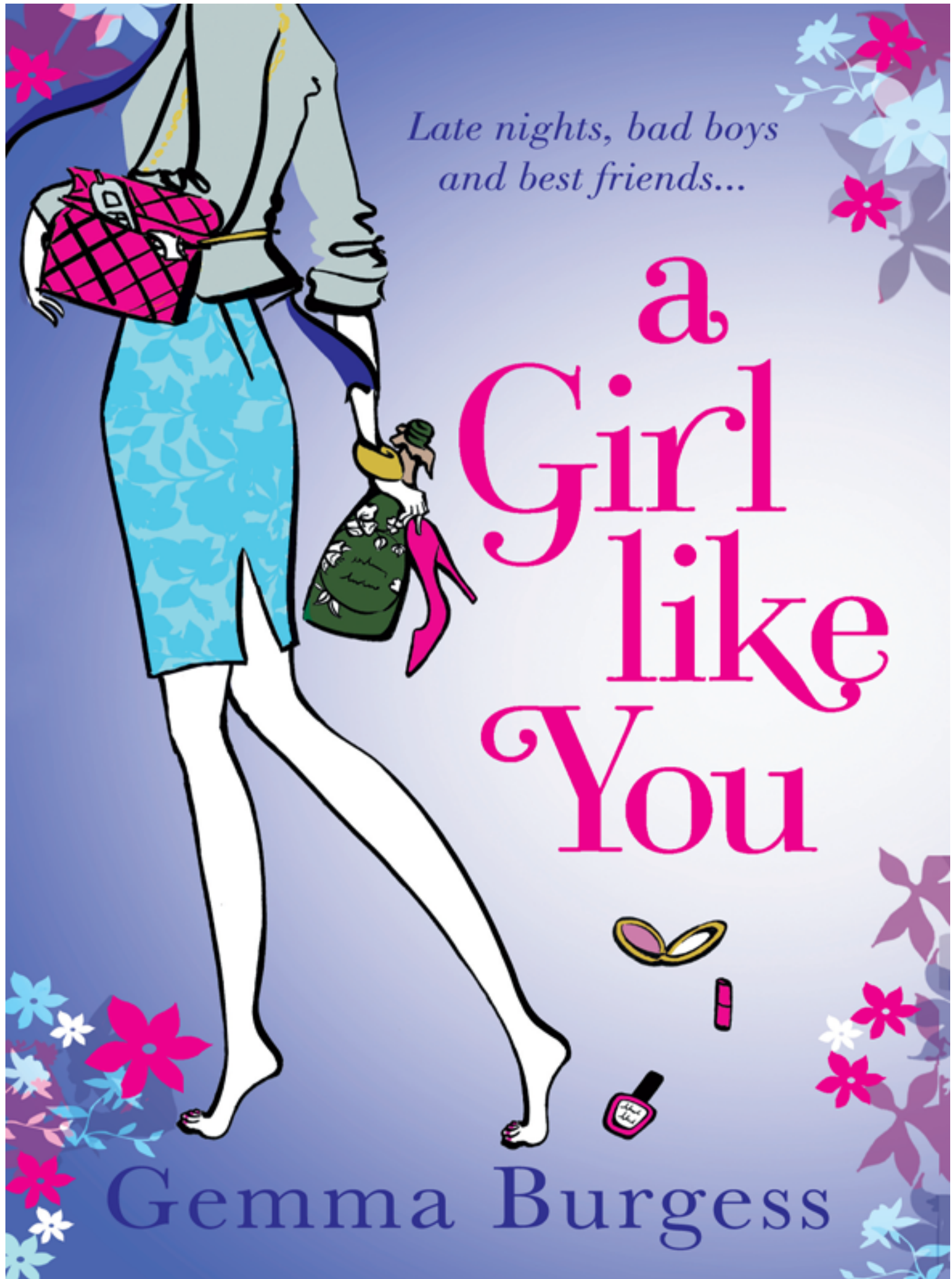


*Late nights, bad boys
and best friends...*

a Girl like You

Gemma Burgess



Gemma Burgess
A Girl Like You

«HarperCollins»

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A Girl Like You / G. Burgess — «HarperCollins»,

I've discovered the secret to successful singledom. I'm acting like a man. And it's working."I've discovered the secret to successful singledom. I'm acting like a man. And it's working. After breaking up with her boyfriend of, well, forever, Abigail Wood must learn how to be single from scratch. Her dating skills are abysmal, and she ricochets from disaster to disaster – until Robert, one of London's most notorious lotharios, agrees to coach her. With his advice, she learns to navigate the bastard-infested waters of the bar scene and practices the art of being bulletproof. The new Abigail is cocky, calm, composed...but what happens when she meets her match? A Girl Like You is the second book from Gemma Burgess. Her first book, The Dating Detox, was published in 2010 to rave reviews: "Laugh out loud funny" Closer magazine. "Smart, plotty and funny... Buy it, read it, love it." The Irish Herald. "For those waiting to option the next Bridget Jones, Gemma Burgess answers back." VF Daily, www.vanityfair.com.

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A Girl Like You
GEMMA BURGESS



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Dedication

For Paul

Because you rock.

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Dedication

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[February. \(This year.\)](#)
I never thought I'd spend hours crying on the floor of a hotel shower.

The weird thing is that underneath the hysteria, I'm completely aware how dramatic-yet-amusing this is. I'm crying for a soul-shakingly horrible reason, my contact lenses are flipping over in my eyes from the tear-water onslaught and I don't have the strength to get up, turn off the shower and reach for a towel . . . but I can still see that this is a teeny tiny bit funny.

Is it normal to feel so detached from reality after a heartbreak? Is this heartbreak? God, I don't know.

And as usual, my mind is wandering. I can't help but notice how nice the shower gel is, and how I wish I had a dinner plate showerhead at home, because crying under the pathetic trickle in my skinny white bath is so depressing.

Home, oh God, home.

Then reality hits me and I start sobbing again.

I wonder how my black eye is coming along, but I can't bear to look in the mirror. I swear my jowls droop when I'm this tired. On top of everything else that life has landed me with (inability to tell right from left, inability to tell lust from love, inability to drink whisky without becoming really drunk), that's just not fair.

The sick feeling I've had for days just won't go away. I wonder if it ever will.

I think I'll make the water a little bit hotter and curl up on the floor. There. I'm almost comfortable. The shower is huge, taking up about half the bathroom, which, like the rest of the hotel room, is dark and sexy with a dash of chinoiserie, and flattering lighting that whispers five star in a posh accent. Hey, if you're going to have a breakdown, you may as well have it in the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong, that's what I always say.

Perhaps I should call my sister. Sophie. She is always good at being comforting. That's the best thing about little sisters: they spend so much time wishing they were elder sisters (when they're waiting to go to big school, waiting to get a bike without training wheels, waiting to get their ears pierced, though wily Sophie got her ears pierced the same day as me, despite the fact that I'd been begging for YEARS and I was 13 and she was only 11) that in the end they're far wiser than the elder ones could ever be. She's in Chicago right now, so that's only . . . Oh, I can't figure out time differences.

I don't even know what time it is here. Late afternoon?

It feels like the sun hasn't properly risen in Hong Kong today. It's grey and humid and thunderstormy. I love it when the weather matches my mood.

I think I'm almost sick of being in the shower. Perhaps I should go and lie on the floor of the hotel room again. I spent a good two hours crying next to my open suitcase earlier. I estimate . . . Wait. Was that the door?

I stare into space, listening intently.

Another knock, very loud and impatient. Not like the soft knock of the hotel staff.

Maybe it's him! Who else could it be? Yes! It must be! It's him!

I scramble up and turn off the shower, shouting 'coming!', wrap the bathrobe around myself and hurry to the door, my hair dripping water all over my face. I knew he'd find out I was here, I knew it was a mistake, I knew—

I'm stunned. It's not the man I was expecting.

'What are you doing here?' I finally croak.

'What are you doing here?' he retorts angrily. 'And Christ, what the fuck happened to your face?'

'I got in a fight,' I say sarcastically, as he barges in and slams the door behind him, pushing me through into the bedroom.

'We have to call Sophie and your parents, now,' he says.

I sigh. 'Why?'

‘Because you’ve been gone for almost two full days? Because you flew halfway across the world and didn’t tell anyone where you were going or what you were doing? Because you turned your fucking phone off?’

‘It ran out. Of juice,’ I say, very sarcastically, in a way that I know will annoy him. I see his eyes light up with anger and feel a jolt of joy that I’m making someone else feel as bad as I do right now. (Is that evil?)

‘Do you have any fucking idea what you’ve put us through?’ he shouts.

‘What do you mean “us”?’ I reply. I’m so exhausted and miserable that I don’t care if I sound like a brat. ‘They’re my family, my friends! How dare you stalk me like this?’

He stares at me for a second, and then says flatly: ‘You stupid bitch.’

‘SHUT UP!’ I shout. ‘Just SHUT the FUCK UP!’ I know I’m hysterical, but I’m so tired, and I feel sick, and I can’t stop crying. I don’t want to be here anymore, and nothing is how it should be, and my life will never work out, because I don’t know what I want or how I’d get it if I did, and as I think this I scream so loudly that tiny lights dart in front of my eyes.

Then, to my shock, he slaps me sharply on the cheek. It’s not hard, but I’m so stunned that I immediately shut up, mid-wail. He slapped me?

I sit down on the bed. Wow, that was dramatic. Especially for me. I’ve never been a drama queen. More of a drama lady-in-waiting.

He sits down next to me, trying to get his breath back as I stare at him, my mouth still open in surprise. He looks tired, I notice. It must be Friday by now. Is it? What day did I leave London? I can’t remember. My throat hurts.

I suddenly can’t go on. I can’t bear this. I can’t bear any of this. So I flop on the bed, curl up in a little ball and start weeping.

Again.

It’s so pathetic, I know, but I can’t stop myself. How can I possibly have any tears left? Oh, God. I want my mum.

The wrong man puts a big paw out and starts stroking my head, clearing the wet hair off my face and making soothing ‘shhh’ noises.

‘I’m sorry,’ I sob. ‘Thank you for finding me. You were right. I saw them . . . and my face, my face . . .’

‘He’s not worth it. I’m sorry I slapped you, I’m so sorry . . .’

He keeps talking, but I can’t hear him, because I really can’t stop crying now, and I just wish I’d never come here. What on earth was I thinking? I cry and cry until I finally cry myself into exhaustion. The last thing I think, as I go to sleep, is thank God he found me.

Chapter One

September. (Last year.)

This is it. My first ever date.

Not many people have their first date at 27, and I’m not saying I’m proud of it, but it’s true, and it’s one of the things you should know about me. Another is that I’m nervous. My stomach hurts from nerves. Perhaps I’m coming down with something. God, then I won’t be able to snog him. Will I snog him? I don’t know. How do you snog someone for the first time? Do people even still say ‘snog’ at the age of 27?

I haven’t had a first kiss since I was 20, for fuck’s sake. I’ve probably forgotten how.

I’m meeting my date at a place called Bam-Bou at 8 pm, and I’m on the tube. In fact, I’m 40 minutes early. Typical.

It’s not like I think he’s that amazing, or even – ahem – remember him that well. Perhaps my sister was right. I should have picked someone I didn’t like at all for the first date. ‘Sharpen your tools on someone blunt,’ was her exact suggestion.

I wonder if I even have any tools to sharpen.

I'm not a recovering nun, by the way. I've just been in a relationship forever. I mean I was in a relationship. I'm not used to using the past tense. I've only just stopped saying 'we' when I talk about things I've done. As in, 'we loved that movie', 'we went there for dinner'. That's what happens when you have one boyfriend from the age of 20 until 27-and-a-half. I left him in July and here I am, just over two months later. Officially single. And officially dating.

Paulie – my date – is the first guy to ask me out. Not the first guy to ask for my number, mind you. One of the things I've learnt in the past two months of singledom is that guys sometimes ask for your number and then don't call, even though you think they will, and you'll work yourself up into a nervous frenzy every night waiting.

I stop for a drink at a bar called The Roxy, to kill time and check my makeup. A double gin and tonic will take the edge off. Possibly two edges.

I met Paulie last weekend and though he didn't take his sunglasses off (well, it's been an unusually sunny September, and Plum and I were standing around outside a pub trying to smoke and flirt, or 'smirt' as it's apparently called) I definitely had the impression he liked me.

He gave me his card at the end of the night and told me to email him. So I did.

And here I am. Losing my dating virginity.

It was surprisingly easy to get asked out, after all the obsessing, I mean light discussing, I've been doing with Sophie, Plum and Henry for these past two months. Everyone had different advice, of course.

'Just laugh a lot,' said my sister Sophie (the only one in an actual relationship). 'It always worked for me.'

'When a guy talks to you, touch his arm and flick your hair,' said Plum (last relationship: depends how you'd define 'relationship'). 'It's subtle body language, and those signals show that you're interested.'

'Why do you keep asking me this shit? Get drunk and jump on him. It would do it for me,' said Henry (last relationship: never).

'I thought you were confident?' said my mother in dismay (married to my father forever, has hazy understanding of modern dating due to serious period drama box set addiction).

So they weren't much help.

Anyway, I always thought I was confident. Ish.

But being single and being confident is a whole different thing to being in a relationship and being confident. It's easier in a relationship. Peter, my ex-boyfriend, was an ever-buoyant life-vest of reassurance. I didn't have to make new friends, I just had a handful of old ones and shared his. If I couldn't talk to anyone at a party, I talked to him. If I found a group intimidating, he would talk for me. And so on.

So, the first time I found myself being chatted up by a moderately good-looking guy in a bar, I felt sweatily self-conscious and couldn't wait to get away. (He seemed to feel the same way about me after about 45 seconds.)

Confidence is a stupid word. It's not like I think I'm worthless or anything. Sometimes I just have trouble thinking of something to say. And then, when I say things, I sometimes wonder if they sound a bit shit. I talk to myself a lot, in my head. But everyone does, right?

Perhaps it's not confidence, perhaps there's simply a knack to being chatted up. I think I'm getting better at it. Maybe. I like bars and drinks and what do you know, so do men.

And so here I am. On a date. High five to me.

I wonder how Peter is. We broke up in July, he moved in with his brother Joe, took a sabbatical from work and went on a year-long backpacking trip. He said it was one of the things he felt he missed out on by being in a relationship with me for the whole of his 20s.

I wonder what I missed out on.

I guess I'm about to find out.

Breaking up with him was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. There isn't much in books or music or films that helps you leave someone who is very, very, nice but just not quite right. He's not mean, you're not miserable, no one cheats. It's just a sad, slow process of ending it.

Peter's such a reasonable guy that he didn't even disagree when I said, 'I don't think we're right for each other, I think deep down you know it too. So I think we should break up.' He just nodded. He would have gone on living with me for years, without questioning if we actually had a good relationship or just a functioning one. All Peter really wanted was an easy life. And – wait, why am I still thinking about my ex-fucking-boyfriend? I'm almost on a date. Stop it, Abigail.

Gosh, my palms are clammy. Perhaps I'll need Botox shots in them. They do that, you know. I wonder if my armpits are sweaty too. Fuck. I can't tell. I'll just have to keep my arms down all night.

Oh, look, I've finished my drink. May as well have another.

Thank hell I'm finally going on a date. For the six months before we broke up, the flip side to the thought 'I'm not happy, I want to leave Peter,' was the thought 'but then I'll be single, and I'll have to meet new men, and go on dates, and I don't know how.'

For a while, that thought – that fear – was enough to keep me from leaving Peter. Fear of never having anyone think I was pretty, fear of never being asked out, fear of never falling in love again, in short: fear of getting Lonely Single Girl Syndrome, of never finding the right person and dying alone. Why take the risk?

Pretty standard stuff, right?

And yet, the last two months of singledom have been infinitely more fun than the last year (or three) of my relationship. After I dealt with the inevitable emotional fallout and guilt from ending my old life (my advice: move out as fast as you can, so your new surroundings match your new state of mind, and get a haircut, for the same reason) I immediately started structuring a new one. Work is the same, obviously, so the focus has been on my previously neglected social butterfly skills. Dinners and drinks and lunches and parties: you name it, I'm doing it. Other nights I rejoice in time alone, reading chicklit in the bath or going to sleep at 8 pm covered in fake tan and a hair mask.

I love it.

I love my new flatshare, too. It's in the delightfully-monikered Primrose Hill. I'm renting a room from Robert, a friend of my sister's fiancé. I haven't seen him much since I moved in a month ago. When we do meet, in the kitchen or the hallway, we make polite small talk and that's about it. Which suits me just fine.

My bedroom is on the top floor of the house. It's small and quiet and best of all, it's mine, all mine. It's not perfect, of course – the ensuite bathroom is poky, and the wardrobe is tiny, but my clothes have adjusted very well to the transition. They're such troopers.

I look down at my black peep-toes. Yes, you, I think. You're a trooper.

What, like you've never talked to your clothes.

OK, it's 7.50 pm. I can walk to Bam-Bou now. I'm sure Paulie will be early. Men are always early for dates, right? I don't know! God. How did I end up being the only 27-year-old I know who's never ever gone out on a date?

Now I'm nervous again.

Could I have a boyfriend called Paulie? It sounds like a budgeri gar. Right. Here we are. Bam-Bou. He said he'd meet me in the bar on the top floor.

'Hi!' I say, grinning nervously, when I finally reach the sexy, dark little bar. Paulie is sitting on a stool in the corner, wearing a very nice dark grey suit. He's hot, though a bit jowlier than I remembered.

'Ali,' he says, putting down his BlackBerry and leaning over to give me a doublekiss hello. Cold cheeks. Sandalwoody aftershave.

'Abi . . . gail,' I correct him. 'Abigail Wood.' There's nowhere for me to sit. Never mind. I'll just lean. Oh God, I feel sick with nerves.

‘Right,’ he says, going back to his BlackBerry. ‘Pick a drink, I’ve just got a work thing to reply to . . .’

I nod, and looking around, pick up a drinks menu and start reading it. What shall I pick? I’m puffed! How embarrassing to be panting this much. Why would you have the bar on the fourth floor of a building with no lift?

I choose a martini, and as he orders it, I try to look composed, like I date all the time. Who me? I’m on a date. Who him? He’s my date.

‘So. How was your day?’ I ask, when Paulie returns. Is that a good question? I don’t know. My mum would ask it.

‘Scintillating,’ he replies crisply, leaning into me. Cripes, he is definitely hot. Very dashing eyebrows.

‘What do you do?’ I am trying to smile and look interested and nice and pretty, all at the same time.

‘I work for a branding agency,’ he says. ‘I’m head of account management.’

‘Oh, how interesting!’ I say. Wow. I really do sound like my mum. ‘Where is your office?’

‘Farringdon.’

‘How long have you been doing that?’ But I can’t seem to stop.

‘About seven years. I started my own company straight out of university, managing chalet bitches, as that was what I loved,’ he pauses, and grins to himself for a second. ‘You know. But that got tired after a couple of years, so here I am.’

‘Golly,’ I say brightly. ‘That does sound interesting.’ Why do I feel like I’m at a job interview?

‘It was,’ he nods, his smile faltering slightly.

‘Where was the chalet company based?’ Is this normal?

‘Verbier.’

‘Do you speak French?’ Stop asking questions.

‘I can hold my own.’

‘Are you from London originally?’ But what if there’s an awkward pause in conversation?

‘I am,’ he says. ‘Though I left when my parents split up. My mum moved to Devon and I moved with her. I haven’t seen my dad in twenty years.’

‘Oh, I’m . . . sorry . . .’ Shit.

He smiles at me, slightly less enthusiastically than before. Perhaps talking about his mum and dad makes him sad. I’ll change the subject. Is it hot in here? My face feels so flushed.

‘So, have you eaten here before?’ I ask. I wonder if he can see me sweating.

‘Yeah, it’s great,’ he nods. ‘The pork belly is historic. In fact, our booking isn’t for another 45 minutes, but I bet we could get settled early. Shall we?’

‘Yes!’ I exclaim, getting up and following him down the stairs. ‘I’m so hungry! I had a sandwich from Pret for lunch and I swear they’re basically carbs and air, I am always hungry mid-afternoon, so then I had a chocolate bar, which I know is . . .’ Oh, my fucking God, I’m babbling absolute shit, and he’s not even listening. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up, Abigail.

‘Oooh! What shall we order?’ I ask, as we sit down at our table. Paulie doesn’t say anything. Shit, we can’t just sit here in silence. Without even thinking, I start reading the menu out loud. It’s not something I’ve ever done before, but nerves are enough to make a girl a little, you know, antsy.

‘Steamed edamame! They’re lovely. Saigon-style crepe, hmm, not sure about that . . . Har gau, they’re a favourite of mine. Soft-shell crab! I love crab, my sister hates it, she once had food poisoning in Singapore. I’m not—’

‘Excuse me, I think we’re ready to order some wine,’ interrupts Paulie, gesturing towards the waitress at the door.

‘Wine! Great,’ I say, and take a deep breath. You’re being a dickhead, Abigail, I think firmly. Sort it out. But I can’t. I’m a rolling snowball of nerves and stupidity, gathering momentum every

second. 'I seem to be impervious to alcohol recently, since I left my, uh, in the last few weeks. I mean, I drink, you know, a lot, but I don't get hangovers lately. It's like I'm an alcoholic goddess!' Did you just say that Abigail? You absolute idiot.

'Cheers to that,' says Paulie, and drinks half his glass in one gulp.

I take a deep breath and smile, and drain half my martini in the next sip. Please God. Let this be over soon.

Chapter Two

Two hours later, I crash through the front door, staggering a little to take my heels off. My flatmate, Robert, is stretched out on the couch, legs up on the coffee table, watching TV.

'Honey, I'm home!' I say.

'Hey,' he replies, glancing at me and back at the TV.

I shuffle into the living room, carrying my shoes, and plop down on the other couch.

'I just had my first date, ever, in my whole entire life,' I say chattily. I close one eye to focus on the TV. It's an old *The Simpsons*, the episode with the monorail. 'They use the M as an anchor to get the doughnut and then there's an escalator to nowhere,' I say helpfully.

'Thanks for the heads-up.' Robert runs his hands through his hair absent-mindedly. It's longish and dark, and sticks up in the most gravity-defying way I've ever seen. I wonder if he uses product and if so, which one. 'Beer?'

I look down and see a small bucket next to the couch, filled with ice and beer. The fridge is exactly nine feet away.

'That is supremely lazy.'

Robert glances over again and grins. 'Well, aren't you chatty tonight?'

'I'm a little drunk,' I confess, sliding down the couch and manoeuvring my foot to pinch a beer bottle between my toes. Those last two martinis were goooood. We finished the wine, and Paulie switched to beer, and I thought hell, why not?

'Good date?' he asks, not taking his eyes off the TV.

'Yeah,' I say, moving my foot to bring the bottle up to my hand. Good eye-foot coordination. 'He seems really nice. A bit reserved. He's getting up early for a conference call so we called it a night after dinner.'

'Oh, so it was a bad date,' Robert says decisively, throwing me the bottle opener. I catch it perfectly and smile to myself. I cannot play any sports, at all. In fact, team sports make me panic – what if I let people down? (The pressure!) Yet I can always catch anything thrown at me. If only I could market this talent in some way, I'd never have to analyse results again. I could work in a bar, like Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*, and just throw bottles all – wait. I focus on what Robert just said.

'Bad? No!' I say. 'It was fine. I was a little, uh, nervous, but then the conversation was easy. I found out lots about him, he seems very nice.'

'Did you ask him lots of questions?'

'Yes.'

'Did he ask you any questions?'

Pause. 'No . . .'

'Did you laugh a lot?'

Even longer pause. 'We had a few . . . light moments.'

'Bad date,' he says again. 'No kiss, right?'

I admit, that part confused me. When the hell are you meant to kiss? How can you tell if they want to? I tried to look at Paulie meaningfully, but I couldn't catch his eye, and then he opened the cab door and kind of stood behind it, so I just got in and waved goodbye.

God. That is a disaster, now that I think about it.

'How did you know that?' I ask.

'Lip gloss,' he replies.

‘Well, aren’t you Sherlock fucking Holmes?’ I say. I feel a bit deflated. ‘I think he’ll call me, anyway.’

‘Right,’ says Robert flatly.

‘He could be my soulmate,’ I say lightly.

‘He isn’t,’ he says. ‘I promise.’

‘Oh, poo on you,’ I say, taking a sip of my beer.

‘Nice comeback,’ he says.

Luke, my sister’s fiancé mentioned that people sometimes find Robert a bit moody. He should know: Robert is one of his best friends. Robert and I haven’t spoken much until now. I’m probably out of practice at making new friends, and sometimes I think I wouldn’t know small talk if it hit me in the face. But tonight, the booze is helping.

I close one eye and gaze over at Robert. His legs are so long that he can easily reach the coffee table. I try to reach my toes out to it and fail. Robert notices and reaches forward to pull it towards my hopeful toes.

‘Thanks.’ Maybe I should say what’s on my mind. ‘It’s not my fault that I don’t know this dating stuff, you know. I’m a dating virgin. I’d never gone on a proper date before tonight.’

‘Mmm,’ says Robert, which I take as further encouragement.

‘I mean, I went to the movies and things with Peter at the start, obviously. But we’d been friends for so long that it felt natural . . . and we didn’t even go on an official first date. I mean, it was university. We were drunk at a party and snogged and voilà, instant boyfriendage. And now it’s seven years later and I’ve forgotten how to be single. What can I do about it?!’

Robert doesn’t respond.

‘I was just being polite by asking Paulie all those questions. What else could I talk about? He’s a total stranger! Better than awkward silence,’ I pause, thinking of more reasons. ‘And I was trying to be nice, and, um, and interested in his life. It’s good manners.’

‘I’m sure he appreciated your good manners,’ says Robert.

This is not the type of cosy flatmate chat I used to enjoy with Plum and Henry and everyone at university, I must say. Perhaps he’s never lived with a girl before. Luke shared a flat with him until he met Sophie and kicked Robert out, which is when he bought this place. It’s a funny little place over three stories, with bare floorboards and very masculine furniture. Leather couches and a couple of low wood tables. I described it to Plum as ‘butch chic’.

He’s obviously not keen on becoming best friends, I muse. He probably only needs a flatmate to help pay the mortgage. He must be old. Luke’s 30, but Robert looks older. He seems to permanently need a shave.

‘How old are you?’ I ask.

‘Old enough to know not to talk to a man during The Simpsons,’ he replies.

We watch The Simpsons episode till it ends, and then Robert starts flicking the TV channels. We go past an episode of Family Guy.

‘Oohh! Family Guy. Yes please,’ I say. Robert flicks back.

I’m starting to sober up.

‘After martinis, beer is like bread, I swear,’ I comment during the ads. ‘It really soaks up the alcohol.’

Robert doesn’t respond.

Family Guy starts again. My mind is racing. Was that a bad date? What a lot of effort and excitement and outfit-planning and grooming and anticipation . . . all for one hour and 45 minutes of shit conversation and good food.

Perhaps I haven’t missed out on that much after all. Perhaps this dating and being single malarkey is just a lot of fuss about nothing.

But that can't be right. Plum loves being single and meeting men and going on dates and you know, all that shit. It's like the entire focus of her life. And my sister Sophie loved being a single gal about town (as my dad says), that's how she met Luke, and now they're getting married.

And it's the whole point of everything, isn't it? To find someone to love and laugh with. A (whisper it) soulmate. And not settle with someone that you love like a brother and don't ever really laugh with. Like Peter. I left him because I knew there was something wrong, something missing. But there was something missing tonight, too. I – oh, I need to pee.

'I'm just going to the, uh, euphemism,' I say.

'Good to know,' he replies.

Perhaps Robert is wrong I think, as I sit back down on the couch a few minutes later. Paulie will call and we'll go out again and it will be better. Perhaps it will be a date we'll laugh about for the rest of our lives ('I was so nervous!', 'No, I was nervous!'). I mean, he must have liked me enough to ask me out, so wouldn't he like me enough to ask me out again? I don't—

'Don't think about it anymore,' says Robert to the TV. Wait, is he talking to me?

'Huh?'

'You're very easy to read,' he says, without looking at me. 'It was one night. Just learn from it and move on. Singledom is brutal. You need to be brutal too.'

'Learn what? I don't know what I did wrong . . .' I say, quickly adding, 'If I did anything wrong, if you're even right about it being a bad date, which you might not be. I like him . . . I might like him,' I caveat. Do I like Paulie? God, I don't know. I was too busy keeping the conversation going to figure that out. 'The last thing I said was "will you call me?" and he said "yes".'

'Never ask a guy to call you,' says Robert, opening another beer.

'Then I'll call him,' I say crossly.

'I wouldn't recommend it.'

'I'm a feminist. I can call a man,' I'm defensive now. 'Or I'll just text.' Robert shakes his head slowly. Cripes, maybe I should flatshare with girls. I like a bit more compassion in my pep talks, thank you very much. 'Or email. I have his email address. Or I'll casually Facebook him.'

'I'm a feminist too,' he says, rolling his eyes. 'But no. Not after the first date. Be elusive. And there is nothing casual about Facebook.'

'I just don't understand why you think it went so badly,' I say again.

'What gave it away was the questions thing,' he says, more gently. 'Too many personal questions and it becomes an interview.'

'That's just what it felt like!' Maybe he does know what he's talking about. 'This is good. Tell me more. I need baby steps.'

He grins at me. 'Play it cool. You need to be detached from the situation. It's the only way.'

'Wait!' I take out my notebook. I'm never without it: it's the repository of my to-do lists and the only way I can keep track of everything.

'Give me one sec,' I squint, close one eye, pick up my pen and start writing. What was it he just said again? Oh yeah.

Be cool

Be detached

That seems simple.

'That doesn't mean you should be a mute. Making him laugh is crucial.'

'I need to be funny, too?' I say in dismay. Robert looks amused by this. 'What makes you the expert? Do you have a girlfriend?'

'Not exactly. I'm just very good at being single.'

Ah, a player. On cue, his phone buzzes with a text that I can immediately tell, by the disinterested way he reads it, raises his eyebrows slightly, and then taps out a reply, is a girl.

‘Cool, detached . . .’ I muse, watching him. ‘Do I have to do this forever? Some day I’ll fall in love again, I hope, and then I won’t have to think about this . . . Right? Like, on my wedding day, do I have to think about acting cool and detached?’

His phone buzzes again. Another text. He reads it and raises an eyebrow, before looking up at me and computing my last statement.

‘Don’t think about falling in love. Don’t even say the word. Love has nothing to do with dating. And don’t think about your wedding day. Ever,’ he says, picking up his wallet and keys from the coffee table. He throws me the remote control and I catch it perfectly. Yes! Two out of two. ‘I’m off. Meeting a friend.’

‘I figured,’ I say. ‘Does that mean my how-to-date tutorial is over?’

‘Going on a date is just something to do for a few hours.’ Robert takes his coat from the hall cupboard. ‘It’s no big deal, so don’t build it up to be something more in your head.’

‘But what if I don’t feel detached? Or cool?’

Robert pauses as he reaches the door, looks over at me, and grins. ‘Fake it.’

Chapter Three

As I head in to work the next morning, I realise that Robert was right. I’m sure you’ve already come to the same conclusion: it was a bad date. I’m trying to chalk it up to experience, rather than chalking it up to my so-I-WILL-end-up-alone-and-lonely theory.

My office is just behind Blackfriars. I’m a financial analyst for an investment bank. Basically, I need to know everything about the retail industry in order to help our traders and clients make money.

When I first started working, I loved my job. I loved winking out information that no one else had. I felt like a little truffle pig snuffling for gems. Then the recession hit, and with no gems to snuffle, it became hard to get excited, or even care, about any of it. And then I – rather belatedly, as tends to happen to me quite a lot – realised that my job wasn’t about research, it was all about helping rich people get richer. Which doesn’t exactly fry my burger. Though perhaps work isn’t meant to be enjoyable, you know?

Full disclosure: I only joined this company because its stand was next to the bar at my university careers day.

I am not kidding. I was finishing a difficult and essentially useless degree in medieval French. The university careers day was stressful and weirdly humiliating. Plum and I discovered the bar during happy hour, the two investment guys at the company stand spotted us and, after our second bottle of half-price wine, came over for a chat.

I didn’t know what else I’d do with my life, and the salary sounded pretty good, so I applied for the grad scheme, got in, got a couple of qualifications, and now, here I am, an associate analyst. Stuck halfway up a job ladder I never knew existed till I was already on it.

I sit in a quiet corner of a very large, very grey open-plan office, on the 6th floor. My boss, Suzanne, is a managing director and has her own office (glass fronted, so she can keep an eye on us). I work in a small team, specialising in luxury retail, with two other analysts, Alistair and Charlotte. Sitting around us are the other teams: pharmaceutical, automotive, banking, construction blahblahblah.

Today, at 6.40 am, I’m the first one in from my team. The workday starts very early for research analysts. Just one of the many things that I don’t like about my job.

I sit down, turn on my laptop and sigh. Oh fluorescent lighting, how I hate you. I swear the one above my head flickers and buzzes an abnormal amount. At least my team doesn’t have to present at the 7.15 am sales meeting today. Instead, all I have to do is check Bloomberg and Reuters and see what’s happening in the markets. Nothing so far. Yay. If there was, I’d need an opinion. And it’s hard to have an opinion when you don’t really care.

This is how easy it would be to improve my quality of life: let my work day start after 9 am and let me dress how I want. Today I’m wearing my uniform: a cream top with grey trousers and heels.

The top is a bit silky and the trousers high-waisted, so this is haute fashion in my office, which is exceedingly conservative even for the City. Most women here wear utterly boring skirt suits with ill-fitting shirts and sensible, closed-toe low heels; anything too fashionable attracts attention. I think my job is why I don't speak style quite as well as Plum does. You need to be trying out new looks all the time in order to develop a real instinct for what suits you.

I take out my notebook and am looking over yesterday's list (I'm big on lists, as you've probably noticed), crossing off things and rewriting instructions on today's fresh list when my phone rings.

'Plummy plum,' I whisper. 'I'm—'

'I know you're already at work,' she says. Plum works in PR, so her day doesn't start till at least 9 am, and right now I can tell she's still in bed. 'I need 10 seconds. How the fuck was it?'

I sigh. 'Pretty bad. I need more than 10 seconds.'

'I thought perhaps you'd fall in fucking love and end up marrying him!' she says, yawning. Her voice is croaky in the mornings. She smokes too much. And swears too much.

'Dream on,' I reply, and hang up quickly as Alistair approaches. Maybe Robert's right. Love's got nothing to do with dating.

'Everybody's got a dream!' He's very cheerful in the morning. 'What's your dream? What's your dream? Welcome to Hollywoooooood.'

'It takes a real man to quote *Pretty Woman*,' I say, as he sits down.

'Really? Can I rescue you right back? Remember, you shouldn't neglect your gums.'

Alistair seemed shy and hardworking in his interviews, but quickly revealed himself to be quite the opposite, and we've ended up becoming almost-friends – as much as I ever make friends at work, anyway.

Charlotte, on the other hand, who I can see trudging up the hallway now, is, well, dull. Yes, I feel bitchy for saying that about a colleague who's never done anything bad to me, but honestly, she doesn't inspire affection. I might be a bit quiet sometimes, but she's practically a mute. Her hair, skin and clothes are all varying shades of taupe, and she wears ponchos (ponchos!) over her suits in winter and so inevitably, because she isn't Elle Macpherson-shaped, looks like a mushroom. I'm not the most stylish person in the world, but I know a 'don't' when I see one.

'Morning, Charlotte,' I say cheerfully, as she sits down at her desk.

'Morning . . .' she says flatly. See? No effort.

A text arrives from my sister, Sophie.

Date. Details. I need to know everything.

I sigh. I wish I hadn't talked about my first date so much. Now I have to tell them all how terrible it was. Though one bad date doesn't mean that I'm going to be single forever, right? Or end up with Lonely Single Girl Syndrome, miserable and . . . desperate? (I'm starting to hate that word. The d-word.)

I open a new email to Plum, Henry and Sophie:

I will only discuss this once, so read carefully. It was a disaster. I had total verbal diarrhoea. Read entire menu out loud. Asked in-depth questions about everyone he knows. Told him all about my break-up with Peter. Made stupid comments constantly. He left as soon as he could. No goodnight kiss. And I was pretty hammered.

At about 11 am, the replies arrive. My sister, Sophie, is first:

Oh Abigail. Maybe you should call him to apologise.

Is she out of her fucking mind? There is no way I am ever calling him again, ever. Why line up to get rejected outright? Far better that he just doesn't call me. Sophie is too sensitive sometimes.

I reply:

I might be a dating virgin. But I'm not an idiot.

Plum replies:

Sounds like you can chalk that one up to fucksperience, sugar-nuts. x

Ah, thank you, Plum.

Henry replies:

I can't believe you didn't jump him.

Another useful response.

I field emails all morning, in between phone calls to traders expressing my opinions on what's happening in the market (very little and very little). Then finally one email, from my ever-perceptive sister Sophie, cuts through all the shit.

Abigail – do you even want to see him again? If not, stop torturing yourself.

I think for a few minutes. I don't. I didn't really have a good time. I just feel like, well, since he asked me out, I should really give it my best shot. Try to make it work. Surely if he's a nice person, and I'm a nice person, there's no reason we shouldn't keep going?

This, it occurs to me, is the kind of thinking that kept me in a relationship with Peter for seven years.

God, that's brutal.

Wait. That was something that Robert had said about dating. I should write it down. I take out my notebook and add '**Act brutal**' to the list. Fine. I won't even try to see Paulie again. He is erased from my mind forthwith. How's that for brutal?

'Are you up for lunch later?' says Alistair, shooting across from his desk to mine on his chair.

I frown at him. This is the third time he's asked me out to lunch in the past fortnight. I'm usually too busy, but today is pretty quiet.

'Sure,' I say. 'Charlotte?'

I don't know why I'm asking, she never leaves the office at lunch. As expected, Charlotte declines.

'So, why have you been dying to eat lunch with me?' I ask, once we're seated at the sushi bar around the corner, and I've done my usual wasabi-soy mixing routine.

'Can't a man want to break bread – sorry, raw fish – with his line manager without attracting suspicion?' says Alistair, copying me.

I glance at him and arch an eyebrow.

'I don't want to be an analyst anymore,' he says in return.

I've just put a huge piece of maki roll in my mouth so I chew it slowly, whilst nodding and making eye contact, trying to think of what to say next. Halfway through chewing, my tongue discovers a large gob of wasabi that I didn't stir into the soy sauce properly, and tears immediately spurt from my eyes.

'You don't have to cry about it,' says Alistair.

'Water,' I whisper, grabbing the shiny, utterly non-absorbent napkin in front of me and holding it to my cheeks. Darn, now I'll have streaks through my makeup. 'Well. That is a big decision. What do you want to do instead?' I say eventually. I sound like my mum. Again.

'I want to sit on a trading desk,' he says firmly.

'Sheesh, why?' I exclaim. The trading floor is the Wild West of the office. They're almost always entirely male, and pungent with the sharp smell of testosterone and competition. Alistair is far too silly and funny to be a trader. And he doesn't have the killer instinct.

'Don't you ever get tired of setting up huge kills and never being part of the bloodshed?' he replies. Perhaps he does have that instinct.

'When you put it like that . . . no,' I say.

'You love research, huh?' he says, rolling his eyes. 'Well, I want more . . . more excitement. And more money.'

'You can't just decide to be a trader, you know. You're only one year out of university.'

'People do make the jump, though,' he says insistently.

'Why don't I do some research to help you make sure it's what you want?'

‘Anything you can do to help would be great, lovely Abigail. I’m bored.’

We both go back to dipping and mixing and chewing. I am flushed with pleasure that he called me lovely Abigail. It’s harmless flirting, but hardly anyone has flirted with me, harmlessly or not, in years.

‘You know, I get bored sometimes, too,’ I admit. ‘And I wonder if I’m in the right job. But I think that happens to everyone. I mean, work is work.’

Alistair frowns. ‘Work is life . . . Don’t you want to spend your life doing something you love? What would you do, if you could do anything at all?’

I gaze at him, speechless.

‘I mean, what do you want?’ he adds. ‘What do you want your life to be like?’

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. My mind is empty. What do I want? What kind of a question is that?

‘I don’t . . . I don’t know . . . I don’t . . .’ I don’t seem to have any words in my head at all.

‘Until you do, I wouldn’t worry about it,’ Alistair says, grinning at me.

My sentiments exactly.

When we get back from lunch, I sit down at my desk, and stare at the screen for a second as I try to push out all the disquieting thoughts from my head. But I can’t. Alistair is 23, and knows exactly who he is and what he wants. I’m 27 and three quarters, and I haven’t got a clue.

Chapter Four

You know what bites about singledom?

No, not the lack of sex and/or cuddling. Though a little bit of sex would not go astray right now. In fact, for a month after the break-up, sex was practically all I could think about, isn’t that weird? Where was I? Oh yeah. Singledom.

I miss not having anyone to chat to about things. No one to nod when I make comments about an inane TV show, or share a new song with, or to make porridge for on a chilly morning. I’m so used to having someone around that sometimes I come out of the shower and say, ‘Can you remind me to get more razors?’ before I remember there’s no one there. Companionship, in other words.

I’m finding that social butterflying is the best way to fill the companionship void, so I try to make sure I’m almost never alone. At least once a weekend, I meet one or all of the girls to go ‘shopping’, a catch-all phrase that covers fashion, coffee, gossip, errands, people-watching, and sharing cupcakes or other baked goods as, of course, calories shared don’t count (like calories consumed standing up, drunk or on an airplane).

Today is an important day: my best friend, Plum and my sister Sophie, are helping me refresh my singledom wardrobe and teaching me to speak style.

I’m trying on a trench coat in Whistles, and Plum is telling us a story about her colleague.

‘And then Georgina is like, since the little fucknuckle hasn’t rung her, she’s going to organise a party just so she can invite him. I have to say, I admire her balls.’

‘Yeah,’ I say, exchanging a glance with Sophie. All of Plum’s non-fashion conversation so far has, as usual of late, centred on men. Men she knows, men she likes, men other women know and like.

Plum walks over. ‘Push the sleeves up,’ she instructs me, undoing the belt and tying it in a half-bow-knot instead. ‘Pop the collar. Never wear a trench the old-fashioned way. This isn’t Waterloo fucking Bridge.’

I nod obediently, exchanging a grin with Sophie. Plum has a bossy-but-charming manner that you could put down to her Yorkshire roots, five years working with posh girls in PR or growing up with four younger brothers. We met at university when she borrowed my French notes, and became best friends when she began dating one of Peter’s friends. That didn’t last, but our friendship did. She was the centre of a much wider group while I was in a relationship with Peter and didn’t really get to know many people . . . I wonder if that’s why I get so socially nervous sometimes. Hmm.

Plum has always been sunnier and more easygoing than me, though the recent months – or is it years? – of man troubles are getting her down. She’s also very pretty, with a smile so perfect, it’s almost American. I’ve had braces twice and my teeth still retain a certain kookiness.

‘Anyway,’ she continues airily, backcombing her light brown hair with her fingers and pouting in the mirror. ‘I told her that was silly. I mean, maybe he lost his phone. Or maybe he saved her number incorrectly. A hundred things could prevent him from calling her. That’s what I always tell myself when I’m in that situation.’

I nod, unsure what to say. When I was in a relationship I didn’t really see this side to her. The man-hunter side.

‘Perhaps I’ll just go back to Yorkshire,’ she says glumly. ‘I’m running out of men in London. My mother would be thrilled.’

‘Don’t be a dick,’ says Sophie gently. She’s the only person I know who can call someone a dick and still sound nice.

Sophie is two years younger than me. As children we were both very shy and spent a lot of time reading and drawing in intense, creative silence. But then, at 12, she developed this calm confidence while I remained quiet and prone to inner panic. For a few years I was jealous of her – she went to more parties and no matter what she did, was unable to keep platonic male friends where I was depressingly capable of it – but that soon faded. And now I just adore her. (Which is fortunate, as her engagement coinciding with my break-up could otherwise have been difficult.) We look very similar: straight, dark brown hair, slim but utterly un-athletic, with blueish eyes. Her teeth are better than mine too.

‘Easy for you to say, you’re the one who’s getting fucking married at the age of 25,’ says Plum.

Sophie doesn’t say anything to this. She told me once that she feels embarrassed about jumping the marriage queue ahead of us both. That is typical Sophie. She’s kinder than anyone I know.

Plum is now trying on the trench I just had on, and is gazing at her reflection in the mirror in that detached, assessing way that all girls have when they’re shopping, like they’re examining fruit in a market. ‘I look like Inspector fucking Clouseau,’ she says. (Plum has to be extremely ‘on’ for her job in PR, which I think is one of the reasons she swears like a sailor with Tourette’s when she’s with us. Another is that she’s just really good at swearing.)

I pick up a dark-blue mini-dress. ‘Good? With a belt?’

‘I’m over belts,’ says Plum. ‘Actually, I’m over dresses. They’re so un-versatile. It’s all about separates now. But that would be OK with some drop earrings and some chic little flats.’

‘I don’t own drop earrings or chic flats,’ I say sadly. ‘How can I have been shopping my whole fucking life and still have nothing to wear?’

I take out my notebook and write ‘Flats, earrings’ in a page I keep specifically for sartorial learnings.

‘How’s this?’ says Sophie, coming out of the changing room. ‘It’s not revealing, it’s informative.’ Her dress is cut to well below boob-crease.

‘When the fuck are we going wedding dress shopping, by the way?’ says Plum, perking up considerably.

‘We?’ repeats Sophie dubiously.

‘You need me, I’m your other big sister,’ says Plum firmly, putting her arm around Sophie and shepherding her back to the changing room. ‘I’m not leaving the Wood sisters alone with that decision.’

‘Fine. After work next week,’ calls Sophie through the changing room curtain. ‘I know a vintage wedding dress company. We did a shoot there once.’

Sophie is an agent for photographers that you’ve almost heard of and soon will. She discovered she loved photography temping in a gallery in San Francisco, then rang 20 London agents every week till one of them gave her a job to shut her up. Another person who knows what she wants and makes it happen. Argh. Did I miss a Figure-Out-Your-Life-Day at school or something?

‘Right, stick a fork in me, I’m done,’ says Sophie, handing the rejected dress back to the saleswoman with an apologetic smile. ‘It’s lovely, I’ll probably come back later, thank you so much for your help!’

She once told me that she feels bad when she doesn’t buy something. It’s why she owns eight identical V-neck black jumpers.

‘Let’s go to Zara for non-basic basics,’ says Plum decisively. ‘That’s what Abigail’s missing.’

‘How are you so good at this stuff?’ I ask as we head outside.

Plum shrugs. ‘My brain automatically co-ordinates outfits. Like that magic fashion computer in Clueless. I can even do it with things I haven’t bought yet.’

With Plum’s help, Zara is a success. I find a sexy nude pencil dress, a slightly-longer-than-any-of-my-others-and-therefore-apparently-completely-different black skirt, and some totally inappropriate green high heels that I just want. Plum tells me how I should wear all these things, and I take out my notebook and write everything down till she starts laughing at me.

‘How are you getting along with Robert, by the way?’ says Sophie.

‘Fine,’ I say. ‘He’s not around much. He gave me some good “surviving singledom” tips the other night.’

‘He’d be good at that,’ says Sophie. ‘He’s a total ladykiller. One of London’s premier playboys.’

‘Description, please,’ says Plum.

‘Dark hair, dark green eyes, high cheekbones, chiselled jaw line, lips arrogantly curled into a perma-snarl,’ says Sophie, as though she’s reading the back of a Mills and Boon novel. ‘Gorgeous, brooding and manly.’

‘Frowny,’ I add. ‘Grumpy. Needs a shave. Hair’s a bit messy. He’s very tidy around the house, though. Thank God.’

‘Good body?’ says Plum.

‘Yes,’ says Sophie. ‘You really don’t find him hot, Abigail?’

‘I haven’t seen his body. It’s not like I’m going to run into him coming out of the shower, we have separate bathrooms.’

‘Shame,’ says Plum wistfully.

‘Anyway, when we met I was still in break-up recovery mode,’ I say. ‘I only ever saw him as a potential flatmate.’

‘Domesticity breeds contempt,’ says Plum. ‘He sounds like just my kind of bedmate. Roll him in honey and bring him to me.’

‘He’s not the relationship type,’ I say, shaking my head.

‘Totally,’ agrees Sophie. ‘He’s sort of unobtainable. Great guy, but . . .’

‘Marvellous, another fucknuckle, that’s just what I need. Hey, did you hear what happened to Henry?’ asks Plum. ‘He woke up this morning with a bite of unchewed kebab still in his mouth.’

Henry is my other best friend. He’s a real boy: uncomplicated, very good-natured and permanently hungry. He shared a house with Plum and me at university. We went through a phase of calling him Miranda, but he said if he was anyone, he was Charlotte, so we stopped. He’s not gay, by the way, and he has lots of guy friends (all mined by Plum a long time ago). But we’ve known him for so long, he’s one of us.

We head towards Marylebone and sit at a table outside the first coffee shop we see, just as Plum’s phone rings.

She pops her Bluetooth earpiece in her ear (she was convinced that her mobile was giving her blackheads), and trills, ‘Henrietta! No, the BabyCare Show is the 25th this year, darling! Mmm. Righto. Bye!’ She hangs up and rolls her eyes. ‘You’d think we were saving the world, not launching a new fucking nappy range.’

Sophie frowns. ‘Plummy. Language.’

‘Well, she always panics on weekends and calls me from her boyfriend Sebastian’s fucking Range Rover as they’re off shooting yachts, or whatever it is they do,’ says Plum crossly. ‘I’m fed up with posh girls, I really am.’

Sophie and I look at each other and start to giggle. I wonder if people I work with do things like that. Then I remember work, and sigh deeply.

‘What’s wrong, kittenpants?’ asks Plum.

‘Do you love work?’

‘I love my work friends, even the posh ones,’ says Plum. ‘But the pay is shit, I’m permanently broke and because the office is all women we all go on the blob at the same time, which is a fucking nightmare.’

‘I do love my job,’ says Sophie. Plum throws a sugar cube at her. ‘Sorry, but I do! . . . It’s stressful but I look forward to Mondays.’

‘Fuck me,’ says Plum in dismay. ‘You look forward to Mondays? Honestly . . .’ she turns to me. ‘Why do you ask, sweetie?’

I sigh deeply. ‘Work is basically somewhere I go for free internet access. I don’t like it, I never laugh . . . But I don’t know how to do anything else.’ Oh God, I’m getting emotional. Tears, down boy.

‘Remember it pays well,’ says Sophie. I nod. I get paid more than Plum and Sophie put together, which I feel guilty about so I try to surreptitiously pick up the cheque whenever I can. For the record, I’m not the flash-your-cash bankery type: the idea of spending thousands on a handbag is obscene (practical and annoying, but hey! that’s me). I’ve also saved quite a lot over the years without really trying. (I know how practical and annoying that is too.)

‘I don’t think that . . . I don’t think that I care about the money that much,’ I say.

‘So you’re in the wrong job,’ says Sophie calmly. ‘It’s not the end of the world. You can change.’

‘How can I have spent the last six years in the wrong fucking job?’ I exclaim. ‘Then again, I spent the last seven years with the wrong man. I clearly have a talent for ignoring things.’

‘Isn’t it time you bought a house?’ says Plum. ‘You should get a mortgage while you still have a good job. Then you can quit and do what you want.’

I wince. The buying-a-house conversation comes up with my parents every year. I always fudge it. The idea of committing to something so huge makes me feel sick. I can’t imagine it, I don’t want to imagine it. So I ignore it.

‘Maybe you shouldn’t worry about it just now,’ suggests Sophie quickly. She can read me so well.

‘And remember, you are recovering from breaking up with the man you spent a quarter of your life with,’ says Plum, slipping straight into supportive-friend mode. ‘I mean, I need fucking months to get over relationships that didn’t even last as long as a season of *The City*.’

‘But . . . I am fine about Peter,’ I say uneasily. I really do feel fine. Perhaps I’m in denial. ‘Never mind. It’s too late to change careers now.’

‘It’s never too late. What would you do, if you could do anything?’ says Sophie.

Pause.

I’m staring at her, unable to respond. She stares back for 10, 20, 30 seconds . . . I’m speechless, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. My inability to answer that simple question makes me want to be sick even more. What’s wrong with me?

Plum exchanges a glance with Sophie.

‘I don’t know!’ I say eventually. ‘I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I’m going home to get changed. I need to put my singledom skills to the test again.’

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