

TOP TEN *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lindsey Kelk

One in a
Million

'A corker... hilarious!'
GIOVANNA FLETCHER



*One in a
Million*

Lindsey Kelk



HarperCollinsPublishers

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Published by HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by Harper 2018

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Cover design © Holly Macdonald

Cover illustration © Shutterstock.com

Cover layout design © HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd 2018

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A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

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Source ISBN: 9780007582457

Ebook Edition © July 2018 ISBN: 9780007582464

Version 2018-06-12

Dedication

*For Rowan & Kit
One in a Billion*

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CHAPTER ONE

Every once in a while, everything comes together and for a single day, your life is amazing.

'Hands up if you think Annie Higgins is the most wonderful human being in the whole wide world?' Miranda yelled, lining up an armful of champagne bottles on her desk. Well, leftover Marks & Sparks cava. It was cold and it was fizzy and it would do.

Brian immediately raised his hand in the air. Modesty kept mine down but it was a challenge.

'And hands up if you're excited that we're up for not one, not two, but three very important and exciting awards?'

This time, my hand shot right up. That was an actual stone-cold, verifiable fact. They'd already tweeted it and you could not take back a tweet. Ask literally anyone.

'Our first award ceremony,' Mir said, with eyes so dreamy you'd think she was preparing for the Oscars. 'Our first mandatory fancy-frock professional event for Content. You know they hold it in the ballroom at the Haighton Hotel and everyone wears black tie and—'

'And everyone does coke in the toilets,' Brian interrupted. 'Don't you pop that cork, I want to make a Boomerang.'

Miranda wrestled with the bottle of fizz, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth as I counted down. 'One, two, three ...'

The bottle opened and a shower of champagne arced high into the air, dousing the office floor to wild applause. There was a reason Rodney the cleaner didn't like us. Actually, that wasn't true – there were lots of reasons.

'Such a waste,' I said, holding out my plastic cup for a pour from the already half-empty bottle.

'But it looks so cool,' Brian said as he uploaded the loop to Instagram. The cork went in, the cork came out, the cork came out. He had a point.

'To Annie, a verifiable goddess,' Miranda said as she filled my glass before passing on pouring duties. 'This is going to make us, you know.'

'Is it going to make us rich?' I asked, bracing my face for her big, sloppy kiss. 'In fact, I'd settle for financially solvent. Do any of the awards come with a cheque?'

She held up a finger to shut me up, knowing full well if anyone else had done that, I'd have bitten it off.

'Not interested in hearing about real life right now,' she replied. 'Today is for celebrating, so shut up and let me tell you how amazing you are. This is the start of it all for us, Annie. It's all upwards and onwards from here on in. Our little company just put on its big boy pants.'

'Big girl pants, I can't stand boy shorts,' I corrected, rereading the confirmation email from TechBubble on my phone. *Content London has received nominations in the following categories: best social media campaign, best boutique agency and best new agency.* 'Do you know what? I don't even care if we win.'

Mir said nothing. Instead she slowly raised one eyebrow.

'I already feel like a winner,' I insisted. 'I don't need some industry prize or shiny trophy to validate me.'

Up went the other eyebrow.

'Just being nominated is an honour in itself?'

My best friend shook her head. 'Yeah, the problem is, I still remember when you didn't win the three-legged race at school and decked Marie Brown with a tennis racket.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' I mumbled into my drink. 'It was a hockey stick.'

'It was brutal,' she assured me. 'Very Tonya Harding.'

Somewhere along the line, I'd missed the memo about not being competitive.

'Shall we go up to the roof and celebrate properly?' Miranda suggested, gathering up the unopened bottles. 'It's such a gorgeous evening and the weather's been awful all week.'

'Mir, it's only Tuesday,' I reminded her as she walked away.

'And the first five days after Sunday are always the worst,' she called over her shoulder. 'Can you tell the boss I'll be late in the morning?'

'You just did,' I replied, chasing after her.

Just over a year ago, Miranda and I pooled every penny we had and moved Content London, our 'two girls, one laptop' digital marketing agency, from the settees in the back of Costa Coffee to a tiny corner of a very trendy new co-working space in East London called The Ginnel. The manager sold the building on stories of its 'history' and 'character', a description that roughly translated to 'people used to get mugged outside, but not any more'. Exactly the kind of place that would fascinate your father and worry your mother. Of course, that meant that after the cheap deal he used to lure us in expired, the rent was extortionate. But Miranda insisted it was worth it, for the location and the connections we could make and because you never knew who you were going to bump into at the barista station.

Because of course there was a barista station.

The best part of the entire building was the honest-to-goodness actual roof terrace. It wasn't fancy – we didn't have a bar or a sophisticated sound system or sexy, lounging furniture – but we did have a load of waterproof beanbags, someone's second-hand settee and the most beautiful view of the London skyline I had ever called my own. It was all very DIY chic but I loved it. I'd even brought in a few potted plants to hide the electrical boxes. Nothing I could do about the man across the road who liked to parade around naked of an evening, but Miranda assured me he added to the rooftop's character.

A few months after moving to The Ginnel, we expanded our work family to make room for Brian, another of our oldest friends who both happened to know his way around a website and was prepared to take a chance on a fledgling company. I still wasn't sure if it was because he had so much faith in me and Mir or because we never complained about him rolling into work after ten a.m. every morning but either way, I wasn't going to complain. Our budgets were still tighter than a tight thing but we were making it work, just about.

Only puffing very slightly from the last set of stairs – I was determined to make my ten thousand steps – I put my glass down on a wooden box-slash-makeshift table and straightened up to admire the view, digging my fingers into my lower back. Even though we were right in the heart of London, and The Ginnel wasn't a very tall building, it always felt peaceful up here. I looked down, watching the tops of the red buses sail by, the tops of people's heads bobbing along to whatever was coming out of their earphones. Even the swell of competing sirens seemed softened by a few floors' distance. Plus it made for fantastic sunset skyline pics and who didn't love a sunset skyline pic? Monsters, only monsters. Whenever the weather allowed, I was up here, soaking in the Vitamin D and willing my skin to tan. But for all The Ginnel's Brooklyn hipster aspirations, we were still very much in England and I remained the same shade as your average sheet of A4 year round.

'Starting without us?'

I was settling myself down on the sofa when Charlie Wilder emerged from the doorway, his ever-present shadow, Martin Green, close behind. Charlie was one of the original tenants of the building and generally liked to swank around as though he owned the place. Martin, however, did own the place. Would that I'd had the presence of mind to mortgage myself to the hilt and buy a ramshackle, East London teardown when I was twenty-two. Fifteen years later, he must have made his money back on this place a thousand times over. I was fairly certain our monthly rent alone was more than the cost of his original mortgage payments and there were dozens more tenants in the building. He was so rich, it made me want to do a little cry.

'Start without you?' I looked at Charlie, slightly flustered on the inside but cool, calm and collected on the outside. Sort of. I could already feel myself turning red. 'As if we would.'

'What's the occasion?' Martin asked, eyeing the bottles of fizz.

'We,' Mir said, handing him a freshly filled glass. 'Are celebrating.'

Martin – commonly referred to as Miranda's Work Husband, although never to his face – took the drink with a shy smile. Yes, he could be obnoxious and yes, he wore one too many ironic T-shirts but he was also too cute when it came to his very obvious crush on my friend.

'Celebrating what?' asked Charlie.

'Did Taylor Swift like one of your tweets?' Martin asked, much to Charlie's delight.

'Tay-Tay did like one of my tweets once,' Brian said, talking into his champagne glass. 'And it was a magical day.'

'We've been nominated for a couple of awards,' I replied, tucking my light brown hair behind my ear in an attempt to look as casual as possible. 'But well done, you're very funny.'

'She's being polite – you're not funny at all,' Miranda said in a stage whisper, flashing her middle finger at the pair and dropping down onto the sofa beside me. Behind them, what looked like the entire population of The Ginnel streamed out of the staircase and onto the roof. 'What's going on? Why are you all up here?'

'We're watching the game,' Charlie answered, as though it was obvious. 'Kick off is in five minutes.'

'Oh Christ, it's the England game,' Mir groaned. 'Kill me now.'

'We're in the second round of the World Cup,' Martin replied with mock shock. 'Where's your national pride?'

'The same place as your sense of style,' she said, sipping her drink and staring straight ahead. 'We were having a nice time, do you have to ruin it with football?'

As much as she might protest, the bickering was part of the flirting. Until recently, it was all back-and-forth banter, sliding into each other's DMs and cow eyes across the coffee shop, but that was before the fateful Friday night two weeks ago when Miranda had one too many cheeky Vimtos and Martin had inhaled god only knows what and I walked in on the pair of them, snogging like a pair of teenagers in our office. But since then, nothing.

Rather than give Miranda a satisfactory answer, Martin and Charlie gravitated over towards the projector screen set-up, joining the other half-dozen men who were all stood around, observing the process, rubbing their chins and nodding.

'What's going on with you two?' I asked. 'Has he declared his undying love yet?'

'No, because he's an idiot,' she replied with a resigned sigh. 'Whatever, it's not like it's a big deal, is it?'

'Of course it isn't.' I patted her knee and passed my champagne to an empty-handed Brian as he walked by. 'You're a kick-arse queen who is the master of her own destiny and you've got better things to worry about than Martin Green.'

'Please don't call me a queen,' she said, fluffing out her amber afro. 'You can't pull it off.'

'Dope,' I replied with a nod.

'No, Annie, just no.'

Everyone on the rooftop cheered as a bright green field appeared on the giant projector screen and I felt my heart sink. There was no way I was spending the rest of the evening watching football; we were supposed to be celebrating, not punishing ourselves. Across the way, I saw Brian press his fingers to his temple and pull the trigger before cocking his head towards the exit. But before I could make my escape, Charlie and Martin leapt over the back of the sofa, Charlie pressed up against my left side and Martin glued to Miranda's right, squishing us into the very finest BFF sandwich.

Charlie flashed me a grin and I blushed from head to toe. It wasn't my fault, I was a nervous blusher and no matter how many times I saw him, talked to him, awkwardly shared a lift with him, I couldn't seem to make it through a conversation with Charlie without saying something idiotic. I always talked utter shit when I was nervous and six feet something of blond hair, big brown eyes and an annoyingly adorable lopsided smile definitely made me nervous. He looked as though he should be in an advert for outward bounds holidays in Iceland, not running his own advertising agency. And while I wouldn't necessarily say I had a crush on him *per se*, I could admit to having lost the odd half hour imagining the two of us stranded on a desert island with nothing but a bottle of tequila, a never-ending supply of Krispy Kreme doughnuts and some baby oil.

'Not a big football fan then?' Charlie asked, spreading out across the sofa and forcing me into Miranda's armpit. Fantasy Charlie would never manspread. Fantasy Charlie would have got down on the floor and given me a foot rub. Fantasy Charlie was the best.

'I used to go out with someone who worked for the FA,' I explained, snapping a hair band off my wrist and bundling up my hair. I hated the feeling of hot hair stuck to my neck in the summer. 'We went to a lot of games, I think I'm just footballled out.'

'Congrats on your award thingies, we were only joking with you before,' he said, leaning towards me as the players streamed out onto the pitch and everyone on the roof began to cheer. 'Do you think you'll win?'

'We'd better,' I replied readily, a proximity shiver running down my back. 'I mean, I'd like to think we're in with a shot to win *something*.'

And when I said something, I meant everything.

'I'll keep my fingers crossed for you,' he promised. 'I've seen so many people go in and out of that end office, really glad you're managing to make it work.'

'Thanks?' I said, folding my arms over my boobs, shrinking down into the sofa. 'We're trying.'

Charlie did not need to know about our cash-flow problemette. As soon as last month's invoices were paid, it would all be solved; the last thing we needed was word getting around that we were struggling.

'You know, I'm always here if you need any help,' Charlie offered, flexing the manly bicep that peeked out from the short sleeve of his England shirt. 'I only started up a couple of years ago and I know it isn't easy.'

I smiled, melting just a fraction.

'Actually, that's really helpful, thank you.'

I turned my attention back to the TV before I could ruin the moment. The camera zoomed along a long line of men with expensive tattoos and identical haircuts as they sang the national anthem. If I wanted to make a getaway, now was the time. It wasn't that I actively disliked football, it was more a Pavlovian response to having spent every weekend travelling from stadium to stadium for five long years with my ex. There wasn't another woman on this planet who knew how to find the cleanest ladies' loos at any given premier league team's home ground as quickly as I did.

But it was a lovely evening and we did have all that fizz and there would be no convincing Miranda to leave now Martin had made an appearance. And then there was Charlie. Maybe it was worth sticking around, at least until half-time.

On screen, the national anthem ended but instead of the clapping and jogging shenanigans that usually followed, the camera panned around the stands. An entire section of the stadium had taken off their England shirts to reveal bright pink T-shirts and when the camera pulled out, they formed a massive heart in the middle of the all-white-wearing crowd. All at once, the same section held up their phones until they joined together in one enormous high-tech jigsaw that read MARRY ME KARINE.

'Oh god, it's a flashmob,' I heard Miranda mutter at the side of me. 'I'd murder someone if they did this to me.'

'Point taken,' Martin whispered back.

But I was too busy staring at the screen to comment.

The words were replaced with an image of a couple on the big screen pitchside. He had dark hair and olive skin and she was tiny and blonde and beautiful. She was so delicately pretty, it looked as though her features had been carved out by unicorns. So that's what their horns were for. Eventually, the cameraman found the couple themselves and zoomed in on their corporate box. They needn't have zoomed in quite so close, you could have seen the ring from space, it was enormous. And of course, Karine said yes.

Suddenly, I seemed not to be breathing and my hands were clamped over my mouth. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, completely mute.

'Mortifying,' Martin scoffed. 'Who proposes at a World Cup game?'

'Someone romantic?' suggested a random voice behind me.

'Someone with a massive pair,' Charlie commented.

I exhaled for the first time in what felt like minutes. I happened to know first-hand that they were both wrong because it was Matthew, my ex-boyfriend.

Like I said, every once in a while, everything comes together and for a single day, your life is amazing.

Unfortunately, this was not going to be one of those days.

CHAPTER TWO

'Did she see it? Did she see it?' Brian sprinted across the roof, knocking several people out of the way as he lunged in front of the big screen. 'Annie, close your eyes. Take out your contact lenses. No, you don't wear lenses, poke out your eyes.'

I opened my mouth to say it was fine but nothing came out.

'Are you all right?' Miranda asked while Brian began unfastening his button-down shirt in order to cover the screen where the happy couple were busily waving to their thousands of new friends. 'Annie, talk to me.'

'I'm missing something here,' Charlie said, shielding his eyes from Brian's pasty torso.

'And I'm missing the game,' Martin shouted. 'Get out the way, dickhead.'

'This is bigger than twenty millionaires kicking a ball around,' he shouted back. 'That's Annie's ex. Show some respect, man.'

'Twenty-two!' Martin gasped in horror at the idea of someone not knowing how many players made up a football team. Charlie, Miranda and Brian all stared, waiting for me to say something.

'I'm fine,' I insisted. 'Really.'

There were at least three dozen people on the roof terrace, some I knew, most I didn't, but every single one of them was looking at me. If you took off my clothes, threw in a couple of murderous clowns and a box full of spiders, it was my worst nightmare come true.

'Yes, Matthew's my ex-boyfriend,' I confirmed to Charlie with a breezy smile. 'But very ex. Long time ago. Not a big deal.'

'Well, it's not quite been a year, has it?' Miranda corrected helpfully.

'Feels like much longer,' I said, pinching her thigh tightly as I stood. 'You know, I'm not really in the mood for football. I think I might head home after all.'

'We're coming with you,' Brian declared, shirt still open and streaming out behind him like a factory seconds Backstreet Boy. 'Come on, Miranda.'

Mir paused for a split second, glancing at her work boyfriend who kept his eyes on the football.

'Come on, Miranda,' Brian barked.

'I don't mind if you want to stay,' I told her, lying through my teeth. 'Honest.'

I would literally never forgive her.

'I'm coming,' she replied, leaping to her feet and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. 'We're out of champagne anyway.'

I noticed Martin watching out of the corner of his eye but he didn't say anything to try to stop her.

'I really am OK,' I said, sending a silent prayer up to the patron saint of friends for my bests. 'It's just the surprise. It's been ages since we broke up, sorry, since *I* broke up with *him*.'

'Really?' Brian scrunched up uncertain features as he hustled us across the rooftop, down the staircase to the fourth floor and buzzed for the lift. 'I thought you were the dumpee.'

I pursed my lips tightly.

'No, I wasn't. I ended it.'

Brian looked to Miranda for confirmation.

'Technically, yes,' Mir said, rubbing little circles in the middle of my back. 'She broke up with him.'

He still didn't look convinced.

'But wasn't he already—'

'Shut up, Brian.'

'And didn't you walk in on them—'

'Shut up, Brian.'

'The official record shows I did the dumping,' I insisted as the lift pinged open. 'And that's what matters.'

Out of the huge floor-to-ceiling windows of the fourth floor, I could see a glorious sunset breaking across the sky. It was such a beautiful evening and I didn't want to ruin it for them.

'You two should stay,' I said, slipping one foot between the lift door and the wall. 'I'm going to go for a walk.'

'No way,' Brian said. 'We're not leaving you alone.'

'I don't need a babysitter,' I insisted, putting on my resolved face. 'That was admittedly very weird, but I'm fine, I promise. Just not in the mood to go over it all night long.'

Did anyone really like rehashing their break-ups? It felt like a lifetime since Matthew and I had ended things, but seeing him on the big screen had been a shock. I'd done such a good job of wiping him out of my life, such a dramatic re-entry felt like a punch to the gut.

'As if I'm going to let you go home on your own and be upset over that tosser,' Miranda said as my resolved face faltered. 'Matthew was a wanksock, you are the best. It's like you, then Chrissy Teigen and then Beyoncé.'

'No way am I better than Chrissy Teigen,' I argued. 'Maybe Beyoncé on a good day, but never Saint Chrissy.'

She stared at me with a thoughtful pout and I offered her a genuine, if watery smile in return.

'Fine, you can go,' she said, finally. 'But you have to promise me you're not going to spend all night stalking their Instagram accounts.'

'I'm not a sadist,' I replied, stepping into the lift. 'I'm going to watch the proposal once or twice, find something he bought me and burn it, have a cry in the bath and then watch QVC Beauty until I pass out in front of the TV.'

'We can't argue with that plan,' Brian said, blowing me a kiss as the lift door slid shut. 'We'll see you tomorrow, love.'

My flat was only a five-minute walk from work – if you took the shortest route. But I was in no rush and the long way was calling me. Beautiful weather had been in short supply all summer and it felt good to feel the last rays of sun on my skin as I trotted out into the empty street. Everyone was watching the game, I realised as I peeled off my denim jacket and straightened the sleeves of my pink T-shirt, and the city was mine. Winter had overstayed its welcome well into spring and I couldn't even count the number of nights I'd stayed late at the office to keep my central heating bill down at home. Such was the glamorous life of a London gal.

There was something reassuring about a warm summer's evening in the city. People slowed down, they smiled, they forgot their problems and lingered a little longer, another drink, a chat outside the tube station. It was hard to be social when you were running away from the rain or hiding under your hood from an angry gust of wind. But this was perfect wandering weather. A whiff of the chip shop, the clean soapy smell of the laundrette, I could even find a soft spot for City Best Kebabs on a night like this. Or, let's be honest, any night.

I held my phone in my hand, as I almost always did, and as I turned off the main street it began to ring. I'd been avoiding checking my messages since I left the office. A cursory glance at my inbox on the way down in the lift had revealed more puke-face emojis than I'd had the privilege to see in my entire life. My friends were good people. But this was a call, not a text or a What's App, and no one called me, save my sister or my mother. This time, it was my mum.

'Annie.'

'Mum.'

'I just saw the news.'

I sighed internally and looked longingly at the fried chicken place across the street.

'You know I don't watch the news,' I replied, keeping my head down and walking on by. I had half a packet of perfectly delicious, three-day-old scones at home that weren't going to eat themselves. 'What's wrong, has the world ended?'

'Not the news-news,' she said, sighing externally. 'The news about Matthew. At the football thing.'

'Oh, *that* news,' I replied, blasé as could be. 'I saw that. I must drop him a text.'

Mum seemed surprised.

'Oh.' It took a moment to choose her next words. 'I thought you might be a bit upset.'
'I'm fine.' How many more times would I have to sing this song before everyone believed me? 'Me and Matthew broke up forever ago,' I recited. 'I'm really happy for him.'

'Doesn't feel like it was that long ago to me,' she replied. Helpful as ever. 'But that's age for you. If it wasn't twenty years ago, it was last week.'

'Mum, you're only fifty-eight,' I reminded her. 'We're not carting you off to the knacker's yard just yet.'

'You might as well,' she muttered as I hopped down off the pavement to dodge two tired-looking mothers pushing two double pushchairs. I smiled politely at the women and skipped on quickly. Miranda and Brian were all the children I could cope with for now. 'Honestly, Annie, I'm falling apart at the seams.'

It was utter nonsense, I'd never seen a midlife crisis go so well. Ever since she'd left London and moved up north, my mother had been through a complete renaissance. My dad left when I was little and Mum hadn't dealt with it terribly well, then out of the blue, she was thriving. My sister was worried she'd taken herself off to Yorkshire to die but as it turned out, we'd had quite the incorrect impression of Yorkshire. Mum had transformed from a depressed divorcée into a lean, mean needle-wielding machine. One day she was a practice nurse at our local surgery, the next she was opening the first medspa in Hebden Bridge and bringing Botox to the masses. I hadn't seen my mother's forehead move in more than two years.

'You're sure you're not even a little bit sad about Matthew getting engaged?' Mum wheedled. 'No good can come from bottling up your feelings. You'll block your chakras, and then I can't begin to tell you what kind of a mess you'll get yourself into.'

'My chakras are absolutely brilliant,' I assured her. 'All properly aligned and shiny and fresh and whatever else they're supposed to be.'

'Why don't you take a few days off?' she suggested. 'I'm going to Portugal on a yoga retreat tomorrow, with Karen? From the library? We're adding a studio onto the back of the clinic so I can teach once I've got my five hundred hours.'

The image of my mother administering lip filler while in Warrior III tickled me.

'I can't take any time off at the minute,' I said, forcing a little extra regret to my voice. 'We're so busy at work and we've been nominated for some awards, big ones, so I need to be around. I'm totally gutted though, I'm sure it would be fun.'

'You've really thrown yourself into work since you and Matthew separated,' she replied with a soft warning in her voice. 'But you must remember to look after yourself. We work to live, we don't live to work.'

'That's not it at all, I love my job,' I reminded her. 'And like I said, everything's fine.'

'That's your theme song,' Mum said before breaking into song. 'Everything's fine, everything's fine, my name is Annie and everything's fine.'

'Mum, you're breaking up,' I said, holding the phone at arm's length. 'I can't hear you.'

'Phone calls don't break up any more,' she shouted out of my tinny speakers. 'Annie?'

'Sorry, didn't get all that.' I held my finger over the end call button. 'I'll call you when I get home.' A grumpy, fat pug grimaced up at me from outside the newsagent's on the corner. 'I'm not going to call,' I confessed. 'I'm going to go to bed.'

The pug judged me silently.

They say home is where the heart is but I kept most of my other essential organs at the office. My flat was so small, you could walk from the front door to the back wall in five big steps and if I was being entirely honest, I wasn't the most house-proud of humans. Piles of ironing, piles of books, piles of absolutely anything that could be stacked on top of each other were dotted around the living room, creating an obstacle course of little leaning towers. Every ounce of energy I had went into my job. Home was supposed to be the place where I could switch off. Not literally, of course, that would be insane. I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually seen my phone with less than 43% battery.

Even though it was small, the flat was mine and I did love it. Little bathroom, little bedroom and a tiny open-plan living room and kitchen that might be a bit more inviting if I ever got around to buying a new settee. It turned out getting hold of an entire flat's worth of furniture after a break-up was expensive – who knew towels could cost so much? And so, instead of the beautiful mid-century modern West Elm sofa of my dreams, I made do with my sister's hand-me-down Ikea loveseat. It was too small for two people to sit down at the same time and painfully uncomfortable if you ever tried to lie down on it. Once upon a time, I think it had been white but now it was ... well, white it definitely was not.

Carefully placing my laptop bag on top of the second-hand dresser I'd wedged in the space by the front door, I turned on the kettle before taking one giant leap from the kitchen into the bedroom and stripping off my clothes. More wine would not make me feel better. This was a night for tea. Besides, I told myself, I had nothing to feel bad about, other than the bag full of dry cleaning I'd been meaning to drop off for almost six months.

The front of my built-in wardrobe was mirrored from floor to ceiling, meaning at least once a day I had to give myself an all-over once-over. No matter how many body positivity videos I watched, I still preferred not to stare at my backside for too long. Objectively, I knew this was not a worst-case scenario situation; I liked my hair when it didn't frizz, I liked my legs and thanks to a thirty-day plank challenge, I felt strong in the middle, if not especially skinny. And who wanted to be skinny these days, anyway? Being able to see your ribs was so 2015.

'I'm happy for him,' I told Mirror Annie. 'Because I am a whole and complete person who only wishes joy for everyone in the universe.'

Mirror Annie frowned.

'Fuck it,' I muttered. 'I hope he trips down the stairs and breaks both his legs.'

Yep, that was better.

Sometimes I wondered what would happen if my flat ever made it on to *Through the Keyhole*. Who would live in a house like this? A smart, small newbuild on the outside, the hoarder-like tendencies of a Deliveroo addict on the inside. The many devices covering every available surface suggested it could be the kind of professional troll who thought Piers Morgan talked a lot of sense. The endless polystyrene cartons and pizza boxes suggested someone who didn't know how to turn on an oven. So far, so slightly worrying; very single middle-aged shut-in. But the lack of porn and huge stack of online shopping packages to be dropped off at the post office was a real curve ball. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd ordered something from ASOS only to realize, when it arrived twenty-four hours later, that I'd already ordered and returned the exact same thing a month earlier.

I plugged my phone into its charging dock, turned on the tiny TV in the bedroom and fired up my iPad, all while the kettle boiled. Time for one last circle around the socials to make sure everything was good and well with our clients. The influencers, the style vloggers, Fitspo and BoPo specialists, gamers and the mummy, travel and beauty bloggers, we worked with all of them. I'd learned more about different walks of life in this job than I could have ever come across in any other profession, whether it was how to apply perfect winged liner, where to stay on the island of Vanuatu or how to improve your vertical reach in *Street Fighter V*. Not all of my newly acquired knowledge had proved helpful yet, but who was to say when I might find myself invited to a formal video game competition in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?

As far as I could tell, all was right with the world of social media. Or at least, as all right as it ever would be, I was good at my job but I wasn't a miracle worker. I carefully avoided my own pages. Even with all the filters and blocks and mutes I'd put on Matthew's name, there was still too great a chance of seeing their happy, shining faces, and I didn't want to give myself nightmares. With a fresh mug of tea and the last three broken Hobnobs in the packet, I retreated to my bedroom. My safe, beautiful, man-free bedroom. It was wonderful, not having to explain my every move to someone the way I had when I was with Matthew. I loved not having to justify another late night at work or an after-hours cocktail. I loved eating biscuits for dinner, scheduling my own weekends and never finding softcore porn in my Netflix queue. I loved my life. Would it be nice to occasionally have someone to snuggle up to while I yelled at the TV during *Question Time*? Maybe. Would it be nice to have a second pair of hands to help bring the shopping back from the supermarket? Of course it would. And yes, perhaps an actual living, breathing man might beat creating a nest of pillows in the middle of the night once in a while, but I was very much of the opinion what was meant to be would be. My life was full and fun and I was happy. Something I couldn't always say when I was with Matthew.

Munching the last of my crumbly dinner, I turned off the TV and turned on my podcast app. *Behind the Scenes* had an interview with Mark Ruffalo. Maybe if I listened to it as I fell asleep, I could trick my brain into dreaming he was my boyfriend.

Because that was the behaviour of a perfectly happy, single thirty-one-year-old.

Wasn't it?

CHAPTER THREE

'It's shit, Annie,' Miranda growled, blinking into the bright morning sunshine. 'I feel like I just got told off by my dad for spending all my pocket money.'

We'd been to see the bank manager. It had not gone well.

'Can we just go back to the office and talk about it there?' I asked. Yesterday's beautiful weather had turned into a sweltering, sticky day and all the things I loved about London in the summertime had been washed away by the sea of sweaty bodies pressed against me on the Northern Line. 'I can't be angry and outside at the same time, Mir, it's making me feel stabby.'

There were many difficult factors in running a real business but far and away the hardest part was money. There was never enough. Every single month we had to find rent, we had to find wages and for some reason, clients kept expecting us to do things for them before they paid us. It made literally no sense. I didn't walk into Topshop, pick up a frock and flash the girl on the till a peace sign with a vague promise to get her the money within thirty days. Also, no one ever paid within thirty days. Ever.

Even though I was insanely proud of owning our own business there were other downsides too. I couldn't call in sick and take to my (non-existent) settee with a Terry's Chocolate Orange and watch an entire season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* when I was having a particularly bad day. Like today, for example.

Miranda and I started Content because we were out of other options. After spending the best part of ten years in miserable marketing and advertising jobs, me withering away at a giant agency, nursing a sense of integrity that just wasn't welcome, in a dark corner – literally a dark corner, I couldn't even see a window from where they'd shoved me – and Miranda bouncing between every company in London, we decided it was time to become masters of our own destiny. And so we pooled our meagre resources and decided to live the dream.

With hindsight, I did sometimes wonder if we mightn't have been better off just going to Disneyland for a fortnight then getting jobs at McDonalds when we came home but, you know what they say, you live and learn.

'I'm so pissed off,' Mir said, rolling up the sleeves of her oversized white shirt only for them to flap back down by her sides like an angry penguin. 'He talked to us like we were children.'

'He wasn't angry, he was just disappointed,' I agreed, wiping a film of city sweat from my forehead. 'But not nearly as disappointed as Brian's going to be when he finds out we can't pay him at the end of the month.'

'We'll work it out, we always do,' she muttered before automatically checking her phone. 'All we need is breathing room. Maybe we could get another company credit card? Or we could sell something.'

I looked at her while she angrily swiped at her screen.

'Like what? A kidney?'

'Not helping,' she replied.

'You're right,' I said, unable to stop myself from bending down and picking up the Starbucks cup and depositing it in the closest bin. 'We need our kidneys. We drink too much.'

'Didn't we start our company because we didn't want to spend the rest of our careers listening to sanctimonious old men telling us what to do?' Mir was still lost in rantland while I melted into an Annie-shaped puddle on the side of the road. 'I want to march back in there and show him just how badly I have overextended myself.'

'We don't give up and we don't give in,' I reminded her, blocking her path. I was fairly certain she wouldn't really walk into Barclay's and deck the business manager but there really was no telling with Miranda Johansson. 'That's our motto, isn't it?'

She frowned and shook her head.

'I thought it was "Yes, I will have another"?''

'We can't afford the first one, let alone another,' I said. 'Come on, let's go back.'

'Fine,' she sighed, opening up a rideshare app on her phone. 'We can work this out without the bank. I believe in us.'

'I believe I'd rather not be bankrupt by Christmas,' I told her, covering her screen with my hand. 'We should get the tube back.'

Mir threw her head back and howled out loud, attracting the attention of more than a few confused onlookers. 'But it's so hot,' she whined. 'And the station is miles away.'

'Mir.'

I hated it when she made me sound like my mother.

'Fine,' she said, grudgingly cancelling the car. 'I'll just sweat through my shirt and look like a skank all day.'

'That's my girl,' I replied, patting her on her sweaty back. 'One day we'll have drivers at our beck and call, hot and cold running drivers, ready to ferry us here, there and everywhere.'

'Hot, cold, moderate, I don't care,' Miranda said, rolling up her sleeves once more and putting her best foot forward. 'I just want to actually make some money for a change.'

It was always nice to have a dream.

'Morning.'

Just what I needed. I looked up from my important tea-making activities to see Martin and Charlie flanking either side of the office kitchen. Rather than reply, I offered a tight smile and kept my eyes on the kettle hoping it was politely rude enough to send them on their way. On the walk back to work, I'd made a deal with myself. If I managed to call in at least one invoice *and* made it through the entire day without brutally murdering the first person to mention Matthew's proposal, I was ordering Domino's for dinner.

'How are you feeling this morning?' Martin asked in a sympathetic tone of voice I assumed he usually reserved for his grandmother's best friend.

'Amazing,' I replied without looking at him. 'Thank you for asking.'

Keep your eyes on the prize, I told myself. There's pizza at stake, don't murder them.

If only they hadn't approached me in the kitchen with all its bright and shiny sharp things.

'Everyone's been talking about last night,' Martin said while Charlie hovered at his elbow, monitoring my expression. 'Must have been weird for you?'

'You don't really expect to turn on the game and see your ex getting engaged in 4K HD, do you?' I replied. Deep, calm breaths. Think of the garlic dipping sauce. 'Seems like more of a Facebook thing.'

'Seems like you're well out of it to me,' Charlie said, passing me the milk from the fridge. 'What a cock.'

They mean well, the voice in my brain whispered, *let them live and you can have garlic bread as well*.

'The only thing that's getting to me is having to talk about it, to be honest,' I said as I aggressively dunked my teabag. 'It's really not a big deal.'

'My mate Will just got dumped. I could set you up with him if you'd like?' Martin offered helpfully. 'I'll give him your number.'

They're only trying to help, do not disembowel them with a Nespresso pod.

'Recently dumped Will sounds lovely,' I said with as much grace as I could muster. 'But just because my ex got engaged, it doesn't mean I'm desperate for a boyfriend.'

The two of them exchanged a glance and I knew what they were thinking.

It was the same thing I was thinking, lying in bed, wide awake at three o'clock that morning and scrolling through Bumble, Tinder, Happn, Hinge, Huggle and god help me, even Farmers Only. As soon as you ended a relationship you were in a game of snakes and ladders with your ex, there was always someone keeping score and, right now, Matthew was winning. Any points I'd earned from technically doing the dumping had been wiped off the board by his proposing to his supposed soulmate twelve months after we called it quits.

'I'm dying of thirst, Higgins. Where's my tea?' Miranda strolled into the kitchen, having traded her oversized shirt for a cropped neon yellow T-shirt. She was the best, all faux leather trousers and fuck-you attitude. It was something I needed more of. The attitude, not the trousers. I got thrush from just looking at them.

'Martin offered to set me up with his friend,' I told her, handing over her My Little Pony mug. It didn't really go with the rest of her look but when it came to a cup of tea, Mir would have drunk it out of a lightly rinsed bedpan if it was the only option. 'Because I'm a sad and lonely spinster.'