

'HOWLINGLY FUNNY'
Sunday Times

'HILARIOUS'
Daily Mail

'GLORIOUSLY CHEERING'
Red

Polly's not looking for
'the one', just...

THE PLUS ONE.

SOPHIA MONEY-COUTTS

Sophia Money-Coutts

**The Plus One: escape with the hottest,
laugh-out-loud debut of summer 2018!**

«HarperCollins»

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The Plus One: escape with the hottest, laugh-out-loud debut of summer 2018! / S. Money-Coutts — «HarperCollins»,

‘So funny. And the sex is amazing – makes me feel like a nun!’ Jilly Cooper ‘Light, fizzy and as snort-inducing as a pint of Prosecco.’ Evening Standard Magazine ‘Hilarious and compelling.’ Daily Mail ‘Perfect summer reading for fans of Jilly Cooper and Bridget Jones.’ HELLO! ‘Bridget Jones trapped inside a Jilly Cooper novel. A beach cocktail in book form.’ METRO ‘Gloriously cheering.’ Red Magazine ‘Howlingly funny.’ India Knight, Sunday Times Magazine ‘This saucy read is great sun-lounger fodder.’ Heat ‘Sexy and very funny... perfect for fans of Jilly Cooper.’ Closer ‘Cheerful, saucy and fun!’ The Sunday Mirror ‘As fun and fizzy as a chilled glass of prosecco... this is the perfect read for your holiday.’ The Daily Express The Plus One informal a person who accompanies an invited person to a wedding or a reminder of being single, alone and absolutely plus none Polly’s not looking for ‘the one’, just the plus one... Polly Spencer is fine. She’s single, turning thirty and only managed to have sex twice last year (both times with a Swedish banker called Fred), but seriously, she’s fine. Even if she’s still stuck at Posh! magazine writing about royal babies and the chances of finding a plus one to her best friend’s summer wedding are looking worryingly slim. But it’s a New Year, a new leaf and all that. Polly’s determined that over the next 365 days she’ll remember to shave her legs, drink less wine and generally get her s**t together. Her latest piece is on the infamous Jasper, Marquess of Milton, undoubtedly neither a plus one nor ‘the one’. She’s heard the stories, there’s no way she’ll succumb to his charms... A laugh-out-loud, toe-curlingly honest debut for fans of Helen Fielding, Bryony Gordon and Jilly Cooper. Don’t miss the hottest book of 2018!

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SOPHIA MONEY-COUTTS is a 32-year-old journalist who spent five years studying the British aristocracy while working as features director at *Tatler*. Prior to that she worked as a writer and an editor for the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Mail* in London, and *The National* in Abu Dhabi. She writes a weekly column called 'Modern Manners' for the *Sunday Telegraph* and has appeared on various radio and television channels talking about topics like Prince Harry's wedding and the etiquette of the threesome. *The Plus One* is her debut novel.

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THE PLUS ONE

Sophia Money-Coutts



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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To my family, who are madder than any
of the characters in this book.

But that's why I love you all so much.

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I BLAME SENSE AND SENSIBILITY. I saw the film when I was twelve. A very impressionable age. And more specifically, I blame Kate Winslet. She, Marianne, the second sister, nearly dies for love. That bit where she goes walking in a storm to look at Willoughby's house and is rescued by Colonel Brandon but spends the next few days sweating with a life-threatening fever? That, I decided, was the appropriate level of drama in a relationship.

I consequently set about trying to be as like Marianne as I could. She was into poetry, which seemed a sign because I also liked reading. I bought a little book of Shakespeare's sonnets in homage, which I carried in my school bag at all times in case I had a moment between lessons when I could whip it out and whisper lines to myself in a suitably dramatic manner. I also learned Sonnet 116, Marianne and Willoughby's favourite, off by heart.

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds...'

Imagine a tubby 12-year-old wandering the streets of Battersea in rainbow-coloured leggings muttering that to herself. I was ripe for a kicking. So, yes, I blame *Sense and Sensibility* for making me think I had to find someone. It set me on the wrong path entirely.

1

IF I'D KNOWN THAT the week was going to end in such disaster, I might not have bothered with it. I might just have stayed in bed and slept like some sort of hibernating bear for the rest of the winter.

Not that it started terribly well either. It was Tuesday, 2 January, the most depressing day of the year, when everyone trudges back to work feeling depressed, overweight and broke. It also just happened to be my birthday. My *thirtieth* birthday. So, I was gloomier than anyone else that morning. Not only had I turned a decade older overnight, but I was still single, living with Joe, a gay oboist, in a damp flat in Shepherd's Bush and starting to think that those terrifying *Daily Mail* articles about dwindling fertility levels were aimed directly at me.

I cycled from my flat to the *Posh!* magazine offices in Notting Hill trying not to be sick. The hangover was entirely my own fault; I'd stayed up late the night before drinking red wine on the sofa with Joe. Dry January could get stuffed. Joe had called it an early birthday celebration; I'd called it a wake for my youth. Either way, we'd made our way through three bottles of wine from the corner shop underneath our flat and I'd woken up feeling like my brain had been replaced with jelly.

Wobbling along Notting Hill Gate, I locked my bike beside the *Posh!* office, then dipped into Pret to order: one white Americano, one egg and bacon breakfast baguette and one berry muffin. According to Pret's nutritional page (bookmarked on my work computer), this came to 950 calories, but as I hadn't actually eaten anything with Joe the night before I decided the calories could get stuffed too.



'Morning, Enid,' I said over my computer screen, putting the Pret bag on my desk. Enid was the PA to Peregrine Monmouth, the editor for *Posh!* magazine, and a woman as wide as she was tall. She was loved in the office on the basis that she put through everyone's expenses and approved holidays.

'Polly, my angel! Happy Birthday!' She waddled around the desk and enveloped me in a hug. 'And Happy New Year,' she said, crushing my face to her gigantic bosom. Her breath smelled of coffee.

'Happy New Year,' I mumbled into Enid's cardigan, before pulling back and standing up straight again, putting a hand to my forehead as it throbbed. I needed some painkillers.

'Did you have a nice break?' she asked.

'Mmm,' I replied vaguely, leaning to turn on my computer. What was my password again?

'Were you with your mum then?' Enid returned to her desk and started rustling in a bag beside it.

'Mmmm.' It was some variation of my mum's dog name and a number. *Bertie123*? It didn't work. Shit. I'd have to call that woman in IT whose name I could never remember.

'And did you get any nice presents?'

Bertie19. That was it. Bingo.

Emails started spilling into my inbox and disappearing off the screen. I watched as the counter spiralled up to 632. They were mostly press releases about diets, I observed, scrolling through them. Sugar-free, gluten-free, dairy-free, fat-free. Something new designed by a Californian doctor called the 'Raisin Diet', on which you were only allowed to eat thirty raisins a day.

'Sorry, Enid,' I said, shaking my head and reaching for my baguette. 'I'm concentrating. Any nice presents? You know, some books from Mum. How was your Christmas?'

'Lovely, thanks. Just me and Dave and the kids at home. And Dave's mum, who's losing her marbles a bit, but we managed. I overdid it on the Baileys though so I'm on a new diet I read about.'

'Oh yeah?'

'It's called the Raisin Diet, it's supposed to be ever so good. You eat ten raisins for breakfast, ten raisins for lunch and ten raisins for supper and they say you can lose a stone in a week.'

I watched over my computer screen as Enid counted out raisins from a little Tupperware box.

'Morning, all, Happy New Year and all that nonsense. Meeting in my office in fifteen minutes please,' boomed Peregrine's voice, as he swept through the door in a navy overcoat and trilby.

Peregrine was a 55-year-old social climber who launched *Posh!* in the Nineties in an attempt to mix with the sort of people he thought should be his friends. Dukes, earls, lords, the odd Ukrainian oligarch. He applied the same principal to his wives. First, an Italian jewellery heiress. Second, the daughter of a Venezuelan oil baron. He was currently married to a French stick insect who was, as Peregrine told anyone he ever met, a distant relation to the Monaco Royals.

'Where is everyone?' he said, reappearing from his office, coat and hat now removed.

I looked around at the empty desks. 'Not sure. It's just me and Enid so far.'

'Well, I want a meeting with you and Lala as soon as she's in. I've got a major story we need to get going with.'

'Sure. What is it?'

'Top secret. Just us three in the meeting. Need-to-know basis,' he said, glancing at Enid. 'You all right?' he added.

Enid was poking the inside of her mouth with a finger. 'Just got a bit of raisin stuck,' she replied.

Peregrine grimaced, then looked back at me. 'Right. Well. Will you let me know as soon as Lala is in?'

I nodded.

'Got it,' said Enid, waving a finger.



An hour later, Lala, the magazine's party editor, and I were sitting in Peregrine's office. I'd drunk my coffee and eaten both the baguette and the muffin but still felt perilously close to death.

'So, there's yet another Royal baby on the way,' said Peregrine, 'the Countess of Hartlepool told me at lunch yesterday. They have the same gynaecologist, apparently.'

'Due when?' I asked.

'July,' he said. 'So I want us to get cracking with a quick piece which we can squeeze into the next issue.'

I wondered if I'd live as far as July given how I felt today. Some birthday this was. 'What about something on the Royal playmates?' I said.

Peregrine nodded while scratching his belly, which rolled over his waistband and rested on the tops of his legs. 'Yes. That sort of thing. The Fotheringham-Montagues are having their second too, I think.'

'And my friend Octavia de Flamingo is having her first baby,' said Lala, chewing on her pen. 'They've already reserved a place at Eton in case it's a boy.'

'Well, we need at least ten others so can you both ask around and find more posh babies,' said Peregrine. 'I want it on my desk first thing on Friday, Polly. And can you get the pictures of them all too.'

'Of the parents?' I checked.

'No, no, no!' he roared. 'Of the babies! I want all the women's scan pictures. The sort of thing that no one else will have seen. You know, real, insidery stuff.'

I sighed as I walked back to my desk. *Posh!* was now so insidery it was going to print pictures of the aristocracy's wombs.



My Tuesday evenings were traditionally spent having supper with my mum in her Battersea flat and tonight, as a birthday treat, I was doing exactly the same thing.

It was a chaotic and mummified flat. Mum had lived there for nearly twenty years, ever since Dad died and we'd moved to London from Surrey. She worked in a curtain shop nearby because her boss allowed her to bring her 9-year-old Jack Russell to the shop so long as he stayed behind the counter and didn't wee on any of the damask that lay around the place in giant rolls. Bertie largely obliged, only cocking his leg discreetly on the very darkest rolls he could find if Mum got distracted by talking to a customer for too long.

It was the curtain shop that had landed me a job at *Posh!*. Peregrine's second wife – the Venezuelan one – had come in to discuss pelmets for their new house in Chelsea while I was in there talking to Mum one Saturday. And even though Alejandra had all the charm and warmth of a South American despot, I plucked up the courage to mention that I wanted to be a journalist. So, because I was desperate and Peregrine was miserly, he offered me the job as his assistant a few months later. I started by replying to his party invitations and buying his coffees, but after a year or so I'd started writing small pieces for the magazine. Nothing serious. Short articles I mostly made up about the latest trend in fancy dress or the most fashionable canapé to serve at a drinks party. But I worked my way up from there until Peregrine let me write a few longer pieces and interviews with various mad members of the British aristocracy. It wasn't the dream role. I was hardly Kate Adie reporting from the Gaza Strip in a flak jacket. But it was a writing job, and, even though back when I started I didn't know anything about the upper classes (I thought a viscount was a type of biscuit), it seemed a good start.

'Happy birthday, darling, kick my boots out of the way,' Mum shouted from upstairs when I pushed her front door open that night to the sound of Bertie barking. There was a pile of brown envelopes on the radiator grille in the hall, two marked 'Urgent'.

'Mums, do you ever open your post?' I asked, walking upstairs and into the sitting room.

'Oh yes, yes, yes, don't fuss,' she said, taking the envelopes and putting them down on her desk, where magazines and old papers covered every spare chink of surface. 'I've made a cake for pudding,' she went on, 'but I've got some prawns in the fridge that need eating, so we're having them first. I thought I might make a risotto?'

'Mmm, lovely, thank you,' I replied, wondering whether Peregrine would believe me if I called in sick because my mother had poisoned me with prawns so old they had tap-danced their way into the risotto.

‘Have you had a nice birthday?’ Mum asked. ‘How was work?’

‘Oh, you know, Peregrine’s Napoleonic tendencies are as rampant as ever. I’ve got to write a piece on Royal babies and their playmates.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mum vaguely, as she walked towards the kitchen, opened the fridge and took out a bottle of wine. In the four years I’d worked at *Posh!*, I’d learned more about the upper classes than I’d ever expected to. A duke was higher than an earl in the pecking order and they were all obsessed with their Labradors. But Mum, a librarian’s daughter from Surrey, while supportive of my job, wasn’t much interested in the details.

She poured two glasses of white wine and handed me one. ‘Now, let’s sit down and then I can give you your present.’

I collapsed on the sofa whereupon Bertie instantly jumped on my lap and white wine sloshed over the rim of my glass and into my crotch.

‘Bertie, get down,’ said Mum, handing me a small jewellery box and sitting down beside me. She stared at Bertie and pointed at the floor, as he slowly and reluctantly climbed off the sofa. I opened the box. It was a ring. A thin, delicate gold band with a knot twisted into the metal.

‘Your dad gave it to me when you were born. So, I thought, to mark a big birthday, you should have it.’

‘Oh, Mum...’ I felt choked. She hardly ever mentioned Dad. He’d had a heart attack and died at forty-five when I was just ten years old. Our lives changed forever in that moment. We had to sell our pretty, Victorian house in Surrey and Mum and I moved to this flat in Battersea. We were both in shock. But we got on with our new life in London because there was no alternative. And we’d been a small, but intensely close, unit ever since. Just us two. And then Bertie, when I left for university and Mum decided she needed a small, hairy substitute child.

I slipped the ring on my finger. It was a bit tight over the knuckle, but it went on easily enough. ‘I love it,’ I said, looking at my hand, then looking up at Mum. ‘Thank you.’

‘Good, I’m glad it fits. And now, listen, I have something I need to chat to you about.’

‘Hmmm?’ I was trying to turn the ring on my finger. A bout of dysentery from prawn-related food poisoning might not be the worst thing, actually. I could probably lose half a stone.

‘Polly?’

‘Yes, yes, sorry, am listening.’ I stopped fiddling with the ring and sat back against the sofa.

‘So,’ started Mum. ‘I went to see Dr Young last week. You know this chest pain that’s been worrying me? Well, I’ve been taking my blood pressure pills but they haven’t been doing any good so I went back on Thursday. Terrible this week because the place was full of people sneezing everywhere. But I went back and, well, he wants me to have a scan.’

‘A scan?’ I frowned at her.

‘Yes. And he says it may be nothing but it’s just to be sure that it is nothing.’

‘OK... But what would it be if it wasn’t nothing?’

‘Well, you know, it could be a little something,’ said Mum, breezily. ‘But he wants me to have a scan to check.’

‘When is it?’ I felt sick. Panicky. Only two minutes ago I’d been worrying about the sell-by date on a packet of prawns. It suddenly seemed very silly.

‘I’m waiting for the letter to confirm the date. Dr Young said I’ll hear in the next couple of weeks but the post is so slow these days, so we’ll see.’

‘It might help if you looked at the pile of post downstairs every now and then, Mum,’ I said, as gently as I could. ‘You don’t want to miss it.’

‘No. No, I know.’

I’d always told myself that Mum and I had done all right on our own over the years. Better, even, than all right. We were way closer than some of my friends were with their parents. But every now

and then I wished Mum had a husband to look after her. This was one of those moments. For support. For help. For another person to talk to. She could hardly discuss the appointment with Bertie.

‘Well, will you let me know when you get the letter and I’ll come with you? Where will it be?’ I asked.

‘Oh there’s no need, darling. You’ve got work. Don’t fuss.’

‘Don’t be silly, obviously I’m coming. I work for a magazine, not MI6. No one will mind if I take a few hours off.’

‘What about Peregrine?’

‘He’ll manage.’

‘OK. If you’re sure, that would be lovely. The appointment will be at St Thomas.’

‘Good, that’s sorted,’ I said, trying to sound confident, as if the scan was a routine check-up and there was nothing to worry about. ‘Now let’s have a sniff of those prawns.’



By Friday afternoon, I had six posh babies and their scan pictures. Where the hell were another four going to come from? My phone vibrated beside my keyboard and a text popped up from Bill, an old friend who always threw a dinner party at the end of the first week of January to celebrate the fact the most cheerless week of the year was over.

Come over any time from 7! X

I looked back at my screen full of baby scans. Jesus. A baby. That seemed a long way off. I hadn’t had a proper boyfriend since university when I went out with a law student called Harry for a year, but then Harry decided to move to Dubai and I cried for about a week before my best friend, Lex, told me I needed to ‘get back out there’. My love life, ever since, had been drier than a Weetabix. The odd date, the odd fumble, the odd shag which I’d get overexcited about before realizing that, actually, the shag had been terrible and what was I getting so overexcited about anyway?

Last year, I’d had sex twice, both times with a Norwegian banker called Fred who I met through a mutual friend at a picnic in Green Park in the summer. If you can call several bottles of rosé and some olives from M&S a picnic. Lex and I drank so much wine that we decided to pee under a low-hanging tree in the park as it got dark. This had apparently impressed Fred, who moved to sit closer to me when Lex and I returned to the circle.

We’d all ended up in the Tiki bar of the London Hilton on Park Lane, where Fred ordered me a drink which came served in a coconut. He’d lunged in the car park and then I’d waited until I was safely inside my cab home before wiping off the wetness around my mouth with the back of my hand. We’d gone on a couple of dates and I’d slept with him on both those dates – possibly a mistake – and then he’d gone quiet. After a week, I texted him breezily asking if he was around for a drink. He replied a few days later.

Oh, sorry been travelling so much for work and not sure that’s going to change any time soon. F ‘F for fucking nobody, that’s who,’ said Lex, loyally, when I told her.

So, that, for me, was the total of last year’s romantic adventures. Depressing. Other people seemed to have sex all the time. And yet here I was, sitting in my office like an asexual plant, hunting for scan pictures, evidence that other people had had sex.

I squinted through the window up the alleyway towards Notting Hill Gate. It was the kind of grey January day that couldn’t be bothered to get properly light, when people hurried along pavements with their shoulders hunched, as if warding off the gloom.

Whatever. It would be six o’ clock soon and I could escape it all for Bill’s flat and a delicious glass of wine. Or several delicious glasses of wine, if I was honest.



At one second past six, I left the office, winding my way through the hordes of tourists at Notting Hill Gate Tube station. They were dribbling along at that special tourist pace which makes you want to kick them all in the shins. Then, emerging at Brixton, I walked to the corner shop at the end of Bill's street to buy wine. And a big bag of Kettle Chips. 'Let's go mad, it's Friday, isn't it?' I said to the man behind the till, who ignored me.

Bill lived in the ground-floor flat on a street of white terraced houses. He'd bought it while working as a programmer at Google, though he'd left them recently to concentrate on developing an app for the NHS. Something to do with making appointments. Bill said that it was putting his nerd skills to good use, finally. He'd never tried to hide his dorkiness. It was one of the reasons we became friends at a party when we were teenagers.

Lex had been off snogging some boy upstairs in the bathroom (she was always snogging or being fingered, there was a lot of fingering back then) and I'd been sitting on a sofa in the basement, tapping my foot along to Blue so it looked like I was having a good time when, actually, I was having a perfectly miserable time because no boy ever wanted to snog me. And if no boy ever wanted to snog me then how would I ever be fingered? And if I was never fingered how would I ever get to have actual sex? It seemed hopeless. And, just at the moment when I decided I might go all *Sound of Music* and enter a convent – were there convents in South London? – a boy had sat down on the other end of the sofa. He had messy black hair and glasses that were so thick they looked double-glazed.

'I hate parties,' he'd said, squinting at me from behind his double-glazing. 'Do you hate parties too?'

I'd nodded shyly at him and he'd grinned back.

'They're awful, aren't they? I'm Bill by the way.' He'd stuck out a hand for me to shake, so I shook it. And then we'd started talking over the music about our GCSEs. It was only when Lex surfaced for air an hour or so later, gasping for breath, mouth rubbed as red as a strawberry, that I realized I'd made a friend who was a boy. Not a boyfriend. I didn't want to snog Bill. His glasses really were shocking. But he became a friend who was a boy all the same. And we'd been friends ever since.

'Come in, come in,' Bill said when I arrived. He opened the front door with one hand and held a pair of jeans in the other. 'Sorry, I haven't changed yet.' He grinned. 'You're the first.'

'Go change,' I said. 'Is there anything I can do?'

'No. Leave those bottles on the side and open whatever you want. I'll be two minutes,' he said, walking towards his bedroom.

I opened the fridge. It was rammed. Sausages, packets of bacon, some steaks. Something that might once have been a tomato and would now be of considerable interest to a research scientist. No other discernible vegetables. I reached for a bottle of white wine and fished in a drawer for a corkscrew.

Bill appeared back in the kitchen in his jeans and a t-shirt that said 'I am a computer whisperer' on it. In the years since I'd met him, he'd discovered contact lenses but developed a questionable line of t-shirts. 'I'll have one of those please. Actually, no I won't. I'll have a beer first. So, how's tricks?' he asked, opening a bottle. 'How was Christmas? How was your birthday and so on? I've got you a card actually.' He picked up an envelope from his kitchen table and gave it to me. 'Here you go.'

'Being single at 30 isn't as bad as it used to be,' the front of the card read. I smiled, 'Thanks, dude. Really helpful.' I put the card down on the side and had a sip of wine. 'And Christmas was lovely, thanks. Quiet, but kind of perfect. I ate, I slept. You know, the usual.' I'd been worrying about Mum and her scan all week, but I didn't want to mention it to anyone else yet. If I didn't talk about it, I could keep a lid on the panic I felt when I woke in the middle of the night and lay in bed thinking about the appointment. I had decided to wait for the results of the scan and then we could go from there. 'Anyway, how was yours?'

'Terrible,' Bill replied. 'I was working for most of it, trying to sort out some investors.' He took a swig of beer and leant on the kitchen counter. 'So, I haven't left the office before midnight this week

and I'm doing no exercise apart from walking from my desk to have a pee four times a day. But that's how start-up life is,' he sighed and had another slug of his beer.

'Love life?' I asked.

'I'm still seeing that girl, Willow. I told you about her before Christmas, right?'

I nodded. 'The Tinder one? Who works in...?' I couldn't actually remember much about her. I was always, selfishly, slightly peeved when Bill was dating someone because it meant he was less available for cinema trips and pizza.

'Interior design, yeah. She's cool. But everything's so busy at the moment that I keep having to cancel on any plans we make in favour of a "chicken chow mein for one" at my desk.'

'Have you invited her tonight?'

'Yeah. But she couldn't make it.'

'OK. So, who's coming?'

Normally, Lex would be here too, and she and I would spend the night drinking wine while discussing our New Year's resolutions. But Lex had gone away to Italy with her boyfriend, Hamish, this year. So, I was slightly nervous about who Bill had invited. Or not nervous exactly. Just apprehensive about having to talk to strangers all night.

'Er, there's Robin and Sal, who you know. Then a couple I don't think you've met who are friends from home who've just got engaged – Jonny and Olivia. Two friends from business school you haven't met either. Lou, who's in town for a bit from America, who you'll love, she's amazing. And a guy called Callum I haven't seen for years but who knows Lou, too.' He looked at his phone as it buzzed. 'Oh, that's her now,' he said.

'Lou, hi,' he said, answering it. 'No, no, don't worry, just a bottle of something would be great... number fifty-three, yep? Blue door, just ring the bell. See you in a tick.'



By 11 p.m., everyone was still sitting around Bill's kitchen table, their wine glasses smeary from sticky fingers. I'd drunk a lot of red wine and was sitting at one end of the table, holed up like a hostage, while Sal and Olivia, sitting either side of me, discussed their weddings. How was it physically possible for two fully grown women to care so much about what font their wedding invitations should be written in? I thought about the countless weddings I'd been to in the past couple of years. Lace dress after lace dress (since these days everyone wanted to look as demure as Kate Middleton on her wedding day), fistfuls of confetti outside the church, a race back to the reception for ninety-four glasses of champagne and three canapés. Dinner was usually a bit of a blur if I was honest. Some sort of dry chicken, probably. Then thirty-eight cocktails after dinner, which I typically spilled all over myself and the dance floor. Bed shortly after midnight with a blistered foot from the inappropriate heels I'd worn. I couldn't recall what font any of the invitations were written in.

'Polly,' they said simply at the top. Just 'Polly' on its own. Never 'Polly and so-and-so' since I never had a boyfriend. Sometimes an invitation said 'Polly and plus one'. But that was similarly hopeless since I never had one of those either. I reached for the wine bottle, telling myself to stop being so morose.

'Who's for coffee?' asked Bill, standing up.

'I'm OK on red.'

'You're not on your bike tonight?' asked Bill.

'Nope, I'll Uber. But touched by your concern.'

'Just checking. Right, everyone next door. I'm going to put the kettle on.'

There were murmurs of approval and everyone stood and started to gather up plates and paper napkins from the floor. 'Don't do any of that,' said Bill. 'I'll do it later.'

I picked up the wine bottle and my glass and walked through the doors into the sitting room, collapsing onto a sofa and yawning. Definitely a bit pissed.

Sal and Olivia followed after me and sat on the opposite sofa, still quacking on about weddings. 'We're having a photo booth but not a cheese table because I don't think it ever gets eaten. What do you think?' I heard Sal say.

As if she'd been asked her opinion on Palestine, Olivia solemnly replied, 'It's so hard, isn't it? We're not having a photo booth but we are going to have a videographer there all day, so...'

I yawned again. I'd been at uni with Sal. She once stripped naked and ran across a football pitch to protest against tuition fees. But here, discussing cheese tables and photo booths, she seemed a different person. An alien from Planet Wedding.

'So, you're a fellow cyclist?' said Bill's friend from business school, sitting down beside me on the sofa.

'Yup. Most of the time. Just not when I've drunk ten bottles of wine.'

'Very sensible. Sorry, I'm Callum by the way.' He stuck his hand out for me to shake.

Stuck, as I had been, between two wedding fetishists, I hadn't noticed Callum much. He had a shaved head and was wearing a light grey t-shirt, which showed off a pair of muscly upper arms, and excellent trainers. Navy blue Nike Airs. I always looked at men's shoes. Pointy black lace-ups: bad. The correct pair of trainers: aphrodisiac. Lex always criticized me for being too picky about men's shoes. But what if you started dating someone who wore pointy black lace-ups, or, worse, shiny brown shoes with square ends, and then fell in love with them? You'd be looking at spending the rest of your life with someone who wore bad shoes.

'I'm Polly,' I replied, looking up from Callum's trainers.

'So you're an old mate of Bill's?'

'Yep, for years. Since we were teenagers.'

He nodded.

'And you met him at business school?'

He nodded again. 'Yeah, at LBS.'

'So what do you do now?' I asked.

'Deeply boring. I work in insurance, although I'm trying to move into K&R.'

'What's that?'

'Kidnap and ransom. So more the security world really.' He leant back against the sofa and propped one of his muscly arms on it.

'How very James Bond.'

He laughed. 'We'll see.'

'Do you travel a lot?'

'A bit. I'd like to do more. To see more. What about you?'

'I work for a magazine. It's called *Posh!*' I said, as if it was a question, wondering if he'd heard of it.

He laughed again and nodded. 'I know. Sort of... society stuff?'

'Exactly. Castles. Labradors. That sort of thing.'

He grinned at me. 'I like Labradors. Fun?'

'Yup. Mad, but fun.'

'Do you get to travel much?'

'Sometimes. To cold, draughty piles in Scotland if I'm very lucky.'

'How glamorous,' he said, grinning again.

Was this flirting? I wasn't sure. I was never sure. At school, we'd learned about flirting by reading *Cosmopolitan*, which said that it meant brushing the other person with your hand lightly. Also, that girls should bite their lips in front of boys, or was it lick their lips? They should do something to attract attention to their mouths, anyway. My flirting skills hadn't progressed much since and, sometimes, when trying to cack-handedly flirt with someone, I'd simultaneously touch a man's arm or knee *and* lick my lips and end up looking like I was having some kind of stroke.

‘Hang on, hold your glass for a moment,’ he said, leaning across me.

My stomach flipped. Was he lunging? Here? Already? In Bill’s flat? Blimey. Maybe I didn’t give myself enough credit. Maybe I was better at flirting than I realized.

He wasn’t lunging. He was reaching for a book. Underneath my glass, on the coffee table, was a huge, heavy coffee table book. Callum picked it up and laid it across both our laps.

He leant back and started flicking through the pages. They were exquisite travel photos – reindeer in the snow around a Swedish lake, an old man washing himself on some steps in Delhi, a volcano in Indonesia belching out great clouds of orange smoke.

‘I want to go here,’ he said, pointing at a photo of a chalky landscape, a salt flat in Ethiopia.

‘Go on then. And then... let’s go here,’ I replied, turning the page. It was Venice.

‘Venice? Have you ever been?’ He turned to look at me.

‘No.’ Was now a good moment to touch his arm? I quite wanted to touch his arm.

‘Then I will take you.’

‘Ha!’ I laughed nervously and clapped my hand on his forearm.

We carried on turning the pages and laughing for a while, discussing where we wanted to go until the photos were becoming quite blurry. I wasn’t really concentrating anyway, because Callum had moved his leg underneath the book so it was touching mine. I glanced across at him. How tall was he? Hard to tell sitting down.

‘Right, team,’ said Bill, sometime later from across the room, draining his coffee cup. ‘I think it might be home time. Sorry to end the party but I’ve got to go into the office tomorrow.’

Callum closed the book and moved his leg, stretching out on the sofa and yawning. ‘Fun sponge.’

‘I know, mate, but some of us can’t just drink for a living. We’ve got real jobs.’

‘Talk to me when I’m in Peshawar.’ He stood up and clapped Bill on the back in a man hug. ‘Good to see you after so long, mate. Thanks for dinner.’ He was the same height as Bill, I noted. Sort of six foot-ish. A good height. The size I always wanted a man to be so I didn’t feel like a giraffe in bed next to him. That thing about everybody being the same size lying down is rubbish.

Around us, everyone else was saying goodbye to one another. ‘Thanks, love,’ I said, hugging Bill. ‘Don’t work too hard tomorrow.’

‘Welcome,’ he said back, into my shoulder. ‘And I won’t. I should be around on Sunday if you are? Cinema or something? Is Lex back?’

‘Yup, she gets back tomorrow so said I’d see her for lunch on Sunday. Wanna join?’

‘Maybe, speak tomorrow?’

I nodded and Bill turned to say goodbye to Lou behind us.

‘Where you heading back to?’ Callum asked as we stood by the open front door. I was squinting at my phone, trying to find Uber.

‘Shepherd’s Bush.’

‘Perfect. As you’re not cycling I will escort you home.’

‘Why, where are you?’

‘Nearby,’ he replied. ‘What’s your postcode?’

This never happened. Sightings of the Loch Ness Monster were more common than me going home with anyone. I frowned as I tried to remember what state my bikini line was in. I probably shouldn’t sleep with him; I had an awful feeling it looked like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

‘What’s wrong?’ he said, looking at my face.

‘Nothing, all good,’ I replied quickly. Also, I knew I hadn’t shaved my legs for weeks. Or months, maybe. So, a few minutes later, in the back of the Uber, I reached down and tried to surreptitiously stick two fingers underneath the ankle of my jeans to check how bristly my legs were. They felt like a scouring brush.

‘What you doing?’ asked Callum, looking at me quizzically.

‘Just an itch.’ I sat back in the taxi.

‘You’re not coming in,’ I said, in my sternest voice, when the car pulled up outside my flat.

‘Course I am. I need to make sure you get in safely,’ he replied, opening his door and getting out.

So, as alarmed as I was about my ape-like levels of hairiness, I let him in, whereupon he immediately started looking through my kitchen cupboards. I kicked off my shoes and sat at the kitchen table, watching him, still hiccupping.

‘Shhhhhh, my flatmate’s asleep,’ I said to his back, as he inspected the labels of five or six half-empty bottles he’d discovered in one cupboard.

‘This’ll do.’ It was a bottle of cheap vodka, the sort that turns you blind. ‘Where are your glasses?’ I pointed at a cupboard above his head.

‘I can’t drink all that,’ I said, as he handed me a glass.

‘Yes you can, just knock it back.’ He swallowed his in one and looked at me expectantly.

I lifted my glass, nearly gagged at the vapours, then opened my mouth and took three slugs.

‘Good work.’ He took the glass back as I shivered and put it down on the table. ‘I mean, why do the Russians like this so much? It’s disgusting, swallowing it makes me—’

He interrupted me by cupping my face with his hands and kissing me. His tongue tasted of vodka.

‘Which one’s your room?’

I pointed at a door, and he took my hand, pulled me off the kitchen table and into my room, where I froze. There were two embarrassing things I needed to hide: my slightly shrivelled, browning earplugs on the bedside table, and my ancient bunny rabbit, a childhood comforter, which was lying between the pillows, his glass eyes glaring at me with an accusatory air.

I reached for both, opened my knicker drawer and stuffed them in there. I felt briefly guilty about my rabbit and then thought, *You are about to have sex for the first time in five hundred months, Polly, now is not the time to be sentimental about your stuffed toy.*

Callum sat down at the end of the bed and started unlacing his shoes.

‘Hang on, I’m just going to do something.’ I picked up a box of matches on the bedside table and lit a candle next to it.

And here is a list of the things that happened next, which illustrates why I should never, ever be allowed to even think about having sex with anyone.

Having lit the candle, I sat next to Callum and he started unbuttoning my shirt. But then I panicked about him doing this while I was sitting because of the fat rolls on my stomach, so I lay down instead, pulling him back onto the bed. He then undid the rest of my shirt buttons and there were a few undignified moments where I flailed around like a beached seal trying to get my arms out of it.

The tussle of the bra strap. Callum reached for it, clearly wanting to be one of those nimble-fingered men who just have to blink at a bra strap – any bra strap – for it to ping free. ‘I’ve nearly got it,’ he said, after several seconds of fiddling while I arched my back.

Getting my knickers off. This required me to waggle my legs in the air like an upturned beetle.

Callum then moved his way down my stomach until he was kneeling on the floor, his head between my legs. I wondered whether to make a joke about needing some sort of Black & Decker machinery to get through the hair and then decided it would kill the vibe. So, I started worrying about my breathing instead. It’s awkward to just lie there in silence, so I decided to start panting a bit as he used his tongue on me. But it’s quite hard to pant when, after a promising beginning, Callum – perhaps encouraged by my erratic breathing – started working harder with his tongue, like a dog at a water bowl. So, then it started hurting, as opposed to feeling remotely pleasurable, and I decided I’d lost sensation in my entire vagina and instead lay there wondering when to suggest that he came back up again. And how do you do that, anyway, without causing offence?

The worst bit of all. I tapped him on the head and he looked up. ‘Come up,’ I said, in what I hoped was a seductive, come-hither way.

He looked up from between my legs and frowned. ‘Why? Aren’t you enjoying it?’

Oh, GOD, why is sex this embarrassing? Does it always have to be this embarrassing?

‘No, no, I just want to, erm, return the favour.’

CRINGE. I thought I might die. I might actually die from cringing.

So Callum crawled back up and rolled over, lying on his back, still with his boxers on. I then climbed on top of him, trying not to slouch again so that my stomach didn’t crease into rolls of fat. Then I noticed that I hadn’t plucked my nipple hairs recently either. Too late. I wriggled backwards so that I was kneeling between his legs and started pulling his boxers off. Another difficult move because I had to stand up to pull them out from underneath him.

Callum’s penis wasn’t quite hard, so I opened my mouth and gently started sucking the head of it. He groaned. I ran my mouth slowly down it, trying to ignore the musty smell. After a few minutes, my thigh muscles started to burn. For God’s sake. How much longer was this going to go on for? I wriggled my knees in a bit closer, then opened one eye and squinted at his penis. Why do they look like giant earthworms? Then his moaning started getting louder and I felt one of his hands on my head, pressing my mouth down. I’d read magazine articles before that said you should suck their balls as well, but I’d never been sure I could fit everything in my mouth at once. It would be like tackling a foot-long Subway. Or were you supposed to suck just one ball at a time?

I gagged as his penis hit the back of my throat, then he gave a sudden shout and my mouth filled with warm semen. Slightly salty, slightly sweet. I swallowed as quickly as possible. The thought of that swimming around in my stomach with the vodka was ungodly.

‘Just going to get a glass of water,’ I said through a sticky mouth, climbing over him and picking up an empty glass from the bedside table. In the bathroom, I wiped my mouth with some tissue and looked in the mirror. Well, that bit’s done so that’s something. And it’s always quite gratifying to get there, isn’t it? Mostly because then your thighs get a break, but also because it means that you’ve done something right and your teeth didn’t get in the way. And anyway, I decided, filling up the glass from the tap again in case he wanted a drink, it’s my turn. That’s the rule. He should possibly have tried harder to sort me out first. But never mind. He could make up for it now.

‘D’you want some water?’ I whispered, walking back into the bedroom and holding out the glass. Callum was standing up with his jeans back on and his phone in his hand.

‘No, I’m good, thanks. I’m actually going to get an Uber. Got golf in the morning so I need to get home.’

‘Oh. OK. Cool. No problem,’ I stuttered.

WHAT?

‘Thanks though, that was great.’ He reached down for his t-shirt, pulled it over his head, patted his jean pockets, then – while I was still standing there, naked, cold, holding the glass of water – leant in and kissed me on the cheek.

‘Good to meet you.’

‘Er, yeah. You too. Hang on, I’ll let you out.’

‘Nah, don’t worry. I can let myself out. See you soon.’

‘Oh... Sure. OK... Bye,’ I said, still holding the glass of water, as he walked out.

I heard the front door close, put the glass down and stood naked in my bedroom thinking. Was that now a thing? Can men just Uber at – I looked at my phone – 2.54 a.m. after a blow job, having not returned the favour, and think that’s acceptable?

2

WHEN I EMERGED FROM my bedroom in the morning, Joe was in the kitchen making toast. He was wearing threadbare boxers and an old rugby shirt, both of which were too small for his sixteen-stone frame.

‘Morning, my little *chou fleur*, want some breakfast?’

I’d met Joe via a Gumtree advert three years earlier, when I moved out of my mum’s place. I was too old to have my knickers ironed for me, I’d decided back then. And Joe had since become

a sort of surrogate boyfriend-slash-brother figure, a proper friend to both me and my mates. Our flat was above a corner shop run by a large Jamaican lady called Barbara who was obsessed with horoscopes. I'd go in there to buy bacon on a Saturday morning and come out half an hour later, having been told how my weekend would pan out. It was always bad news. Barbara would suck in her cheeks and say that Mars was doing something weird with Jupiter and that Saturn was all over the shop, and so I should be very careful about any mysterious men that crossed my path.

'No. I'm feeling a bit delicate this morning. Can you put the kettle on?'

'How was last night?'

'Oh, you know. Dinner at Bill's. Brought someone back here to have sex for the first time in nine hundred years, nearly choked to death giving him a blow job before he Ubered straight out of here.'

'Polly, my darling, how dramatic. Why didn't he stay?'

'Beats me.' I collapsed on the sofa and caught sight of the vodka bottle on the kitchen counter. 'I don't know how I manage it.'

'Who was he?'

'A mate of Bill's. Kind of handsome. Lives around here somewhere.'

'So, is this grand romance going to continue?' Joe sat down in the armchair opposite me with his plate of toast.

'I doubt it. And anyway he plays golf.'

Joe shuddered. 'Revolting.'

I sighed. 'Why can't I be a normal person and have any kind of normal, functioning relationship? Or not even a relationship, just normal, straightforward sex? The only thing I've had in my vagina recently is a speculum.'

'More *poisson* in the *mer*, my darling. Beating ourselves up won't help. What plans for the weekend?'

'Well, first I'd quite like you to close that gaping hole in your boxers,' I said, my gaze accidentally dropping to his crotch. 'Then I might kill myself. And not much else really. Going over to Lex's tomorrow. And seeing Bill maybe. What about you?'

'The usual, just a bit of light pillaging. Got a date this afternoon.'

'Who with?'

'Lovely chap called Marcus, he plays the French horn.'

'Does he indeed. Where did we find him?'

'Teaches at the academy. He's got an arse like Tom Daley's. It might be love.'

It was 'love' quite often with Joe. In the past few months, various of these loves had passed through the front door. There had been Lee, a waiter from a pub in Kilburn; Josh, who Joe had picked up in the Apple Store buying a new iPhone; Paddington, a footman from Buckingham Palace, and Tomas, an Argentine polo player who insisted he was straight, but liked Joe to do unmentionable things to him with various leather props that he kept under his bed in a box. I tried never to go into Joe's room in case this box was lying open.

The thought of Joe's box made me feel a bit weak again.

'I'm going to go back to bed actually, forget the tea.'

'Okey-dokey, my petal, I'll be quiet later. It's only a first date, don't want to scare the poor boy. And don't worry about your boyfriend running off like that, happens to the best of us.'

'Does it?'

He paused. 'Well, not me, no.'

'Great, that's very helpful, thanks.' I plodded back to my bed and put my earplugs in.



By 3 p.m., I'd had a bath, eaten seven pieces of toast and honey, drunk three cups of tea and I was lying on the sofa watching an old DVD of *Three Men and a Little Lady*. I'd also carefully stalked

Callum on Instagram and spent two hours wondering idly whether I could follow him. Then my phone vibrated with a WhatsApp from Bill.

You get home safely?

I typed out my reply, unsure whether he knew anything about Callum. I could tell him tomorrow. Didn't feel up to it now.

Yes! Thank you for dinner! How's the office?

Alright. But listen, do you mind if I don't come for lunch tomorrow? I'm seeing Willow for a drink.

COURSE, don't be silly. Where you guys going?

Dunno. Southbank maybe. Good date place, right?

I sent back a row of thumbs-up emojis and then flicked back to Callum's Instagram again. Mostly pictures of rugby games and foreign beaches. Bit boring, if I was honest. Why was I obsessing over it?



I woke the following day feeling human again after spending the evening horizontal on my sofa, spooning Thai green curry and sweet clumps of coconut rice into my mouth. Lex had changed our lunch date to brunch, which seemed unlike her because she wasn't much of a morning person. Eggstasy was a café in Notting Hill which, as its ludicrous name suggested, specialized in breakfast. Great folds of buttery scrambled eggs with Gruyère cheese grated over the top, creamed mushrooms, ramekins of smoky beans, thick slabs of white bread. Butter by the bucketful. I made myself walk there from the flat in preparation, given my supper the night before. It had not been a good weekend for calories.

Lex and I had known one another since we were eleven, when Mum and I moved to London. That was the year I left my primary school in the country, where I'd been taught by a teacher like Miss Honey in *Matilda*, and went to a secondary school near Mum's flat in Battersea. The same school as Lex. There were no Miss Honeys there. Instead, I found classmates who were already into boys and eyeshadow and something called Take That. Lex took pity on me in the way that you might take pity on a cowering stray on the street.

'Do you want to look at my sticker book?' she said one lunchtime, which is still the best pick-up line that anyone's ever used on me. And so, in the sweetly uncomplicated way that children do, we became friends. And we stayed friends.

We went on to Leeds together, both reading English, as did Bill, to study Physics. We formed an unlikely trio. The science nerd (Bill), the short, sex-obsessed blonde (Lex) and me, the tall, frizzy-haired romantic who was fixated with *Sense and Sensibility* and on the lookout for my own Willoughby.

Lex was already at a table by the time I got to Eggstasy, sweating from the exertion of walking up Holland Park Avenue. I waved at her from the door and pushed my way through the clusters of tables to the back.

'Hi, love,' I said, as she stood to hug me. 'Welcome home. How was it?'

'It was... ' She smiled at me coyly.

'What?'

'It was... Well... This happened.' She thrust her hand towards me.

'Lex, oh my God!' There was a diamond ring on her finger. I took her hand in mine and pulled it towards my face. A diamond the size of a broad bean in the middle of the ring, surrounded by lots of smaller diamonds. 'Are you kidding?'

'No! It would be quite a weird joke, wouldn't it?' she said, smiling at me.

'You're engaged? To Hamish?'

'Yes! Again, it would be quite weird if I'd got engaged to anyone else since I'd last seen you.'

‘Right, yes, ’course. Bloody hell. You could blind someone with that thing,’ I said, looking at the ring again. ‘I mean, congratulations.’ We were still both standing up so I reached over the table to hug her again. It felt weird though. Not the hug. The news. Lex was engaged. To Hamish. To someone she’d only been going out with for, what, a year? To someone I wasn’t wholly sure about. And I mean what’s the deal in this situation? When your best friend gets engaged to someone you’re not sure about?

‘Could I have a coffee?’ I said to a nearby waitress. ‘A really strong Americano?’

She nodded and went off.

A quick summary. Hamish was Lex’s boyfriend. Fiancé, I suppose I should call him now. He was a former rugby player-turned-banker with lumpy ears who Lex met in a pub in Kennington. I’d never been sure about him because he was the sort of man who made jokes about women staying in the kitchen. But whenever I asked why Lex put up with him, she’d smiled in a pathetic way and said that she liked him. After a couple of months of dating, she’d said that she loved him.

We sat down. ‘I mean, blimey,’ I went on. ‘Sorry. I’m just trying to process it. I had no idea,’ I said. ‘Did you?’

‘No, not really,’ she said, holding her hand out in front of her. The broad bean caught the bulb overhead and twinkled as if it was winking at me.

‘How did he do it?’

‘In bed in the hotel, classic Hammy.’

I nodded slowly. The way that Lex sometimes called Hamish ‘Hammy’ made me feel ill. Where was my coffee?

‘It was just after he tried to strangle me with my own hair actually,’ she went on.

‘What?’ I frowned at her.

‘Well, it was New Year’s Eve, in the morning. And we were in bed, just indulging a bit of harmless foreplay, when suddenly he grabbed a handful of hair and pulled it across my neck. I mean, what’s up with that?’

A man on the next-door table looked across at us.

‘What did you do?’ I whispered.

‘I kind of pretended to go along with it for a bit. Because you have to, right? And then he came and it was while we were lying there afterwards that he proposed.’ She had a sip of her tea and put the cup back down on its saucer. ‘Guys are so weird.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘The proposal?’

‘No! The hair thing. But yes, also the proposal.’

‘I didn’t not like it. It’s something a bit different, isn’t it, being throttled by your own highlights? And, yes to the proposal.’ She paused and looked directly across the table at me. ‘I know it’s quite quick. But, Pols, lying there, in that hotel room, it felt right. Honestly.’

I nodded again. I felt like there were a million questions I should be asking. Had they set a date? Had she told her parents? Had she thought about a dress? Were they having any sort of engagement party? But I wasn’t sure I could ask them genuinely enough. Convincingly enough. Was that bad? It was quite bad, wasn’t it? Unsupportive.

‘You’ll be my maid of honour, right?’ she said.

‘Yes, of course I will,’ I said, smiling back even though I felt alarmed at the prospect, worried that this meant traipsing down the aisle behind Lex like a giant 4-year-old in a hideous dress.

‘Great,’ she said. ‘I’m psyched about dress shopping. I’ll send you some dates because appointments get booked up.’ Lex works in fashion PR. I suspected she’d have ambitious ideas for her wedding dress.

‘Can’t wait!’ I said. There. Was that convincing? Did that sound enthusiastic? I wasn’t sure.

‘Anyway, let’s not do wedding stuff now, I can’t take it all in,’ she said, as if reading my mind. ‘How’s your weekend been?’

Finally, the waitress came back with my coffee. ‘Thanks,’ I said, as she put it down. ‘Well, no proposals,’ I said, pouring the thimble of milk into my coffee. ‘I went to Bill’s on Friday night for that dinner.’

‘Oh yeah, how was it? I missed you guys.’

‘Good,’ I said slowly. ‘I, er, I sort of kissed a friend of his actually.’

‘Oh excuse me,’ said Lex loudly, sitting forward in her seat.

‘What?’

‘Leaving it until now to drop the news that you got lucky. What’s he like? What does he look like? Did you touch his penis?’

‘Lex,’ I hissed, trying to quieten her.

‘Oh my God!’ she shrieked, ignoring me. ‘You might have a plus one for my wedding!’

The man on the table next to us shifted in his seat again, as if flinching.

‘Shhhhh! Lex, I don’t think we’re hearing wedding bells with this one. And “getting lucky” would be a generous description.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Just a friend of Bill’s. From business school. Called Callum.’

‘Aaaaand? Come on.’

‘And nothing. He came home with me and there was a bit of a disaster. That’s all.’

‘What do you mean, disaster?’

‘Not much.’ I glanced at the man next to us and lowered my voice again. ‘I gave him a blow job and then he went home.’

‘What do you mean home? Straight home? Straight after he came in your mouth?’

‘Shhhhh. Seriously. People can hear. And yes.’

‘You didn’t actually shag?’

‘No,’ I hissed.

‘Well,’ said Lex, leaning back in her seat again. ‘He has incredibly bad manners. Now, shall we order some eggs?’

‘Do you think I can start following him on Instagram?’ I asked. I was still wondering if I could, but also worrying this seemed a bit desperate. A bit keen. And I didn’t even know if I liked him. I was just feeling a bit low on excitement and the thing was, even though Callum had left after the blow job, I’d still come within touching distance of a penis. And that was rare. For me.

‘Do you want to see him again? Do you actually like him?’ she said.

I pulled a face. ‘Dunno. Am I just being desperate?’

‘Because something’s happened with him?’

‘Well, kind of. I guess because he’s the first heterosexual man to be in my flat for several decades.’

‘But he left immediately afterwards. Like, straight afterwards? No quick cuddle? No “we should do this again”?’

‘Nope.’

She winced. ‘Up to you, love, but I’d probably leave it.’

I’d always been bad at playing it cool. When I was eleven I went to my first disco in a hessian dress that Mum gave me for Christmas. She plaited my hair for the occasion after I showed her a picture from *Just 17* magazine. The result was more *Little House on the Prairie*, but I didn’t let that stop me, chubby, 11-year-old me, asking handsome Jack – the boy every girl in Year 7 worshipped – for a dance. It was a particularly bold move on my part because handsome Jack was already on the dance floor with his girlfriend (the school bitch, Jenny) when I chose to walk up to him.

‘Yeah, maybe I should leave it,’ I said.

I looked down at my menu and tried to concentrate on what kind of eggs I wanted, but what I was actually thinking was that my best friend was getting married, and I didn't even have a boyfriend. Which meant I still had to find someone, go out with them long enough for them to fall in love with me – and this could be many years – before he'd even propose. And as I'd just turned thirty, I did a quick calculation in my head, this meant I might not be married for at least five or six more years. And I definitely read something the other day about getting pregnant before you turned thirty-five, otherwise you had, like, a 3 per cent chance of even having children.

'What eggs are you having?' asked Lex.

But I wasn't listening. Because now I was getting really hysterical. Maybe I'd never get married? Maybe I'd just go to all my friends' weddings alone. Maybe all the wedding invitations I'd ever get would have a solitary 'Polly' written at the top of them and I'd go along and people would say 'How's the love life?' and I'd say 'Haven't found one yet!' in a falsely cheery manner and they'd look at me sadly, as if I'd just told them I'd got a terminal disease. And then they'd be dancing in couples after dinner and I'd be dancing on my own and all my friends would have children and I'd just become the weird, asexual old woman – Auntie Polly – who'd come over for lunch every now and then smelling of dust and Rich Tea biscuits. 'Poor old Polly,' friends would say to one another. 'Such a pity, she just never met anyone.' And I'd die alone in my flat and it would be months before anyone found me. Although it probably wouldn't even be my flat since I couldn't afford to buy one and I didn't even know what a pension was either and...

'POLLY?' said Lex.

I looked up. 'Yes?'

'What eggs are you going to have?'

'Oh. Dunno. I was just thinking about pensions.'

'You're so weird,' she said, shaking her head. 'I'm having scrambled with a side of avocado. And another cup of tea.'

I looked down at the menu again. Eggs, I thought. Ha! It was all very well for Lex to bang on about eggs. Her eggs were probably fine. It was mine I was worried about.



On Monday morning, I went through my usual routine: arrive at work, drop bag on desk, go to Pret for an Americano, come back to desk, check all forms of social media on phone and computer despite the fact I had been checking them constantly on the bus on the way in. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, repeat.

My finger hovered over the 'Follow' button again on Callum's Instagram profile. I was still obsessing over it. Good idea? Bad idea? Should I? Shouldn't I? In the unlikely event that I was ever the President of the United States, I would have to be more decisive than this with any nuclear buttons. I tapped on 'Follow' and quickly put my phone back on my desk again.

'Polly, can you come into my office in ten minutes,' shouted Peregrine from his office. 'We need to be all over this story about Jasper Milton. Lala, too. Where is Lala?'

'Not sure,' I said slowly, frowning at the desk next to me where Lala should have been sitting. 'I'll text her.'

Technically, Lala's job meant that she looked after the party pages in *Posh!*, the pages where terrifically fat, red-faced men danced with terrifically thin, plastic-surgeried women. In reality, it meant Lala emailed her friends every now and then asking if she could photograph their wedding. She was twenty-eight and ravishingly beautiful. Even on a bad day, Lala still looked like a messy Brigitte Bardot, blonde hair piled on top of her head, black eyeliner still on from the night before. The daughter of the fifteenth Earl of Oswestry, she could tell you the difference between a soup spoon and a dessert spoon. On the other hand, she couldn't tell you who the prime minister was, or what one plus three amounted to, or much about anything else. Her love life was similarly chaotic. Men

worshipped her for the first few dates, but the last three men she'd dated had all gone silent after she slept with them. 'I think I'm maybe doing it wrong,' Lala had said sadly at her desk a few months ago, before ordering *The Joy of Sex* from Amazon.

Morning, La, he's on the rampage. When you getting in? X

I put my phone back on my desk. Next job: find out what Jasper Milton, the Marquess of Milton and notorious society heart-throb, had been up to now. Lala had once snogged him while at a shooting weekend in Gloucestershire, and they'd gone on a few dates afterwards. Lala's mother was thrilled at the prospect of her daughter dating the country's most eligible bachelor. But he'd ended things with Lala a couple of weeks later by failing to turn up to dinner with her, having spent the day in a Knightsbridge casino gambling on the Cheltenham Races.

'I don't want to go out with someone who prefers horses to me,' Lala said tearfully in the office the next day. I hadn't wanted to tell her that this counted out almost the entire British aristocracy.

Jasper, I knew from working at *Posh!*, was always photographed at parties, drink in one hand, fag in the other, women standing adoringly around him. But I hadn't read any of the papers that weekend so I quickly googled him, to find out what Peregrine was banging on about. Ah, here we go. I clicked on the headline for the *Mail on Sunday*:

EXCLUSIVE: PLAYBOY SINGLE AGAIN!

A picture below showed a handsome blond figure falling through a nightclub door, shirt undone, feet bare. 'Some say it was only a matter of time,' started the story, 'but the *Mail on Sunday* can confirm that Jasper, the Marquess of Milton, has ended his relationship with Lady Caroline Aspistrada after just three months.

'Sources close to the Marquess, pictured here in Kensington on Friday evening, say the couple had an argument over his partying habits and his late-night return from The Potted Shrimp nightclub in Chelsea earlier last week proved the final straw for Lady Caroline.

'It's the latest in a steady stream of break-ups for the 32-year-old playboy, who last year alone was linked to Princess Clara of Denmark, Lady Gwendolyn Sponge and the actress, Ophelia Jenkins. Friends are said to be worrying that he still shows no inclination to settle down.'

Jasper himself was quoted towards the end of it. 'Caz is a wonderful girl. Much too good for me if I'm honest. But we've gone our separate ways. And that's all I'm going to say on the matter, I'm afraid. Now sod off and leave me to my hangover.'

Apart from Jasper's reputation as a dangerous heartbreaker, I didn't know much else about him. I clicked on to his Wikipedia page and scrolled down. He grew up in a castle in Yorkshire, was kicked out of Eton for seducing a matron then went into the Army and did a six-month stint serving in Iraq. It didn't seem very clear what he was doing now, apart from falling out of nightclubs, but his lack of A-levels or job didn't much matter because he was next in line to a whopping fortune.

His father was the Duke of Montgomery, an army sort who had won a military medal for bravery in the Falklands and was worth a rumoured £500 million. Rumour also had it he had an increasingly dicky heart, meaning Jasper would inherit a 120-room castle in Yorkshire, 15,000 acres of the countryside, another 20,000 acres of Scotland, a townhouse in South Kensington and all the art, furniture and silver that the family had accumulated over the centuries.

'I'M HERE!' screamed Lala, bursting through the door. 'So sorry, what an awful morning. I had the most terrible dreams last night and then my hairdryer wouldn't work and then I couldn't find any clean knickers and...'

'Don't worry but you-know-who wants to talk to us about Jasper Milton. Have you heard?'

'Oh dear, poor Jaz, what's he done this time?' said Lala, emptying her pockets onto her desk. Coins, chewing gum wrappers, lighters, lip balms and taxi receipts fluttered everywhere.

'Single again apparently. Split from Lady Caroline Whatsername. There are some photos of him falling out of a club that the *Mail* has.'

Lala peered over my shoulder at my screen. ‘Oh, I knew that wouldn’t last. Although...’ She stood up and counted on her fingers. ‘Three months. Not bad for him. Probably a record.’

‘CAN YOU BOTH GET INTO MY FUCKING OFFICE THIS FUCKING SECOND. THIS IS A MAJOR FUCKING STORY.’

‘Hang on, let me find a hair tie. Where are all my hair ties?’ said Lala, leaning over the desk and prodding at the pile of dirty wrappers.

‘Never mind your hair. Come on, let’s go through before we’re flayed.’

‘Right, you two,’ said Peregrine, not looking up from his computer as we walked in. ‘The most eligible chap in the country is up for grabs. Yet again. I want to go big on this so we’ve got to get a move on.’

‘What about a piece on the family as a whole?’ I ventured. ‘We talk to everyone we can think of who knows the family. How’s the Duke? What’s the feeling? What’s going on with the Duchess? That sort of stuff.’

I glanced at Lala for some input, but she was doodling a flower on her notepad.

‘A big profile on the whole family, basically,’ I pressed on.

‘No, no, no, the papers have all that already, they’ll already have people in the village now, trying to dig stuff up on the Duke’s health. I want more. I want to know what the Duke has for breakfast, what that bonkers Duchess does all day, what Jasper does all day, kicking about at home. Why can’t he find love? Why can’t he settle down? What’s he really looking for? We need to give our readers more than a few quotes from an unnamed source. I want a proper, insider look at this.’

‘I could always ask Jasper if we could have an interview?’ said Lala, looking up from her notepad.

‘Would he do it?’ asked Peregrine, scratching at his scalp. Dandruff floated to the floor like little snowflakes.

‘I don’t know, but I can ask him,’ Lala replied, lowering her head again to her flower.

Peregrine sighed. He struggled with Lala, with her lateness, with the Monday mornings when Lala only appeared in the office at midday. Her list of improbable excuses had previously included lack of sleep due to bed bugs and having to call a handyman round to get rid of a spider in her bath. But equally, the office needed Lala. Her random musings on British toffs – ‘Oh, by the way, I heard this weekend that the Duke of Anchovy is having an affair with his butler’ – were vital to the magazine.

‘OK, Lala, marvellous, thank you. Could you possibly get in touch with Jasper this morning and see what he says?’

‘Course. Could I just go and get a coffee first? I’m desperate for a coffee, didn’t get much sleep last night.’

‘OK, go and get a coffee and then could you kindly find Jasper for us? If you can possibly manage that teeny-tiny one thing this morning?’

‘Yah, yah, I’ll track him down, Peregrine, don’t you worry. Poor old Jaz.’

‘In the meantime, Polly, I want you to be in charge of this. So can you make a start on research. Go through old issues; we did an interview with the Duke five years ago. I think that was when he trod on a gun and accidentally shot one of his Labradors.’

‘On it.’

I spent the rest of the day alternating between research on the Montgomerys and obsessively checking Instagram to see if Callum had followed me back. If, at any moment, I had to step away from my desk – to Peregrine’s office, to the loo, to Pret at lunchtime – I took my phone and obsessively checked that too. But by 5.30 p.m. Callum still hadn’t followed me back and my mood was hovering somewhere between high-risk depression and suicide.



‘So there’s good news,’ said Lala, the next morning in Peregrine’s office, twirling a strand of hair around her pen. ‘Jasper says he will do an interview, an exclusive one because he trusts us, but I don’t want to do it. It would be a bit strange, you know, given everything...’

‘Terrific, thank you, Lala. Congratulations on the most productive thing you’ve ever done. When can he do it?’

‘Well, he suggested the last weekend in January, at home. Montgomery Castle. They’re shooting so everyone’s at home, and he said whoever does the interview is very welcome to join them for Saturday, for the shoot, then stay for dinner on Saturday night. If that works?’

‘Why are they giving us so much access?’ I asked. I was suspicious. Normally, you were given half an hour with an interview subject, you had to email your entirely inoffensive list of questions over beforehand – What’s your favourite colour? What’s your star sign? What’s your favourite animal? – and then a minder would sit in on the interview, like a Rottweiler waiting to tear the journalist apart if they dared deviate from their questions.

‘Erm, not sure really. I think the family just really want to set the record straight and feel like we’re the ones to do it. I’ve promised them it’ll be a nice piece,’ said Lala. ‘It will, won’t it?’

‘Of course!’ said Peregrine. ‘It’ll be excellent. I can see the headline now: **PULLING THE TRIGGER WITH BRITAIN’S MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR!**’

‘Polly,’ he went on, ‘I’d like you to do the interview, so cancel whatever you were doing that weekend and start getting ready. I want you to find out everything you can about him. Why can’t he keep a girlfriend? Are the Duke and Duchess pressurizing him to get married? Does he think he’ll ever find The One? And can you talk to the picture desk about it, I want photos of Jasper through the ages. As a page boy at the King of Lichtenstein’s wedding, his first day at Eton, the university years, at the races, out hunting and so on. Everything.’

‘Sure,’ I said, but I was suddenly nervous. ‘La, what should I wear? And dinner, will it be smart?’

‘You need tweed for the shooting, a hat and some boots. Oh, and some shooting socks. And then it’ll probably just be black tie on Saturday night.’

‘*Just* black tie?’

‘Well, you know, a dress or skirt. Knee-length or longer. Heels,’ said Lala.

‘Polly, do stop fussing about the detail,’ said Peregrine. ‘Lala, take her to the fashion cupboard. Sort it out there.’

Back at my computer, I had a little red Instagram notification: Callum had followed me back. Only twenty-four hours later, I thought to myself, which seems odd when everyone has their phones on them *all* the time. And then I thought: stop being so psycho.

‘Lala, look, he’s followed me back.’

‘Who?’

‘That guy Callum I told you about from the weekend.’

‘Ohhhhh yes. The one who lives in Brixton?’

‘No, no. That’s Bill. You’ve met Bill.’

She frowned at me.

‘You know. Dark hair, used to work for Google, now developing his own app.’

‘Oh yes. Cute. Dimples?’

I frowned. ‘You have weird taste. But no, I don’t mean Bill.’

‘Who then?’

‘Callum.’

‘Is he the Instagram one?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Is he the one who’s just added you on Instagram?’

‘YES. Jesus, I feel like we might both die of old age having this conversation.’

‘But who is he?’

‘A friend of Bill’s. I kissed him on Friday night after Bill’s dinner party. Do you really not remember me telling you all this yesterday?’

‘When?’

‘When we went to get coffee after talking to Peregrine about Jasper.’

‘Oh, then. Pols, that was eleven o’clock on Monday morning. I can barely remember my own name at eleven o’clock on Monday mornings.’

‘So I need to take you through the whole thing again?’

‘Yes. Come on. Let’s go to the fashion cupboard and you can talk me through it there.’



While I repeated the entire sorry story of Friday night, Lala and Allegra the magazine’s French fashion editor (nicknamed Legs on the basis that hers were skinnier than a pair of chopsticks), clicked through websites looking for suitably tweedy clothes. After half an hour of umming and aahing, they decided I needed the following:

1) *One tweed Ralph Lauren coat*

2) *One brown felt hat with a feather sticking out of it (‘You must wear a hat, Pols, toffs like everyone wearing hats because it means they can pretend it’s still two hundred years ago and they rule everything’)*

3) *One pair of Jimmy Choo riding boots*

4) *One three-quarter-length black Dolce & Gabbana dress*

5) *One pair of Charlotte Olympia heels.*

‘And not too much make-up, Pols, they don’t like too much make-up,’ Lala added sternly.

‘Why? What’s wrong with make-up?’

‘It’s vulgar. Makes you look like you’ve tried too hard.’

‘OK. And what shall I do with my hair?’

‘Mustn’t be too perfect, otherwise that suggests that you’re vain and have been indoors all day.’

‘Instead of running around outside killing things?’

‘Exactly. Happy? You never know, you might fall madly in love with Jasper and end up marrying him. Imagine that. Oh, except you don’t need a boyfriend any more.’

‘Callum is not my boyfriend. Did you not listen to a word of my story?’

‘But do you want him to be? You must like him, otherwise you wouldn’t have talked on and on about him.’

‘I had to keep talking on and on about him because you weren’t listening. And I don’t really know. I think maybe he’s just a distraction. Or maybe it’s just my biological clock.’

‘What ees thees clock?’ interjected Legs. Being French, she disliked most things, but she especially disliked: fat people, most forms of carbohydrate, London buses, flat shoes, any kind of comfortable or functional clothing, Peregrine and rain.

‘It’s a thing you supposedly get when you turn thirty,’ I explained. ‘It means you want to have babies.’

‘Pfff. You cannot possibly ’ave a baby. Babies are so unchic,’ said Legs.

‘No, no. Well, I don’t mean “no”. I want them at some point. But not now. I couldn’t afford one anyway. I can barely afford my own lunch.’

‘Pffff.’ Legs wasn’t big on lunch either. She always had an Americano with macadamia nut milk for breakfast, a Diet Coke for lunch, then several Martinis at whatever fashion dinner she had that night while she pushed a piece of fish so tiny you could hardly see it, let alone eat it, around her plate.



Later that week, I did my homework on the Montgomerys, which meant Googling them and leafing through old copies of *Posh!*. As far as I could work out, there were four main characters, all of whom would be there for the weekend. The main focus was obviously Jasper. Thirty-three-year-old Jasper, the Marquess of Milton. Suave, sandy-haired playboy, tall and obsessed with horse racing. By all accounts, he had impeccable manners until approximately ten minutes after he'd slept with you, when he would lose all interest and go back to studying the *Racing Post*. After leaving the Army he had moved home and seemingly learnt how to run the family estate.

Then there was his father, Charles, the Duke of Montgomery. Clearly, as a former army major, he was the kind of man who always had toast and marmalade in his 153-room house at 0755 hours and would then take a post-breakfast shit at precisely 0840, before walking his black Labrador and then settling down at 0930 hours to write a letter to the *Telegraph* about the state of the armed services. He had been hospitalized a few times for various heart operations, according to several newspaper reports, and remained as frail as a green bean.

The Duke's wife, Jasper's mother, was a woman called Eleanor, the Duchess of Montgomery. She grew up in a Scottish castle and was mad. Properly, totally mad, according to past *Posh!* interviews in which she only talked about her chickens. She was, as far as I could tell, in love with her chickens. At one point she had thirty-nine of them, all with different names. She had told one interviewer that, when they were born, her trick was to carry the chicks around in her bra so that she bonded with them. 'I've never crushed any of them,' she'd said. 'I love them like they're my own children. Maybe even more.'

Meanwhile, Jasper's sister, Lady Violet, was in love with her horse. Apparently, nobody in this family could form proper human relationships, so instead they made questionably close friends with their animals. Violet was twenty-five and also living at home in Yorkshire, having attempted a cookery course, a secretarial course, an art foundation course and a needlework course. Presumably, she had now run out of courses. No boyfriend, although she had once been linked to Prince Harry. Who hadn't?

So, that was the line-up for the weekend, the family that I had to interview for an eight-page piece in *Posh!* to prove what a normal, upstanding family they were.

Mum sent me a message that same afternoon.

Got the letter, the appointment is at 4.15 on 2nd February at St Thomas' Hospital. Is that all right, darling? X

I checked my diary. It was the week after I was going to Castle Montgomery, so I would make Peregrine give me the afternoon off.

Course, easy-peasy. Will ring later Xxxx

3

ON THE SATURDAY MORNING, I caught the 7.05 from King's Cross, which arrived in York station just before 10 a.m., where an idling taxi driver outside picked me up.

'You're wanting the castle?' said the driver. His car smelt of dogs.

'Yes please,' I said, shutting my eyes and leaning back in the seat to try to denote that I wasn't up for chatting.

'I know that young Lord Jasper,' said the driver, as the car kicked into action.

'Mmmm,' I replied, eyes still closed.

'I've been driving him about since he was a lad.'

'Mmmm.'

'And if you ask me...'

I wasn't.

'... there's something not right about that family. All that money, all them rooms, all them horses. And now Lord Jasper in the newspapers again. Still no wife. And all that carrying on between the Duchess and that gamekeeper, I ask you. It ain't right.'

‘The gamekeeper?’ I opened one eye.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, nodding his head. ‘If you ask me, it’s disgustin’, behaving like that while your husband’s heart’s playing up. If my Marjorie ever even thought about it, I’d have something to say about it. Not that I’ve ever given her cause for complaint in that department.’

I decided to gloss over this personal detail. ‘Does everyone know about the Duchess?’

‘Oh yeah. Everyone up ’ere does anyway. And Tony, he’s the chap, braggin’ about it in the pub every night.’ He shook his head.

‘How long’s that been going on for?’

‘Years, far as I know. I tell you, if my Marjorie...’

Twenty minutes later, he pulled up outside the front door. ‘Here you go then, that’ll be twenty-five pounds. Will you be wanting a lift back later?’

‘Oh no, thanks, I’m here for the night.’

‘Right you are. Here’s my card anyways, you never know.’

I climbed out and looked up. It made the Disney castle look poky. There were turrets and gargoyles grimacing out on various corners. It was the sort of place from which a treasonous medieval baron would have plotted his march on London. I tugged on a metal pulley by the front door. Nothing. I pulled it again. Nothing. I peered through the glass of the front door into the hall and spied a large fireplace. There was no sign of human activity – just a large stuffed bear standing beside a grand piano.

Feeling awkward, I tiptoed across the lawn at the front of the house to find another door, like a visiting peasant who had come to pay my rent. Then, through a large stone arch to the left-hand side of the castle, I saw a door suddenly swing open and a male figure, clad entirely in tweed, marched out of it, followed by a black Labrador. Tweed hat, tweed coat, tweed trousers. The only thing which wasn’t tweed was the man’s face: the face was red.

He turned and shouted back behind him, ‘I TOLD EVERYONE WE NEEDED TO BE READY AT ELEVEN AND AS USUAL IN THIS FAMILY, YOU’RE ALL LATE. I don’t know why we can’t ever do anything on time, it’s a bloody shambles—’

The tweed-covered man spotted me.

‘AND WHO ARE YOU?’ he bellowed.

‘Um, hello... I’m, um... I’ve come from *Posh!* magazine. I’m here to see Jasper, it’s for an interview?’

He frowned. ‘Oh, the journalist,’ he roared, in much the same manner in which someone would say ‘paedophile’.

‘I’m here today... and then staying tonight... and then writing a piece...’ I stuttered.

‘Nothing to do with me, you want my son Jasper. He’s probably up in his room. You’ll have to excuse me for a moment, I’m trying to get ready for this damn shoot.’ The Duke of Montgomery turned to roar through the open door, ‘BUT EVERYONE’S BLOODY LATE THIS MORNING!’

He looked back at me. ‘Go through there and find Ian, he’ll point you in the right direction. And if you could get any of my family to hurry up that would be marvellous. Where’s my bloody dog? Ah, there you are, Inca. Come on, good boy.’ He stalked past me under the stone arch, the dog at his heels, leaving the back door open.

Inside was a room that smelled of mud and damp towels and was stuffed with coats, boots, hats, fishing rods and dog beds. No actual humans. So I walked anxiously through the room, feeling like an intruder, worried that an alarm would go off any second, and into a corridor so long I couldn’t see the end of it. Huge portraits peered down at me from the walls. I squinted at the closest one, which depicted a plain-looking woman in a green silk dress, white hair piled on her head.

‘The Duchess of Montgomery, 1745,’ read a plaque beneath it. There were more Montgomerys lining the corridor. Male Montgomerys, female Montgomerys, fat Montgomerys, thin, bearded

Montgomerys, baby Montgomerys. A waft of cigarette smoke drifted towards me as I started to walk down the corridor.

‘Who’s that?’ came a shriek from a room on the left. ‘Ian, is that you? I can’t find my trousers.’

‘Er, no, it’s not Ian,’ I said, sticking my head into a large kitchen to see a woman sitting at the table, cigarette in hand, smoke snaking its way towards the ceiling. She was wearing a dark green polo neck and a pair of white knickers. No trousers.

‘Who are you?’ she said.

‘I’m Polly. I’m sorry to, um, interrupt. It’s only that I was told to come and find someone called Ian because I’m here to talk to Jasper. I’m from *Posh!*.’ I was gabbling. ‘The magazine?’

The woman drew lengthily on her cigarette. ‘Yes, I’m trying to find Ian, too. I need my trousers. We’re all late this morning and in terrible trouble with my husband. As usual.’

‘Oh,’ I said, in a manner which I hoped suggested I was sympathetic and yet relaxed about being granted an audience with the Duchess in her knickers. Who and where was Ian?

A dog that looked like Bertie was curled up and sleeping on the back of a sofa underneath the kitchen window. ‘Oh, sweet,’ I said, nodding towards it, trying to make conversation so I could stop thinking about the Duchess’s knickers. ‘Do you have a terrier?’

The Duchess looked over her shoulder. ‘He was a terrier, yes. A Yorkie called Toto. But he’s dead.’

‘Oh.’

‘He’s dead too,’ she said, pointing at an orange guinea pig on a bookshelf beside the Aga.

‘Oh, right.’

‘I can’t bear to bury the pets, you see. So I have them stuffed by a taxidermist in town.’ She took another drag of her cigarette. ‘I might do the same to my husband one day.’

Thankfully, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching.

‘Ian, there you are,’ the Duchess exclaimed. ‘I can’t find my trousers. Have you seen them?’

I turned around. Ian was apparently a sort of giant butler, well over six foot, in a uniform, with his hair neatly brushed to the side. A pair of tweed trousers lay across his arm.

‘Are these the ones, madam?’

‘Yes. You are a poppet.’ The Duchess stubbed out her cigarette and stood up. She was tall, with pale, thin legs. I stared resolutely at the floor.

‘This is Holly by the way, she’s come to interview Jasper. How long are you here for?’

‘Well, today and tonight he said, I think, if that’s all right. I mean, I don’t have to stay, I just need to—’

‘No, do stay,’ said the Duchess, taking the tweed trousers from Ian. ‘Lovely to have some fresh blood,’ she added. It sounded like a threat.

‘Are you walking out with us today?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I replied, confused. ‘What does... um, what does that mean?’

‘What?’

‘What you just said. Walking out?’

‘Oh,’ she said, surprised. Then, quite slowly, as if she was talking to a small child, ‘As in, are you coming shooting with us?’

‘With a gun?’

She smiled at me. ‘Darling, no, we wouldn’t give you a gun. You don’t look like a trained killer. Walking out means coming along and watching. Jolly cold, frightfully boring. But you can stand with Jasper.’

I was relieved. ‘Oh, right. Then yes, I think so. If that’s all right.’

‘Have you got any clothes?’ she asked, standing up to put her own trousers on. One leg in, then the other. She maintained eye contact with me throughout. It was like some kind of weird, reverse striptease.

‘Uhhh, yes. In here.’ I jiggled my overnight bag.

‘Good, well, we’re already all terribly late. Ian, has someone made a room up?’

‘Yes, madam.’

‘Marvellous, in that case can you show Holly to her room and she can quickly get changed. I can’t tell you the row there’ll be if we’re not at the stables in the next ten minutes. And take her to Jasper’s room afterwards, will you?’ She stalked out, in the direction of the boot room.

‘It’s Polly, actually,’ I said to Ian, apologetically.

‘Welcome, madam,’ he replied, holding a giant hand out for my bag.

I followed Ian as he walked slowly out of the kitchen and back into the corridor, past more dead Montgomerys, up a twisting staircase, along another corridor, down some carpeted stairs and then he turned and opened a door.

‘Here you are, you’re in Nanny’s old room. There’s a bathroom just through there. I’ll give you a few moments to change and then take you to Lord Jasper.’

‘Great, thanks. Yes please.’

I stepped into the room as Ian closed the door behind me. It looked like it hadn’t been redecorated for fifty years. Flowery wallpaper, a yellowing carpet and a pink quilt on a narrow single bed. I pressed my hand on the mattress and winced as a spring pinged underneath it. There was a stuffed ferret with horrid little pink eyes on the mantelpiece. My phone buzzed from inside the bag. It was Lala.

You there? Keep me posted. Xxx

I chucked the phone down on the quilt. Later was fine, I needed to put on my tweed. A few moments later, I looked like a Victorian lady explorer off to discover the dusty crevices of the empire. Was I supposed to look like this? I fished my lip-gloss out of my bag and added some for effect, then glanced in the mirror again. If Joe could see me, he would die of a heart attack from laughing.

There was a discreet knock at the door and a gentle cough outside.

‘Sorry, sorry, just coming.’ I threw the lip-gloss on the bed and opened the door.

‘Magnificent,’ said Ian. ‘Follow me.’

Sedate apparently being Ian’s preferred pace, I followed him back up the carpeted stairs and along the corridor.

‘Lord Jasper,’ said Ian, stopping outside a closed door from behind which I could hear Van Morrison playing. ‘I’ve got the journalist from London here.’

Van Morrison stopped. ‘Oh, Jesus,’ came a groan.

‘She’s not called Jesus, sir. She’s called Polly,’ said Ian.

‘Good one,’ said Jasper, throwing opening the door and smiling at me. ‘Polly, hello, any friend of Lala’s is a friend of mine.’

He was handsome, I had to admit it. And taller than I expected, with blue eyes and dirty blond hair that he swept to the side with one hand. He was also wearing an absurd pair of tweed knickerbockers which gathered just beneath his knees, but his shirt was loose and unbuttoned. He, too, was barefoot. Was nobody in this family able to dress themselves properly?

Jasper held out his hand. ‘How do you do?’

But I didn’t have a second to answer how I was doing, because he immediately turned to Ian.

‘Now, Ian, my good man, I can’t seem to find a single pair of shooting socks. I mean, I don’t know what you do with them. Do you eat them? I buy a million pairs every year and then the shooting season rolls around again and they’ve all gone. It’s the bloody end, I tell you.’

‘I’ll have a look in your father’s room, sir.’ Ian turned and glided silently back along the passage.

‘Right, well, Polly, I’m so sorry. It’s a madhouse here, as you’ve probably already gathered. Did you meet my parents?’

‘Yes, your father was outside with his dog, and your mother was in the kitchen, looking for her trousers.’

‘And here I am, looking for my socks. What a shambles we all are.’ He pushed his hair to the side again. ‘You look superb anyway. Have you been out shooting before?’

I looked down at my tweed self-consciously. ‘Oh, thanks. And no, I haven’t.’

Jasper started doing up his shirt. ‘Well, give me two seconds and, socks permitting, we can be on our way. How are you with dogs by the way?’

‘With them?’

‘Do you mind them? Do you like them?’

‘Oh, no... I mean, yes. I love them. I’ve grown up with them. My mother has a small terrier called Bertie.’

‘How sweet. Mine is an abominably badly behaved Labrador called Bovril. Do you mind being in charge of him today while I shoot? I’ll tell you where to stand and all that.’

‘Sure. No problem. What about the interview though?’

‘What interview?’

‘Well, I need to sit down with you at some point and chat about, you know, the pictures in the paper and...’ I trail off, nervously.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that, we’ll have acres of time tonight over dinner. Now, let’s go and find these socks.’



An hour later, I was standing behind Jasper in a field on the side of a steep hill, holding on to Bovril’s lead with one hand, and my hat with the other. There were five other men spread out along the field, each holding a gun, each with a woman standing dutifully behind them, also holding some colour of Labrador on a lead. The wind was blowing odd noises towards us from a wood at the bottom of the field, some sort of weird warbling and the sound of crashing footsteps through thick undergrowth.

‘What is that?’ I asked Jasper.

He didn’t reply.

‘Jasper?’ I tapped him on the shoulder and he looked around. ‘What’s... that... noise?’ I mouthed slowly at him and pointed at the trees.

‘Hang on.’ He reached into his ear and pulled out an orange earplug. ‘What?’

‘Sorry. I just wasn’t sure what the noise was.’

‘It’s the beaters. They’re...’

‘What are beaters?’

‘They’re the people who flush the birds out. And they’re down there, in the woods, walking towards us from the other side to flush out the birds, to make them fly over us. Then... bang. See?’

It didn’t seem very fair, a load of people hollering in a forest, trying to make the pheasants fly towards a line of armed men standing on a hill. Beside me, Bovril yawned and lay down. I fished in my pocket for my phone, my hands already numb from the cold. ‘Beaters people who chase birds,’ I tapped into my notes with stiff fingers. ‘Jasper has dog called Bovril. Duchess mad, stuffs all family pets.’

A sudden, loud bang to the right made me jump so I slid my phone back into my pocket and looked up in the air to see a pheasant whirling in small circles towards the ground. It hit the grass with a thud. Bovril looked at it, then looked up at me, then whined.

I jumped again as Jasper’s gun went off. The smell of gunpowder floated through the air and there was another thud behind us as that pheasant tumbled to the ground.

‘Let Bovril off his lead, will you?’ instructed Jasper, eyes still on the sky as if scanning for the Luftwaffe.

Bovril, pleased to be free, bounded towards the dead pheasant, picked it up by the neck, and trotted obediently back, dropping it on my boot. I looked down at it and inched my foot away,

uncertain of Jimmy Choo's policy on accepting back boots which had pheasant blood on them. Frowned upon, probably.

The sound of gunshots rang out. Suddenly, dozens of birds were flying out from the wood. I clapped my hands over my ears and looked up into the sky. Pheasants poured overhead as the shooting continued, some tumbling from the sky like stones, some flying straight on over the hedge behind them. *I'd keep flying if I were you*, I willed them, *keep going until you get to somewhere nice and warm, like Africa*.

Jasper muttered the odd 'fuck' and a small pile of empty red cartridges piled up behind him. Bovril, meanwhile, galloped back and forth, fetching pheasants and proudly creating a pile at my feet. Some were still twitching, which made me grimace. Urgh, what was I doing standing in this cold field? All I wanted was to sit down with Jasper and get the interview done.

A whistle blew and Jasper put down his gun. 'Well, that wasn't too bad, was it? Must have been sixty or so birds that came out of there.'

Poor things, I wanted to say. 'Hmm,' I said instead. 'How long have you been doing it?'

'Since I was six.'

'Six? I was still learning to tell the time when I was six.'

'Dad started me pretty early. Right, come on. Another drive, then it's elevenses.'

'Drive? In a car?' I was hopeful about warming up.

'No, no, you appalling townie. That's what we're on now. A "drive" is this, standing around in a field waiting for birds to be driven towards us. So, we've got one more, then elevenses, then probably another couple, then lunch, then maybe two more drives after that depending on the light.'

The day stretched before me. My fingers had gone white from the cold and my feet were presumably the same colour despite being wrapped in scratchy woollen socks. It would serve Peregrine right if I succumbed to frostbite while shooting in Yorkshire.



Lunch was back in the castle, in a room with the heads of dead animals looking down at us. Stag heads staring glassily out in front of them, snarling fox heads, a zebra head, a warthog head, the head of something else that looked like a deer but had curling horns. I stared at them. You never saw zebra heads on *60 Minute Makeover*.

'We killed the last journalist who came to stay with us,' said a voice behind me. I turned around. It was the Duke. 'Only joking,' he said, before I had the chance to reply.

'Now, come on, everybody sit,' he ordered.

I was sitting between a man who was wearing bright yellow socks with his tweed outfit, called Barney, and another guest called Max. Barney, I learned, was actually called Barnaby and he was fifty-first in line to the throne. He didn't have a job, but lived at the family estate in Gloucestershire and spent his time shooting. When he wasn't shooting, he told me, he was fishing or horse racing.

'Oh,' I said, starting to run out of small talk. He seemed obsessed with killing things. 'So do you travel much?'

'No,' he said firmly, 'going abroad is ghastly. Apart from the Alps. I go skiing three or four times a year. I'd like to go hunting tigers in India, but they're making it very tricky to do that these days.'

'Barney, you can't say that sort of thing,' said Max, joining the conversation. 'Polly, I'm so sorry. Barney is completely appalling, but we've all been friends since school and we can't seem to shake him off.'

'How rude,' said Barney. 'No shooting invitation for you this year, Maximillian.'

'You see, Polly? Barney blackmails us into being friends with him. Tragic.'

I looked along to Jasper, positioned at the head of the table, with two blondes sitting either side and smiling at him in an adoring fashion. His ideal habitat, I suspected. He'd loosened the collar around his neck and was leaning forwards on the table, telling them some story. He reached for a

bottle in front of him and topped up both their glasses while still talking, then put the bottle back and looked down the table at me. He caught my eye and winked. Please, I thought, I'm not that easy.

I turned to Max, sensing if not an ally then at least someone I might be able to hold a conversation with, and asked him about the others. 'Max,' I began, 'who is everyone else here? I mean, obviously, I know about Jasper and his family. But I'm not sure about anyone else. Do you know them all?'

'I'm so sorry,' he said, folding his napkin and putting it on the table.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, just poor you. Having to come to this. Do we all seem totally absurd?' Max asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer. 'No,' I said after a pause. 'I'm just trying to gauge who everybody is.'

'OK, let me talk you through them all. So, next to Jasper's father is Willy Naseby-Dawson, she's...'

I looked at the blonde girl again. 'Why's she called Willy if she's a girl?'

'Short for Wilhelmina. She's from a German family, she's Barny's wife. Poor thing. And then on her other side is Archie Spiffington, who's married to the girl Barny's talking to now, Jessica. They got married last year because she was pregnant – her father was very upset at that and insisted on them getting hitched. Her family's disgustingly rich. Her great-great-grandfather invented the railway or something. Anyway, big wedding in London, then six months later along comes their son Ludo, who's now about seven months, I think. I'm the godfather.'

'Oh, sweet, where's Ludo?'

'No idea, with the nanny in London probably. And then, on Jessica's other side is Seb – Sebastian, Lord Ullswater. He's a fairly dubious character who used to be in the Army and now sells weapons to anyone who'll buy them. And he's married to that girl on the other side of Jasper, the girl on my right, who's called Muffy.'

'And what about you?' I asked him.

'What do you mean, what about me?'

'Are you married?'

Max threw his head back and laughed. 'I'm gay, my darling. Can you not tell because I'm wearing such manly trousers?'

'Oh, right,' I said, blushing. 'Although, you could still get married.'

'Yes, that's true,' he said, nodding.

'Have you got a boyfriend?'

'No. Not terribly good with boyfriends.'

'Max,' said Barny, from my other side. 'None of us want to hear about your love life over pudding.'

'I wish there was one, Barny, old boy. But it's been slow-going of late.'

'You should meet my flatmate, Joe,' I said to Max. 'You're just his type.'

'Oh really? What's his type?'

'Well, actually, quite wide ranging, I'd say. But dark, handsome and funny. And you're all of those.'

'Right,' bellowed the Duke from the other end of the room, slamming his fists down on the table. 'Finish up your pudding and let's get going.'

'Come on then,' Max said to me. Then he called down the table, 'Jasper, I'm stealing Polly to stand with me this afternoon. Violet, why don't you go with your brother? I need to talk to Polly about her flatmate.'

Jasper's sister. I'd barely noticed the woman sitting three to my left. She seemed much quieter than her talkative brother.

'Fine by me,' said Violet, carefully putting her napkin back on the table. 'If anyone wants to borrow another layer then shout, it looks like rain this afternoon.'



It started raining while I stood behind Max waiting for the shooting to start again. Having defrosted enough to handle a knife and fork over lunch, my hands were stiff with cold again. Max stood, gun slung over his arm, cigarette dangling from his lips.

‘You all right?’ He glanced back at me.

‘Yes, yes, fine. Who needs hands anyway?’

‘You going back to London after this?’

‘No, I’m staying tonight. I haven’t had my interview with Jasper yet.’

He exhaled smoke into the air. ‘That’s brave. Have you talked much to their Graces?’

‘Who?’

‘The Duke and Duchess.’

‘No, not really.’ I squinted in the distance to see the Duke standing at the other end of the field. The Duchess had announced after lunch that she wasn’t coming out that afternoon because she had work to do in her hen house.

‘They’re barking,’ said Max, grinding his cigarette out in the mud with his boot. ‘Truly barking.’

‘I’ve noticed.’

‘Which is why Jasper is a bit... complicated sometimes.’

‘You’ve known him for ever?’

He nodded again. ‘We were at prep school together. Then the same house at Eton, until he got kicked out. Then Edinburgh University.’ He paused. ‘He’s been a good friend. Stood up for me at school when I came out. Not that my sexuality was a huge surprise to anyone. I mean, darling, look at me!’

I laughed. Max was wearing tweed, but also pink socks, a pink shirt, a yellow tie and a pink beanie.

‘So, he’s been a good friend,’ he carried on. ‘And, I know we all get a bit carried away sometimes...’

‘Carried away?’

‘Those pictures, after he broke up with Caz, are a case in point.’ Max raised his eyebrows at me. ‘Anyway, Jasper knows exactly who told the papers he’d broken it off with her, who told the photographers where he was that night. But he’s not going to say anything. He’s too honourable.’

There was a bang down the line and a pheasant dropped through the air towards the ground. ‘Right, here we go again. Time to concentrate,’ said Max, turning round and lifting his gun.



Back at the castle there was tea. The sort of tea you read about in a Dickens novel. Sandwiches, sausage rolls, fruitcake, shortbread, tea in actual teapots. Also, port. Port! In miniature wine glasses! Joe and I put away a couple of cheap bottles of Pinot Grigio from Barbara’s shop almost every night, but we didn’t drink as much as this lot. The Duke’s blood must be 93 per cent alcohol, I reckoned, watching him drain another glass of the syrupy red liquid.

After half an hour or so of standing on the fringes of the drawing room, defrosting my hands yet again on a teacup, Jasper’s friends started leaving and I snuck out gratefully to my room. I then ran a hot bath with a good few slugs from an ancient-looking bottle of hyacinth bath oil I found in the bathroom cupboard. Sylvia Plath once said that a hot bath cured everything, which I’d always thought slightly ironic, because poor Sylvia then went and killed herself. But I needed a bath to help collect my thoughts. The evening dinner promised to be a sort of cross between *Downton Abbey* and *Coronation Street*, while everyone politely ate their soup. Or drank their soup. What does one do with

soup? Anyway, everyone would be doing something with their soup and discussing the day while bad tempers seethed underneath. Maybe soup would be thrown.

Because nobody in this house, this castle, rather, seemed able to move without some form of alcohol in their hand, Ian had sent me upstairs with something called a ‘hot toddy’. A few fingers of whisky, some hot water and a teaspoon or so of honey, he’d explained. ‘It’ll warm you up,’ he’d said.

I swirled it around in its glass, splashing hot, oily water over the side of the bath. It burned my throat going down.

My phone suddenly vibrated on the bed, so I climbed out of the bath, wrapped myself in a scratchy towel, picked it up and lay – steaming – on the narrow little mattress. It was Lala again.

How’s it going, Pols? Do you like Jaz? Send my love to everyone. Don’t forget the make-up thing Xxxx

I quickly typed out a reply.

All good, don’t worry. I’ll report back on Monday xxxx

Still hot and damp from the bath, I then stood up to heave myself into the floor-length dress Legs and Lala had insisted I wear. No tights, because they were common apparently. I looked in the full-length mirror. A ropey Twenties flapper girl looked back at me. But it would have to do. And somehow I needed to walk downstairs in the ridiculous heels they’d given me, so high they looked like they might give me vertigo.

I picked up my phone again and checked the time. Nearly seven o’clock. I needed to find the drawing room where Ian had told me the family gathered for drinks. More drinks! And I still hadn’t sat down to interview Jasper yet. I’d scribbled some more notes on my phone – his penchant for Van Morrison, his habit of constantly brushing his hair from his eyes, Max’s comment about him being ‘honourable’ – but I needed Jasper on record about his relationships. I needed him to open up a bit. I couldn’t come all this way and report back to Peregrine with so little. Maybe more drinks would help, I thought, as I closed the bedroom door behind me and inched down the stairs like a wobbly drunk, clutching at the banister. A grandfather clock ticked gently from below, but otherwise the house was silent. Ian’s instructions for finding the drawing room had been along these lines: ‘Come downstairs, turn left and walk fifty yards down the corridor, turn right into another corridor, click your heels three times and the drawing room will be on your right-hand side.’

The sound of smashing glass, followed by a high-pitched scream gave me a clue. It was exactly the sort of high-pitched scream that might come from an angry and potentially violent duchess.

‘WE ARE ALL HAVING FUCKING DINNER TOGETHER, ELEANOR, I MEAN IT.’

Another high-pitched scream. I froze outside the door. Rude to walk in on a row. But quite rude to stand out here listening to it, also. I wondered if I should hobble back upstairs again. But I could already feel a blister coming up on my little toe from those wretched heels. I was hovering like this in the hall, as if playing a private game of musical statues, when I heard a small cough behind me.

‘Polly, there you are,’ said Ian. ‘Follow me and let’s get you another drink.’ He swept past, carrying a silver tray with several Martini glasses on it.

‘Really?’

‘Absolutely, nothing to worry about,’ he said, pushing the door open.

The Duchess was standing beside the fireplace, still in her shooting clothes. The Duke was sitting in a large red armchair. Inca walked towards me and shoved his wet nose into my crotch.

‘Do get your bloody dog to behave,’ said the Duchess, huffily.

‘That’s all right,’ I said, brushing smears from Inca’s wet nose off the three-thousand-pound dress.

‘Very kind of you to dress so wonderfully, Polly, but we’re terribly relaxed here,’ said the Duke, who was wearing a blue shirt and electric red cords with a pair of velvet slippers. ‘Ian, what are we having for dinner?’

‘I think Chef’s doing mushroom soufflé, followed by roast partridge and then rhubarb syllabub, Your Grace. And there’s some cheese, if you’d like?’

‘Yes, we simply must have cheese,’ the Duke said gravely.

‘Well, if you’ll forgive me,’ said the Duchess, ‘I’m going to go and get changed and then go out. So, I’m afraid I won’t be joining you for dinner, Polly, but my husband and children will look after you.’ She glared at the Duke and stalked out, slamming the door behind her.

‘Drink, Polly?’ asked the Duke. ‘I’m going to have another one. A strong one, I think. Bugger the doctors.’



After its warlike beginning, dinner was almost disappointingly peaceful. Jasper, the Duke, Violet and I sat at one end of a vast mahogany table in the dining room, the light from several silver candlesticks flickering off the dark green walls and an eight-foot stuffed polar bear casting a long shadow along the room at the other end of the table. It was his grandfather’s, the Duke told me, one of forty-six polar bears brought back as a trophy from one of his hunting expeditions in the Arctic in 1906.

There was no shouting. No Duchess. Violet (in jeans and a t-shirt) talked about her horses, the Duke generally talked about the animals he’d killed, Jasper (in jeans and a collared blue shirt) quietly fed Bovril scraps of partridge. I felt excruciatingly out of place given that I was dressed as if I was off to a pre-war nightclub, but I kicked my shoes off under the table. I rubbed my feet together as the Duke asked me questions about London.

‘Far too many people in London,’ he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin at the end of dinner and standing up. He then announced he needed to walk Inca and Violet said she wanted to have a bath. Which left Jasper and me sitting at one end of the table, candles still burning and Ian humming while removing bowls and dirty napkins.

‘Another bottle?’ Ian asked.

‘I think so, don’t you?’ replied Jasper, pushing his chair back from the table and stretching his legs out in front of him. ‘OK, Polly, let’s get this over with.’

‘Get what over with?’

‘The interview, our little chat. What do you want to know about me and this madhouse?’

‘Oh, I see. OK. You call it a madhouse?’

‘What else would you call it? My father is a Victorian whose dearest wish is that he’d fought in the Boer War. My mother is happiest pottering about in the hen house with her friend, the gamekeeper.’

‘Ah. So, that’s...’

Jasper raised an eyebrow at me.

‘... common knowledge?’

‘Desperately common. The whole village knows about it. It’s been on and off for years. As long as I can remember. I don’t mind so much but I think Violet probably does. So, instead, she thinks of horses from morning till night.’

‘Hang on, hang on, can I record this?’ I pulled my phone out of my pocket and waved it at him. He smiled at me. ‘Ah my inquisitor. I didn’t realize I was doing an interview for *Newsnight*.’

‘You’re not. But I quite need to record it. Can I?’ I held my phone up again.

‘Course. I will say lots of immensely intelligent things.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ I said, fiddling with my phone to make sure it was recording. ‘And what about you?’

‘What do you mean “What about me?”’

‘Are you as mad as everyone else?’

‘No,’ he replied. ‘I’m the sanest of the lot.’ He smiled again and swept his hair out of his eyes.

‘What about your break-up? What about those photos?’

‘What photos?’

‘The ones in the paper.’

He looked straight into my eyes. It was unnerving, as if he could see directly into my brain. A sort of posh Paul McKenna. ‘I don’t want to talk about Caz,’ he replied. ‘She’s a sweet girl. It just wasn’t right. Or I’m not right...’ He trailed off. ‘And those photos... All right, so occasionally I behave badly and let off a bit of steam. I go out and I behave like an idiot. But I don’t think being photographed stumbling out of a club is the worst thing in the world.’

He leant closer, shifting in his chair, still looking into my eyes. ‘Forgive me, Polly, for I have sinned.’

I burst out laughing. ‘Nice try. But you can’t charm your way out that easily.’

‘Fine.’ He sat back again, reached across the table for the wine and filled our glasses up. ‘OK, go on, ask me anything.’

I raised an eyebrow at him. ‘I’m trying to work you out.’

‘That’s not a question.’

‘I’m just trying to work out whether the joking is a front.’

‘A front?’

‘Like a mask. Covering up something more serious. You joke a lot.’

‘What did you expect?’

I frowned. ‘I’m not sure. You to be more cagey, more defensive.’

‘You expected me,’ he began, ‘to be a cretin in red trousers who couldn’t spell his own name?’

‘Well, maybe a bit. I mean, er, some of your friends at lunch, for example.’ I was thinking about Barny.

‘Yes. Most of them are bad, aren’t they? But...’ He shrugged. ‘They’re my friends, I’ve known them since school. And they don’t mean to be such thundering morons. They were just born like that.’

‘And you weren’t?’

‘No. I’m different.’ He grinned.

‘How?’

‘OK. I know there’s all this...’ He threw his arm out in front of him and across the room. ‘But sometimes I just want something normal. A normal family which doesn’t want to kill each other the whole time. A normal job in London. A normal girlfriend, frankly, who doesn’t look like a horse and talk about horses and want to marry me so she can live in a castle and have more horses.’

‘Oh, so you do want a girlfriend?’ I sensed this was the moment to push him a bit harder, to try to unpick him. ‘You want a proper relationship?’

He looked at me again, straight-faced. ‘Who’s asking?’

‘I am,’ I persevered. It was tricky, this bit, quizzing someone about their most personal feelings. But Peregrine wanted quotes on Jasper’s love life, so I needed him to talk about it. I needed a bit of sensitivity from the most eligible man in the country, a chink in his manly armour.

‘So, OK, you’re single again,’ I pressed on, ‘and I know you don’t want to talk about Lady Caroline... Caz... but what’s the deal with all the women?’

His wine glass froze in mid-air, before he placed it back down on the table. ‘Polly, I can’t believe it. “All the women” indeed. Who’s told you that?’

‘OK, so I know you dated Lala, briefly, and I know about a few others. The rumours about you and that Danish princess, last year, for example?’

Jasper grimaced in his seat. ‘Clara. I had dinner with her once and that was it. Terrible sense of humour. She didn’t laugh at any of my jokes.’

‘All right, the photos of you and Lady Gwendolyn Sponge?’

‘Nothing to it. Our parents are old friends.’

‘Who was that one you went skiing with last year then?’

He frowned at me.

‘You were photographed laughing on a chairlift together.’

His face cleared. ‘Oh, Ophelia. Yes. She’s a darling. But about as bright as my friend Bovril.’

Under the table, Bovril thumped his tail at the sound of his name.

‘Fine. But I imagine there have been... many more.’

He sighed. ‘Many more. I mean honestly, who makes up this nonsense?’

‘So it’s rubbish? All those tales about the legendary Jasper Milton are nonsense?’

‘You, Little Miss Inquisitor, are teasing me. And anyway, what does my personal life really matter to you?’ He looked at me with a straight face. ‘Why are you blushing?’

I put my hand up to my cheek. ‘I’m not. It’s all this wine.’

‘Oh. I thought it might be because I’m flirting with you.’

‘Is this you flirting? I’m amazed you get anyone into bed at all.’

He laughed. ‘Touché.’ And then he brushed his hair to the side, out of his eyes, again. And just for a second, literally for a second, I promise, I wondered what it would be like to be in bed with him, my own fingers in his hair. But then I thought about Lala and told myself to have a sip of water. I couldn’t go around the place fantasizing about my interview subjects. Kate Adie would never do that. I tried to get back to the point.

‘Do you think you’ll settle down though? Find someone? Get married? Have children? Do all that?’

He sighed again and sat back in his seat. ‘Maybe. I don’t know. How does one know? Do you know?’

‘This isn’t about me.’

He laughed. ‘See? You don’t know either. It’s not that easy, is it?’

‘What isn’t?’

He shrugged. ‘Relationships, life, getting older and realizing things can be more complicated than you thought.’

‘You feel hard done by?’

‘No,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘That’s not what I’m saying at all. In the great lottery of life, as my father is fond of saying, I know I’ve done pretty well. But do you know what? Maybe, sometimes, I don’t want to take over this whole place. I don’t want to be told how lucky I am because I get to devote my whole life to a leaky castle and an estate that needs constant attention and I don’t want to be in the papers falling out of a club. But that doesn’t mean that I know what I do want.’

I stayed quiet and glanced up at a portrait of the sixth Duchess of Montgomery, a fat, pale lady in a green dress looking impassively at us from the wall. I looked from the painting to Jasper, who suddenly smiled at me.

‘What’s funny?’ I said.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Me, sitting here, talking to you about how terribly hard my life is. Come on, let’s have more wine and you keep asking me all your clever questions.’ He reached for the bottle and filled up our glasses again.

‘Does it bother you, what other people say? What newspapers say?’

‘It would be a lie if I said that it didn’t. Sometimes it does. But then you just have to remind yourself that they don’t know the real story.’

‘Which is?’

He sighed. ‘Oh, I suppose that we’re a bunch of dysfunctional misfits trying to muddle through like everyone else. Just... in a bigger house. But you can’t say that,’ he said, inclining his head towards my phone, still recording on the table. ‘I’ll get in trouble. More trouble. “Poor little rich boy”, they’ll all say.’

‘It’s quite a defence plea though.’ I said this smiling at him. I couldn’t take his sob story that seriously but I still felt a twinge of sympathy. A very tiny one.

‘Nope,’ he said, ‘Sorry. Can’t use it. That was just for you to know. Not everyone else. And what about you, anyway?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What’s your story? Why are you here interviewing me?’

I felt awkward. ‘Erm, it’s not very exciting. I grew up in Surrey, then my dad died, so Mum and I moved to Battersea where she’s lived ever since. I was all right at English at school so my teacher said I should think about becoming a journalist. I think he meant more politics and news than castles and Labradors, though, no offence.’

‘None taken.’

‘But this is good for now.’

He nodded in silence. ‘Have you got a boyfriend?’

I laughed. ‘I’m supposed to be asking the questions.’

‘You are. I’m just being nosy.’

‘No, as it happens. I don’t. A bit like you, I guess, relationships aren’t my thing.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t imagine you with an Ed or a James, living in some terribly poky flat in Wandsworth.’

‘Oh, I see. You’re not a man of the people at all. You’re a snob?’

‘I’m teasing. Some of my closest friends are called Ed and James. But come on, Polly, you really must lighten up or we’ll never get anywhere. If we’re going to get married one day, you’ll need to stop being so stern.’

‘You’re ridiculous,’ I said. But I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. He was clearly the boy your mother warned you about but he was also charming. More charming than I’d thought earlier that day. More charming than the papers made out. Or maybe it was the wine?

‘Why shouldn’t we get married? I think you’re terribly sweet. And funny. And you clearly know nothing about horses which is also a bonus.’

And then he leaned forward and kissed me. Briefly. His lips brushed mine for two or three seconds, tops, before I pulled my head back. Slow reflexes, admittedly. But, in my defence, I was very drunk.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ I said in my most matronly voice, pulling away.

‘No?’

‘No. This is work. For me anyway. And just when I was starting to like you.’

‘Have I ruined it?’ he said, still leaning forward, still smiling at me.

I ignored the question. ‘Your seduction techniques might have worked on Lala, but not me.’

He sighed and sat back in his seat. ‘Good old Lala. How is she, anyway?’

‘She’s very well. Well... kind of. You know Lala.’

‘I did like her,’ he said, staring at the table as if in a trance. ‘It just wasn’t the right timing again.’ He paused. ‘Or it was something else. I don’t know.’ He looked up at me. ‘You won’t write about me and her though, will you?’

‘You and Lala? No. Don’t worry.’

‘Good. I don’t mind being written about that much but I don’t want to cause trouble for anyone else. I mean, I ask for it, I know. Others don’t.’

He threw back his wine glass and I tried to think of something to say, but I couldn’t. So, we sat for a few moments in silence while ancestors in wigs frowned down from the walls. The mood had changed but I wasn’t sure why.

‘Bedtime, I think,’ he said after a few moments. ‘Let me show you the way to your room.’

I followed him in silence back down the long corridor and up the stairs. I felt awkward about things. About the whole day. The entire family should be in an asylum. I knew Peregrine would expect my piece on the family to be glowing, to talk about how upstanding they all were. To put a gloss on life in the castle and be as flattering as I could about the Duke and Duchess. But the truth was they all

seemed a bit lost. Trapped. Although, having met Jasper, I could at least write about how much more self-aware he was in real life, as opposed to how he was portrayed in the papers. I could definitely bring myself to do that, I thought, as I reached for the zip on the back of my dress. For God's sake, it was going to take me about five hours to get out of this thing.

4

'GOOD TIME THEN?' ASKED the taxi driver as I got back into his car early the next morning, having fished out his card and decided I would sneak out early before breakfast, before any more awkwardness over bacon and eggs. I didn't want to talk to anyone because I had the kind of hangover that I thought I might die from.

'Mmmm, kind of,' I replied, shutting my eyes.

'See much of the Duke?'

'A bit.' Eyes still closed.

'And the Duchess?'

'I saw a bit more of her actually.' I had to silence this. How could I silence him?

'So you're back to London then?'

'Yup.'

'Back to the Big Smoke. I don't know how you do it. I like the quiet life myself.'

'Mmmm.' Could have fooled me.

'Can't be doing with all the stress of London, do y'know what I mean? People rushin' about all the time. And all that noise. How d'you sleep at night with all that noise? All them buses and cars. And people.'

'I can sort of sleep anywhere,' I muttered. Like right now, I thought to myself, literally right this very second.

'Nope, not for me. I'm happier up here. Just me and my Marjorie. I drive my car, she works in the local library. Loves it there, she does. Says she likes the peace.'

'Mmm. I can imagine.'

'Not much of a reader myself. But she loves it. Always got her head in a book, has my Marjorie.'

'Mmm. Listen, I don't mean to be rude but do you mind if I have a quick doze? I'm just a bit tired.'

'No, no, right you are. You have a doze. I read an article the other day about sleep. What was it called?' He paused. "'The Power of the Nap", I think, something like that. I have trouble sleeping myself, do you ever find that? Not every night, just sometimes. My head hits the pillow and the brain's still going, d'you know what I mean?'

I didn't reply. My brain felt like it was about to dribble out through my nose. I was worrying about whether I was going to say anything to Lala about the kiss. Not that you could even call it a kiss really. But, still, did I have to mention it?

Half an hour later, I'd reached the station, paid off the most talkative taxi driver in Yorkshire and installed myself in the Quiet Carriage with provisions for the journey: one large latte, a Diet Coke, a large bottle of still water, two plain croissants and a packet of salt and vinegar McCoy's crisps.

'Ladies and gentleman, welcome to York. This train is for London King's Cross, calling at all stations to Peterborough, where there is a bus replacement service to...'

Fuck's sake. I scrolled through my phone. Three emails from Peregrine asking how the weekend was going, a text from Mum saying that Jeremy Paxman was very poor on *Celebrity Bake Off* last night and she thought he might get the boot, a message from Bill with the link to a review for a new French restaurant in Shepherd's Bush and a message from Lex saying could I ring her 'immediately'. Some sort of sordid sex story, probably. Strangled with courgetti. Spanked with a spatula. That sort of thing. It could wait. I was in no way strong enough for that discussion, and anyway I was in the Quiet Carriage. I fell asleep before I'd even had a sip of coffee.



The flat smelt when I opened the door. It was the sort of smell you know if you've ever ventured into the bedroom of a teenage boy. A musty, stale odour. In the sitting room, Joe lay on the sofa in his boxer shorts and a t-shirt watching *Antiques Roadshow*, empty packets of crisps scattered around him. A large bottle of Lucozade stood propped on his belly like a cairn on top of a hill.

'My angel is home!' he said, swivelling his head towards the door.

'I'm not feeling very angelic, I can tell you that for free.'

'Oh dear. Did it not go well?'

'It went... Erm... How did it go?' I dropped my bags by the kitchen table and flopped on the opposite sofa. 'For starters, I probably shouldn't have kissed my interview subject.'

'You didn't?'

'Not really. I mean he tried to, but I said no.'

'Pols! What on earth? That's unlike you.'

'I know, I know. But I was trying to be professional. Or something.'

'Did you fancy him?'

'No. Not my type. He's kind of hot, but in a very obvious way. Tall. Blond hair, sort of... athletic, you know. Blah blah.'

Joe rolled his eyes. 'Those are the *worst*. The ones who are obviously hot.'

'Don't be mean, I'm not strong enough. I nearly died from my hangover on the train.'

'Here, have some Lucozade. And then sit down and tell me everything.'

'No, no, I'm good. I think I need a hot bath and bed.'

Joe sighed and turned his head back to the telly. 'You're so boring. I tell you everything.'

'Too much sometimes, I'd say. Anyway, what have you been doing all weekend? Apart from marinating on the sofa.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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