primrose clouds. She zips up her baja hoodie, prompting Tyler to reach out and feel her hands.

'You're cold,' he says and there is something softly sensual in his eyes over and above kindness. 'That cold you could hang beef out here. C'mon in.'

She follows him through to his bedroom. The king size bed reminds her of being in a hotel room and she can never quite shake off that image of being a prostitute. At times, she feels so ashamed of her poor student status. Her skinny jeans are as tight as orange peel as she pulls them down, revealing the white pith of her skin. She notices the bruise

on his leg from the hang gliding he did in the Glens of Antrim. One day he'll kill himself just to win new subscribers.

She lies back on the bed. The first night here, she was wary of a hidden camera that might beam her out to the masses. Now she trusts Tyler, her paranoia's gone, but she knows it's inevitable that if she stays with him she'll be dragged into his filmic world to keep up his ratings.

She kisses him and the skin around his lips is as soft as a girl's. The clean-cut look extends to his whole body in the way he trims his pubes and wears his foreskin 'back' as he calls it. He told her he's pulled his foreskin back ever since his teens because he felt it was more hygienic. It's like some sort of self-circumcision. She can't help finding that odd, a little too fastidious and unnatural. Something controlling. But she loves his blond mane matted from the spring winds and ruffles it with her fingers, finding him beautiful.