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# **The Perfect Couple**

Written by Robyn Sisman

Published by Orion

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# The Perfect Couple?

Robyn Sisman



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# Part One



## Chapter 1



Kate eased one black fishnet stocking up her bare leg, then the other, and fastened the suspenders. Straightening up, she slid her feet into patent-leather dominatrix heels and teetered round the bed to the full-length mirror that was fixed to the inside of one of the wardrobe doors. Hmm. Her blonde hair still looked a little wild, having been washed and hastily blow-dried upside-down. Her winter-pale skin contrasted starkly with the deep satiny red of her basque – or bustier, or whatever it was called – and minuscule matching briefs. She turned sideways, first one way and then the other, admiring her flattened stomach and enhanced bosom, then put her hands on her hips and struck a pose. This outfit certainly made a change from the barrister-black and starched white she wore to work every day. Rikki was in for a surprise.

She had been planning this evening for the past couple of weeks, after they'd gone to see a steamy new film by a Spanish director, starring a sensational spitfire with cascading dark hair and a cleavage like the Grand Canyon. As they sat munching pizza afterwards, Rikki had made a decent attempt to contain his admiration for the gorgeous girl, but

had let slip a wistful remark about ‘adventurous’ sex that had rankled at the time and gnawed at her ever since. Well, she would show him tonight.

Kate checked the time: six forty-eight. She consulted her schedule, which she had carefully devised, typed and printed out for instant reference:

**5.30: leave work**

**6.00: arrive flat. Turn up heating. Draw curtains**

**6.05: shower/wash hair/brush teeth**

**6.15: dry hair. Hide toys. Affix handcuffs**

**6.30: make-up; perfume; get dressed (!)**

**6.50: candles. Turn off mobile**

**7.00: R arrives. Action!**

Outside, gusts of winter wind flung raindrops against the bedroom window like handfuls of gravel, but inside the flat was warm and snug. Kate scanned the bedroom. Everything was ready. She shut down her mobile, lit the ‘pheromone candle’ and turned off the overhead light. Time for the handcuffs. It was a bit of a problem that their bed didn’t have a headboard, let alone the fabulous brass bedstead that had been depicted in the film. Even Kate had been struck by the sight of the Spanish girl’s wanton writhing, her beautiful brown arms pinioned above her head. Fortunately this little hiccup had been foreseen by the handcuff manufacturers, who also supplied an ‘Eezyfit Door Kit’, consisting of a metal bracket which fitted over the top of a normal door (‘No drilling! No screws!’), from which the black velvet cuffs now dangled. They were adorned with fetishistic buckles, but these were just for show, disguising a more convenient Velcro fastening. The idea was that Rikki would come home,

notice her coat and briefcase, left in prominent view in the living room next door, and come looking for her. He'd open the bedroom door, see the candle, turn round in puzzlement – and there she'd be, pressed helplessly to the door in her fancy underwear, ready for the taking. Stretching her arms above her head, Kate slid her wrists into the cuffs and pulled them tight, just as the bells of their neighbourhood church struck seven o'clock.



She had researched all this paraphernalia online, which had certainly been an eye-opener. There were devices for everything imaginable — and some things she preferred not to imagine. Mainly, though, she'd laughed. There was a bizarre variety of 'fantasy' outfits that made her question what went on in other people's minds: cheerleader, nurse, policewoman, airline pilot, Mrs Santa and even a football referee's costume, its tiny shorts emblazoned with the phrase YOU'VE SCORED, which came complete with a whistle, and red and yellow cards imposing different penalties. In the end she'd settled for lingerie, fancy but not too tacky – though her basque had what the catalogue called a 'fuss-free' zip down the front. She'd agonised about ordering online because she was worried about the labels on the parcels, so earlier in the week she'd ventured into the Pussy Cat shop after work one day, wearing a beret and dark glasses in case she ran into anyone who knew her. 'Did you want to go on our mailing list?' the girl serving her had asked. 'No!' Kate was horrified. 'I – I'm leaving the country, actually. Charity work in Africa,' she'd added firmly, seeing the girl about to enquire further. 'You know, famine and stuff.'



Now, as she sagged against the door, eyes closed and hands dangling above her head, her thoughts began to wander. She must remember to nip out one lunchtime and buy a present for her godson, six-month-old offspring of her old friend Sam. This weekend she and Rikki were driving down to Somerset to check out Sam and Michael's new country house and for a general worshipping-at-the-shrine number. The trouble was that she never had a lunch hour. It was only in television dramas that barristers sat around in quaint Dickensian pubs, swapping Latin tags and ordering another bottle of champagne to toast their own utter brilliance in court. Kate thought anxiously of the brief she'd stuffed into her bag this evening with some hastily scribbled notes, rather than the meticulous dossier she usually prepared, with key facts and questions picked out in colour-coded highlights. She was meeting the client at ten tomorrow morning, along with a solicitor who was potentially a rich source of future work and therefore needed to be wowed. Never mind. If she set the alarm for six, she could be in chambers by seven and be ready in time. The case itself was bread-and-butter stuff. Three hours should do it easily.

*What was that?* At the sound of a slammed door she tensed, raising one shoe towards the stirrup. But it was only the woman from the upstairs flat, returning home. Kate recognised the familiar pattern of footsteps across bare floorboards overhead, accompanied by ecstatic cat miaows and shortly followed by the signature tune of a soap opera. That was a relief: the television would mask the noise they made. These Victorian warehouses were generally very solidly built – that's what her stepfather had said, anyway, having once



worked as a surveyor (before he started drinking). The flat was ‘enviously situated’ in what the estate agent had described as ‘the doorstep of trendy Shoreditch’. It would be nice to live in one of the penthouses, with nothing but sky and pigeons above, but those were way out of their league. Even this third-floor flat – basically two large rooms plus a tiny kitchen and ‘Manhattan-style’ bathroom – required a frighteningly large mortgage. But she loved the big windows that flooded the flat with light on a sunny day, and the fact that she could walk or cycle to work if she wanted. Having grown up in the bleaker outreaches of a dull Midlands town, whose most glamorous attraction was a shopping mall, it was exhilarating to live in the heart of a great city.

Outside the shaded window, London roared and rumbled and tooted, alive and full of promise. Rikki would be home any minute. She pictured him striding up from the Tube station, coat billowing romantically behind him, with his arms full of goodies. Tonight he had promised to cook her a celebration dinner. He had two specialities: stir-fried prawns with cinnamon rice, and a curry that used every pan, bowl, utensil and machine in the kitchen and took all day to prepare. Prawns, then – and champagne. There might be a present, as well: nothing too extravagant, she hoped. They were only just beginning to dig their way out of a mountain of debt.

A burst of raucous female giggles suddenly exploded from the pavement outside. She heard a squeak of brakes and the whirr of a taxi engine, a stampede of high heels, more laughter and a shriek of ‘Wait! My balloon!’, before the door clicked shut and the taxi took off. A balloon in a taxi? Well, why not? London was awash with balloons, red roses, heart-shaped chocolates and cards ranging from schmaltz to smut. It was Valentine’s Day, after all.



Kate leaned back and closed her eyes. On this exact day, two years ago, she and Rikki had met, arguing against each other in Croydon Crown Court. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Even when he'd been wearing a wig and robe, she'd found him instantly attractive. His mother was Persian by birth, his father English. The combination had given him fine-boned features, impossibly dark hair that curled sexily when it got too long and extraordinary green-grey eyes that lit up his face. His proper name was Rustom – Rustom King, whose initial letters had given him the nickname of Rikki since schooldays. They were arguing against each other in an inheritance case, which had turned into a delicious flirtation, all the more exciting for being played out in public in front of a crusty old judge. 'I think My Friend has failed to note the significance of *Grieves v. Harbottle* 1985 regarding intestacy,' said Rikki – or something like that. 'Irrelevant, Your Honour,' Kate retorted. 'That judgment was superseded in 1991 by *Rudge v. Gulliford*. And I believe My Friend will find that the date of the case he cites was 1986, not 1985.' She had been on top form, and won the case. Male barristers often disliked being trounced by a woman, but Rikki had been charming about it – even impressed. 'Wow. You really know your stuff,' he'd said afterwards, when they met in the robing room. He was even better looking without his wig, with smiling eyes, straight jet-black hair and the most incredible golden skin. Since they were both returning to their chambers, it had seemed natural to walk to the station together and carry on talking in the train. Arriving at London Bridge, neither of them wanted to stop, and he'd suggested a drink together.

That was the beginning of a whirlwind romance – the best

kind, in her opinion. As well as taking her to films and dinners he'd shown her all sorts of special places in London, which he knew much better than she did, having grown up here: the view from Parliament Hill, a candlelight tour of the John Soane Museum, a tiny Lebanese restaurant that looked like a cheap café but had food to die for. He was full of energy and ideas. He loved surprises.

Two months after they'd met, he took her to the Amalfi coast for a long weekend. He'd organised everything, not even telling her where they were going except that it was 'somewhere warm'. Kate had never been to Italy before, and even at Naples airport was enchanted by the emerald-green palm trees sprouting into a cloudless blue sky and the sensation of heat on her sun-starved skin. A taxi had driven them for an hour or so through a steadily more mountainous landscape and finally into a village up a steep, cobbled street. She tried not to be disappointed when it stopped in front of an unprepossessing hotel entrance, just a dark doorway in a white wall: she would forgive Rikki, of course, if it turned out to be a dump. They were dragging their suitcases down a high, tiled hall when the middle-aged manager, trim and elegant as a ballet dancer, appeared from a side office. With a snap of his fingers he summoned a porter to take charge of their luggage, then ushered them out onto a large balustraded terrace with geranium-filled urns and ornately wrought tables and chairs. It would be his great pleasure, he affirmed, to bring them a drink, personally, while they enjoyed the view.

Stepping outside, Kate caught her breath. Greenery spilled vertiginously from the edge of the terrace into a sea of bright, heartlifting blue that stretched for miles to a hazy horizon. She could see a part of the rugged coastline with terracotta-roofed villages perched high on the cliffs or squeezed into

tiny harbours. An ancient tower decorated with brick arches poked up from among the pines immediately below her. Even as it caught her eye, bells inside began to ring, as if in celebration.

Everything about their stolen days together was perfect. Their room was in a private turret, with huge windows to the sea, where their love-making could be uninhibited. By day they roamed the ancient goat paths in the mountains, explored churches and villas, kissed on shingly beaches, all the time talking, arguing, finding out about each other. At night they gorged on seafood and proper Calabrian pizzas before tumbling into their high, white bed. On their last night they were sitting together in a little restaurant on the hill-town square. They'd been swapping confessions about their previous girlfriends and boyfriends, and why the relationships had blown up or fizzled out. Rikki told her that he had been in love several times. 'But,' he added thoughtfully, 'there's only been one girl I wanted to marry.'

'Oh?' Kate was piqued, but curious. 'Who was that?'

'You.'

She remembered how the clatter of plates and buzz of conversation receded to an eerie silence in which she could hear nothing but her own heartbeat. The pink tablecloths and bustling waiters dissolved into a blur. For a few moments she may have stopped breathing altogether, unaware of anything except Rikki's handsome face smiling into hers and the warm clasp of his legs under the table.

He reached for her hand and leaned forward, eyes locked with hers. 'Let's do it. Marry me, Kate. Tomorrow – next week! Let's surprise the world and be happy for the rest of our lives.'

*I love this man.* That's all she could think. She loved his

open, impetuous heart and his optimism that all things were possible. She loved it that he had chosen her above all other women and wasn't afraid to say so. Marriage was not on her agenda, except as a vague future probability. She was still only twenty-seven, and she'd always thought it vital to establish her career first, so that a man would take her seriously, not try to turn her into a 'support' and free housekeeper. But that night something within her shifted, as if a stone had been rolled away from her heart, leaving it open and vulnerable. Quite suddenly she saw marriage not as a surrender, but as an adventure. It was like that psychological test where you could decipher an inkblot either as a household vase or two people kissing. There were a thousand reasons to say, 'Not yet.' But this was the moment. She saw herself reflected in Rikki's eyes as a confident, opinionated woman who ran her own life in her own way, a fit partner who would relish the boldness of his proposal.

'OK.' She felt herself blushing like a teenager. Then, seeing the excitement leap in his face, she started to laugh. 'Yes! Why not? Let's do it!'

'Kate Pepper, I adore you.' He pulled her across the table into a kiss in which she could feel his pent-up passion.

They stared at each other in wonder, laughed, kissed, stared again. It was madness! But, Kate told herself, remembering a bit of Socrates, it was the madness of Aphrodite – a gift sent by the goddess of love herself – and one must never scorn gifts from the gods. In the absence of anyone else to tell, they shared their news with the grizzled waiter, who threw his arms joyfully into the air, shook Rikki's hand, kissed Kate soundly on both cheeks, and brought them a glass each of pink Prosecco.

They'd been married that summer. In his wedding speech,

Rikki had described how they had met, vowing that this would be the first and only time they would appear against each other in court. 'From now on, we're on the same side, and in any case, we intend to do all our arguing at home,' he quipped. Everyone laughed. Everyone agreed that they were the perfect couple.

It hadn't all been plain sailing. Giving up her single, independent life to move in with Rikki while they searched for a place to buy together had been oddly unsettling. She remembered a moment almost of panic when she realised that this was it: that she couldn't escape, that she couldn't walk out and do as she pleased, even for a day, without explanation. Kate shook her head, dispelling the memory. She'd simply felt swamped by the sheer chaotic volume of his possessions – piles of yellowing magazines, scrolls of posters dotted with Blu-tack from his university days, tennis rackets with broken strings that he couldn't bring himself to throw away, perished football boots held together by the solidified mud of yesteryear which he 'might need one day'. As soon as they had moved together into this flat the anxiety had vanished.

People talked such nonsense about marriage: that somehow it 'changed' you; that couples inexorably fell into stereotypical gender roles; that romance faded into compromise, and other agony-column drivel. She and Rikki were exactly the same people as before, pursuing their own careers, holding their own bank accounts, seeing their own friends and thinking their own thoughts. They'd even retained their own copies of the same book, which sat side by side on the shelf like Siamese twins. The trick was to insist on a relationship of equals. Occasionally this meant arguing, but sometimes arguing was good. Romance was as much a matter of the mind as of the body. Though the body was good too ... *Where was*

*he?* Kate snapped out of her reverie. The bedside alarm clock showed that it was seven fifteen. Her arms were aching. And the telephone was ringing.

She tried to undo the handcuffs but her fingers had gone numb. As she struggled with the Velcro, the answer machine kicked in. It was Rikki, sounding hassled. ‘Hi, it’s me. I thought you’d be home by now. Maybe you got held up.’ Kate writhed in fury. ‘Anyway, I’m running late. See you about eight. Gotta go. Love you.’ *Click. Beep.*

Well, great. Finally freed, Kate exercised her fingers and flapped her arms until they tingled with restored circulation. What was she supposed to do for the next forty-five minutes? She blew out the candle (which did not appear to be working – at least not on her), switched on the lights and wandered into the sitting room, absently pinging her suspenders. She rearranged a cushion and straightened the TV on its stand, but basically she’d already tidied up in here. But the kitchen was still a mess from last night’s supper and this morning’s breakfast. Kate surveyed the pile of dirty crockery in the sink. No time like the present. She found the apron that Rikki’s mother had given him last Christmas – dark blue with a crown and the words ‘His Lordship’ stamped in gold – and tied it on over her sexy underwear, then snapped on some rubber gloves. By the time she had washed and dried the dishes and put them away, and cleaned all the surfaces, she had used up twenty minutes. What else could she do? The carpet was looking a bit grubby. When had anyone last cleaned it? She wrestled the unwieldy vacuum cleaner out of the hall cupboard, plugged it in and set to work. If their love-making was so ‘adventurous’ that they ended up on the floor, at least they would be rolling around on something *clean*. By the time she stowed the vacuum cleaner away, it was ten

to eight. Better make sure, this time. Turning on her mobile again, she tapped in a text: How long now? A minute later she had a reply: Just left tube. Back in 5.

*Five!* She dashed into the bedroom, ran a comb through her hair and gave herself a final shot of perfume. OK: lights, candle – apron! For a panicky moment she couldn't undo the apron string. Oh God! What if Rikki came in now and found her like this? It would be worse than the referee outfit. She plucked furiously at the knot, which finally came undone. She pulled it over her head and stuffed it under the duvet. Help! There was his key in the lock. She closed the bedroom door and did up the handcuffs in record time. Right. This was it. Come and get me.

The front door slammed. 'Kate?' called Rikki. 'Hey, Mrs Impatient, where are you?' His voice was joyous and eager, as if it had been weeks rather than hours since he'd last seen her. A ripple of excitement ran through her body. She wasn't going to answer; let him find her.

A strip of yellow appeared under the bedroom door as he switched on the living-room lights. She heard the jingle of keys, tossed onto the hallway table, and the thud of his briefcase hitting the floor. He was the one who sounded impatient.

Rapid footsteps crossed the floor. The doorknob rattled. Then he flung the door open, propelling her through almost a hundred and eighty degrees so that she had to do a kind of running tiptoe and nearly crashed nose-first into the wall. With his other hand he had switched on the bright overhead light. The next moment he had flipped it off again, and she was dragged backwards, heels helplessly scything through the carpet pile as he swung the door shut. She dangled from the handcuffs, trying to regain her balance as her bottom banged against the back of the door.



For goodness' sake! Why are men so stupid? Kate blew out her breath, wondering what to do next. She was feeling a little foolish. And annoyed. Once again she undid the handcuffs, and after a moment's thought jerked them free of the bracket and stuffed them out of sight under the mattress. She retrieved her kimono from the wardrobe and wrapped it tight, then opened the bedroom door and sauntered into the living room.

'Oh, there you are.' Rikki's face broke into a smile. His black overcoat sparkled with raindrops. Radiating masculine vitality he strode over to her and pulled her into a damp hug. Kate put her arms around him. It was still not too late.

'Guess what?' he said excitedly. 'I have big news.'

'You have big everything.' Kate peeped up seductively through her hair, waiting for him to kiss her.

'No, seriously – listen.' He pushed her away from him and held her by the shoulders. 'Snape wants me to work with him on a case! He's chosen me specially.'

'Oh.' Kate was thrown. Nicholas 'Snape' Fonthill, as he had been dubbed by *Private Eye*, was a very senior and very terrifying QC in Rikki's chambers, whose saturnine looks and icy sarcasm irresistibly evoked the Harry Potter character.

'And guess who we'll be acting for?' Rikki paused dramatically. 'Cassandra Carnaby.'

'What?'

For years the marriage between the singer Cass Carnaby and Jeremy Benson, TV megastar, had kept the celeb media afloat on a tide of gossip about wild parties, reckless expenditure, infidelity and whether or not their second child was really his. A while ago it had disintegrated in spectacular fashion when she had thrown a glass of something over him onstage at an awards ceremony. Since then the rumour tom-toms had gone

crazy: Jez had changed the locks on all his houses, leaving Cass and their children homeless. She was having an affair with a twenty-four-year-old rock star, and had demanded a fifty-million-pound divorce settlement. He had offered five. On one of the *Starmaker!* talent shows that had made him famous, you could distinctly see the vertical lines scored into his cheek by her fingernails, despite thick make-up. It was something like the tenth most popular YouTube video ever. If they were now going to the High Court to argue a financial settlement, the case would be huge.

‘Rikki, that’s fantastic,’ Kate told him, though she couldn’t help feeling a stab of jealousy. Nothing this big had come her way yet.

‘Yep. You are looking at a man who is on his way up, baby.’ Rikki threw off his coat and collapsed onto the sofa, hands clasped behind his head, looking incredibly pleased with himself. A strange buzzing noise came from under the seat cushion. ‘Christ! What’s that?’ He jerked upright.

Bugger! He’d sat on the battery-operated Love Glove, which she’d hidden under one of the seat cushions. ‘It’s ... a toy I bought for Sam’s baby,’ she improvised. Quickly she whipped it out and switched it off. ‘You know, a kind of ... vibrating ... octopus.’ She stashed it in her briefcase, then sat down next to Rikki, putting her arm through his. ‘But why you?’ she went on quickly. ‘I mean, how come old Snape chose you?’

‘Because I’m brilliant, of course.’

Well, yes. Though *she* was the one with the first-class degree and an ‘Outstanding’ in her Bar exam. Kate nibbled a nail.

‘God, I might really be successful,’ Rikki burst out. ‘I could become a QC – a judge! You’ll have to call me “My Lord”.’ He leaned over her, chuckling. ‘Go on, call me “My Lord”.’

‘Don’t be silly.’ Kate pushed him away, feeling unaccountably irritable.

His eye fell on her fishnet stockings and high heels. ‘Are we going out?’ he enquired doubtfully.

‘No.’ She stood up.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’

‘I need to get dressed.’

‘Think what it could mean for us, Kate.’ He grabbed her hand. ‘If this case puts me on the map, I could start to make real money. We could move to a bigger flat – maybe a house. We could go on exotic holidays. Even think about having kids.’

Not that again. She stood passively with her hand in his, eyes down, wanting to escape and yet shamed by her feelings. This was Rikki, her husband, whom she loved. It was Valentine’s Day, the anniversary of their first meeting. Not that he seemed to have remembered. Upstaged by a bloody court case!

‘Speaking of “exotic”,’ she said brightly, ‘what are you cooking us?’

‘Oh shit.’ Letting her go, he sank his head into his hands. ‘I didn’t have time to get anything,’ he confessed. ‘Snape didn’t even ask to see me until six, and I couldn’t say I had something else to do. I’m afraid your present’s going to have to wait another day, too.’

Kate felt a yawning disappointment which she knew was unreasonable. She’d have done the same. In fact, more than once she’d stood him up because of work. ‘That’s OK,’ she said in a dull voice. She headed for the bedroom. As if aware that he’d somehow missed a trick, Rikki followed her and leaned against the door-frame while she made a pretence of looking for something in a drawer.

‘Tell you what, we’ll go out! Anywhere you like. Bigger the cost.’

‘On Valentine’s night?’ She threw him a sour look. ‘Rikki, every single place in London will be booked.’

‘Oh ... Well, I’ll cook you something anyway. What about *oeufs scramblés*?’

‘Whatever.’

‘OK. Bad idea.’ He raised his palms in surrender. ‘I know! What about that Thai place you like so much? They do takeaway, and it isn’t all that far to walk.’

‘It’s raining. Really, you don’t have to.’

But Rikki was fired with energy now that he’d made a Plan. ‘You get yourself all glammed up’ – he fluttered his fingers at her – ‘and I’ll hunter-gather us a banquet. When I get back we’ll celebrate.’ Mischief danced in his eyes. ‘Of course, you don’t have to wear any clothes at all.’

Oh, ha ha, thought Kate. To her alarm she saw that Rikki was peering round the door at the metal bracket. ‘What’s that?’ he asked in a puzzled tone.

‘That? Oh, you know,’ she replied vaguely, ‘more hanging space.’

‘Ah.’ His brow cleared. He strode into the living room and grabbed his coat. ‘I’ll be back soon,’ he promised. ‘Oh – and happy Valentine’s Day!’

She watched him let himself out. The front door slammed. Kate gave a howl of frustration. Pulling off one of her heels, she hurled it after him.