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About a Girl

Written by Lindsey Kelk

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LINDSEY KELK

✕ About
a
Girl

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About my girls,

Della, Beth, Emma and Terri.

PROLOGUE

I never meant for things to get so out of hand.

I'd lost my job. I'd lost the love of my life. My mum wasn't talking to me. My best friend was epically pissed off. My flatmate probably had a hit out on me by now, and in twenty-four hours I would likely be homeless.

But, you know, swings and roundabouts.

Considering how incredibly cocked up my life was, I felt surprisingly chipper. Happy even. Stretching out as far as I could, I curled the tips of my fingers around the headboard and scrunched my toes up in the crisp white cotton sheets that had found their way to the foot of the bed. Everything was still, everything was calm, and I was smiling. Somewhere across the room, I heard a phone beep. Instead of jumping up to see who needed what and just how quickly I could get it for them, I concentrated on the sound of the shower running in the bathroom and pressed my lips together to refresh the tingling sensation before it faded away. The stubble burn that tickled my cheeks was altogether more stubborn. I was so happy.

Lindsey Kelk

My best friend had been wrong. Everything was going to be OK. Probably. Not that there hadn't been some sketchy moments over the past week. Not that I hadn't considered having myself committed. More than once. But now it was almost over. I'd survived. This afternoon I would get on a plane back home. I would call everyone who needed calling, and instead of behaving like a jabbering shell of a human, I would be cool, calm and collected and make things right. If I could get through this past week, I could get through anything.

Seven days ago, if anyone had even given me a hint of what was ahead, I would have crawled underneath my desk and refused to come out. But as I had learned from every television show I had ever watched and every book I had thought about reading, you never knew how strong you were until you had to find out. I was definitely stronger than anyone had reckoned. Either that or I was clinically insane. It was a fine line.

The phone beeped again.

It was all going to work out. The photos were taken; the photos were great. Paige was going to be very happy. Mr Bennett was happy. Kekipi didn't seem too bothered either way, but you can't have everything. All I had to do now was spend the rest of the morning lying in this bed reliving all the terrible things I had just done with a terrible man, and by this time tomorrow I'd be practically home.

Rolling onto my stomach, I was very, very glad I couldn't see the state of myself. My too long hair was all tangles, my carefully applied make-up was now carefully applied all over the pillowcases, and, let's face it, post-orgasmic smugness isn't a good look on anyone. If I had seen me right now, I might have wanted to punch me. Not that

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post-orgasmic anything was a look I was terribly familiar with. Well, the bad hair and terrible make-up, yes, but the smug ‘I just got shagged rotten by a very handsome man’ part? Not so much. There had to be a way to do post-coital with an air of class, surely. This was something they really did need to start teaching in schools. Maybe at the same time the nurse took the girls away to explain all about the wonderful world of tampons she could give you a rundown on what to pack in the morning-after kit. If there was one thing women needed to know, it was how to get thoroughly seen to without your gentleman friend sandpapering the top three layers of your skin completely off your face in the process.

Three more beeps.

No matter how hard I tried to ignore it, my phone wasn’t giving up. With a tiny, sad sniff I realized I was going to have to answer the bloody thing. Only it wasn’t on the nightstand where I always left it. Because this wasn’t my nightstand. And I had no idea where it was hiding. My beautiful red silk Valentino dress was on one side of the room, my bra on the other. Somewhere in the middle, there was a white shirt and a beach towel. And from deep inside a pile of carelessly discarded man clothes, another iPhone started chiming along in time with mine. It was a veritable chorus of communication. Together, they sounded a bit like a One Direction song. I gave up. Screw you, Vodafone.

‘Vanessa?’

I watched the huge bamboo fan on the ceiling spinning round and round and round and tapped out the rhythm of the phones, making no effort to answer either them or the man in the bathroom.

‘Vanessa?’

Oh, right. That was me. Sort of.

‘Yeah?’ I called back, scanning the room for my knickers. The biggest problem with crazy, tear-your-clothes-off sex was that once you’d torn off your clothes and had the crazy sex, the clothes were hard to locate in a dignified fashion. It was impossible not to feel a bit slutty scrabbling around on the floor looking for your pants. It was all well and good if you were one of those girls who slinks around starkers after sexytimes, but I wasn’t really a naked person. I was very much an ‘always sleep in a nightie in case the house burns down’ person. I mean, I still called it ‘sexytimes’, for God’s sake, and as we all know, if you can’t say it, you shouldn’t be doing it.

‘Is that me? Can you answer it?’

‘It is. I can.’

And I could, in theory. Although I was very upset at having to get out of bed. Shuffling down the mattress and trying to ignore the streaks of mascara all down the backs of both my hands, I anchored my hair behind my ears and hung over the edge of the bed to comb through the pile of cast-off cotton and silk like a hungry badger. A slutty hungry badger.

The slinky black iPhone was peeking out of my bra, flashing up a private number. I slid off the bed and dived into the middle of the pile of clothes. Classy. ‘Nick Miller’s phone,’ I answered as I clambered back onto the bed. ‘Not Nick speaking, obviously.’

‘Who is this?’

An unfamiliar and unpleasantly accusatory female voice echoed down the line. Hawaii might be beautiful, but the mobile phone reception was shit.

‘This is Tess. I mean Vanessa. Um, yeah, Vanessa.’

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Damn it, I couldn't even think straight when I was tired, let alone lie straight.

'I'm trying to reach Nick Miller?'

'This is Nick's phone,' I yawned. 'Can I ask who's calling?'

'Sorry, who am I speaking to? And why do you have Nick's phone?'

'He's in the shower.' I couldn't help feeling that I might be talking myself into a very deep hole. 'I'm Tess. Vanessa! Shit, I'm Vanessa.'

'Put Nick on the phone,' the woman demanded. 'Right now.'

I did not put Nick on the phone. Instead, I did the only thing I could think to do. I pressed the end call button and dropped the very expensive piece of technology into a glass of water at the side of the bed. Because that was bound to help matters. Launching myself off the bed, I scuttled around on the floor searching for my phone. Maybe there was something I could do. Maybe there was still time. Maybe—

'Hey, who was it?'

A very handsome, very naked man appeared in the doorway, rubbing his ash-blond hair with a white towel. I silently begged him to cover up. It was very difficult to concentrate on digging yourself out of the world's biggest metaphorical hole when there was a visible penis in the room.

'No one,' I chirped. 'Wrong number.'

'No one has had a wrong number since 1997.' Nick strode across the room, dropping the towel as he went. I couldn't help but feel this was disrespectful to both the housekeeping staff and the environment. That was a fresh towel. 'Pass me the phone.'

‘Um, I dropped it.’ I looked up from my slovenly spot on the floor and hoped my naked charms would distract him from the extreme act of iPhone violence I had ‘accidentally’ committed.

They didn’t.

‘What the fuck, Vanessa?’ He grabbed the glass and choked back a sob, staring at the phone as if it was a tony Damian Hirst exhibit. *iPhone in Water*, a dead cert for the Turner Prize. ‘My fucking phone. It’s broken. What am I supposed to do without a phone?’

Hot or not, whining was never attractive. After finding them hiding inside one of Nick’s shoes, I pulled on my knickers, hoping that the less naked I was, the clearer I’d be able to think.

‘It slipped.’ I held my hands up in defence, attempting to squish my boobs together at the same time. Misdirection was a magician’s best weapon and I was definitely going to need a magic trick to get out of this one. Possibly a miracle. Where was Jesus when you needed him? Or at least Derren Brown. But preferably Jesus. ‘I’m sorry.’

Nick carried on pawing his waterlogged lifeline and making heartbroken chuntering noises under his breath, while I continued my search for my ever-beeping, completely annoying phone. I still couldn’t believe I’d broken the screen. Maybe it was in my bag? I spotted the slouchy, pretty black silk clutch bag that had come with my dress over by the door where I’d tossed it as soon as we had crashed through it last night. MAC make-up, Chanel perfume, spare batteries and dozens upon dozens of pens spilled out all over the floor. I was a strange creature sometimes. Didn’t like to be without a pen.

‘Hello?’ I answered after finally retrieving it from inside

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Nick's abandoned boxer shorts. Eww. I fought the urge to hang up and give it a rub down with a wet wipe. This was not the time to relapse into my OCD issues.

'Tess, it's Paige. Where are you? I've called, like, ten times. I've been looking all over for you.'

Brilliant. Paige. Couldn't a girl get five minutes, post-shag peace and quiet?

'I'm in my cottage,' I hedged. 'What's up?'

'No, you aren't. I've just been there.' She paused for a second. 'Are you with Nick?'

'God, yeah, that's what I meant. Nick's cottage,' I looked up at Nick, who seemed to have got over the untimely death of his iPhone thanks to the comforting charms of my tits. 'We were just going over the photos.'

Nick raised an eyebrow and tossed his phone onto the floor. It was amazing how quickly a man could recover from a painful loss if he thought there was even a tiny chance he could put his penis in someone.

'OK, I'm coming over. You need to do something. Stephanie called – she's mega, mega pissed off. I'm going to get fired. What the fuck, Tess – what do we do?'

'OK, don't panic, but don't come here,' I said, trapping the phone between my cheek and my shoulder while slapping Nick's hands away from my newly acquired knickers. 'I've got loads of stuff to show you from yesterday – I left you messages. Seriously, calm down. I'll come to you. Nick's busy, but—'

'Nick is busy,' he said, thumbs hooking around the delicate silk I'd only just managed to get halfway round my arse. 'And so are you.'

He snatched the phone and threw it across the room. I watched it skitter across the shiny wooden floor and vanish underneath the bed, taking Paige's panic attack with it.

‘You know, you are an incredibly sexy woman,’ he said, running his fingertips up and down my spine and pressing his face against my neck. ‘You cannot even begin to know how much I want you right now.’

‘I really want to play along with this,’ I whispered with my eyes closed and brow furrowed. I wasn’t used to being called sexy. Or a woman. Most men didn’t actually seem to notice I had a discernible gender at all and so hearing these things from such a ridiculously attractive man was very difficult to resist. ‘But this is just about the worst timing ever.’

‘Vanessa.’ He took my tiny fists and covered them with his huge hands. ‘You broke my phone. You owe me. Now shut up and do as you’re told.’

Just as it had been since I’d first laid eyes on him, every word out of Nick’s mouth went straight to my vagina, but this time I had to resist. I could be strong. As long as I kept my knickers on.

‘I’m sorry, but I’ve really, really got to go,’ I insisted, swooping out of his arms and grabbing my bra from the floor in one surprisingly graceful move. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t be sorry.’ He gave me a dark look and grabbed my wrist. ‘Just don’t go.’

Before I could come back with an intelligent argument, there was a very loud knock at the door.

‘I am sorry and I do have to go.’ I shook off his hand and tried to discern what bits, in the tangled pile of material on the floor, had started out last night as my outfit. ‘Don’t answer it. It’s Paige.’

Really, I was impossibly stupid. I had just told Nick Miller not to do something and then expected him not to do it.

‘What if it is?’ he asked, eyebrows raised. ‘We’re adults.’

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‘Oh, don’t start!’ I had no time for this. He could be such a cock sometimes. Most of the time. In fact, any time when he wasn’t actually using his penis, he was behaving like one. ‘Just please don’t open that door.’

And so, naked as the day he was born, Nick strode over to the door and flung it wide open. A very shocked blonde girl stood on the step and gaped.

‘Paige,’ Nick nodded. ‘Vanessa and I were just going over the plans for tomorrow.’

The tiny blonde girl tried desperately to avert her eyes from Nick in all his naked glory. As it was, the only other thing for her to concentrate on was me in my knickers, and that was doing nothing to improve the situation.

As she recovered herself and put two and two together to make a filthy four, Paige’s face fell. I took an ill-advised step forward and got my foot caught in Nick’s boxer shorts.

‘Paige.’ I looked at her.

‘Nick?’ She looked at him.

Nick just looked very pleased with himself.

‘Oh, Tess.’ Paige started to laugh and it wasn’t very nice. ‘Tess, Tess, Tess.’

‘Paige, don’t,’ I begged. I was fully aware that pleading with women didn’t usually go very well when they caught you hanging out in your underwear with the man they had designs on. Especially when that man was naked. ‘Please.’

‘Tess?’ Despite how very clever he claimed to be, Nick wasn’t always the sharpest knife in the drawer. ‘Who’s Tess?’

‘She is,’ Paige said, nodding towards me. ‘Aren’t you?’

‘Vanessa?’ Nick placed a hand over his manparts, not

looking nearly as smug as he had five minutes ago. If I hadn't been ready for the ground to open up and swallow me whole, it might have been funny. 'What's going on?'

'Nick, I can explain,' I started, entirely unsure how I was going to do that. 'It's a long story. It's a funny story. It's, um, well. I don't know where to start.'

'I do,' Paige chipped in. 'This is Tess. She's an irresponsible, selfish, evil, lying bitchface who's been faking everything to everyone, and I didn't grass her up because I'm an idiot.'

Bit harsh, I thought. A bit harsh, but ultimately accurate. All of a sudden, my knees weren't feeling terribly steady. Nick looked very confused. And also still very naked. Unfortunately, his supreme manliness wasn't enough to slow Paige down now she'd started.

'Long story short, her name isn't Vanessa,' my friend, mentor and confidante stated. She was on a roll. 'Her name is Tess Brookes and she's full of shit.'

Well.

It was a much more concise version of events than I had to offer.

CHAPTER ONE

Two Weeks Earlier

It was more or less a day like any other when it all went wrong.

My alarm went off, I got up, showered in silence and watched fifteen minutes of breakfast news with stuttering subtitles so as not to wake my flatmate. I got dressed, I checked my bag to make sure I had an adequate number of tampons even though my period was a good three weeks away, and after checking I'd turned my hair straighteners off twice, I left for the office. As usual, I was the first in. No one else made it in before ten on Mondays, but I was the kind of irritating person who got a lot more done without the clacking of everyone else's keyboards to distract me. Early mornings and late nights were my friends. And given the frequency with which they occurred, they were pretty much my only friends. But on this particular Monday, I had good reason to be so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. After seven years' hard slog, I was getting the promotion I'd been dreaming of.

I, Tess Brookes, was about to become the youngest creative director in the history of Donovan & Dunning.

Obviously no one was quite as excited about this as me, so it wasn't exactly a shock that I was sitting outside the HR manager's office before she'd even got off the Tube. It was fair to say I was dead giddy.

'Morning, Raquel.' I gave her a cheek-achingly massive smile when she finally appeared at the top of the stairs. It couldn't hurt, I reasoned; after all, today was my day. Some girls had weddings, some had babies, I had my promotion. And that was only sad if you let it be.

'Tess.' Raquel, short, bleach blonde and dead-eyed, motioned for me to follow her into her office. She didn't look surprised to see me. And why would she? We'd been discussing this promotion for the past six months; I figured she'd be glad to see the back of me. All that was left was for me to sign my new contract and then I'd be out of her way. For six months. I was ambitious.

'OK, so let's just get straight to this.' She sat down behind a too big desk and smiled. 'I've got some difficult news.'

'Right.' I sat up straight and put on my 'I'm listening' face. Difficult news? Was she leaving? Maybe she was leaving. I really hoped she was leaving.

'As you know, the company has gone through quite a lot of changes in the past twelve months,' Raquel said, folding her hands in front of her and leaning her head to one side. Such a serious soul was Raquel. Probably because she fired people for a living and everyone hated her. 'And as such, we are having to undertake some necessary measures to ensure a successful restructure.'

'OK,' I nodded. This was a very funny way of giving me a big hug and a key to the executive bathroom. Of

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course I knew there was a restructure. They were restructuring me into a corner office and a big fat pay rise. Which was much needed to pay for the ridiculously expensive Promotion Shoes that were currently rubbing the fuck out of my feet.

‘As you know,’ she repeated, ‘the original plan for the business was to move you into a creative director role, with the copy and design teams reporting directly to you.’

‘The original plan?’ I was starting to feel a fraction less giddy.

‘The original plan,’ she confirmed, never taking her eyes off me.

This didn’t sound wonderful. Why wasn’t she squealing and giving me a present? And why was she smiling? Raquel never smiled.

‘Unfortunately, due to the new restructure, we will not be moving ahead with the original plan. The creative director role you were moving into is no longer part of the planned downsizing of the company.’

Words I officially did not enjoy. Unfortunately. Restructure. Downsizing.

‘And as such, your role has been restructured out of the business.’

I was definitely ready for the hug and the present.

‘The creative director role –’ my voice did not sound nearly as steady as I would like – ‘has been restructured out of the business?’

After seven years of overtime, evenings and weekends, I was being stiffed out of my promotion by an HR demon with a gob full of business jargon and clichés.

‘Yes.’ Raquel gave me the same look you might give a small child who has just successfully worked out that cows go moo.

‘So I’m not going to be the new creative director?’

‘You are not.’

Poof. There it went. Bye bye, promotion. Hello, God knows how many more years back at my old desk. Hello, shit-ton of overtime I was going to have to do to pay for my new shoes. I stared at an Oxford University mug sitting right on the edge of her desk and fought the urge to move it out of harm’s way. Who went to Oxford and then ended up doing HR for an advertising company?

‘As you’ll see, we’ve put together a very fair redundancy package,’ Raquel continued, switching gears so fast I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. She pushed a stiff cardboard envelope across the desk towards me and tapped it twice. ‘Given the circumstances, we understand if you would like to leave immediately. I can forward your personal effects. If you could just leave your phone and security pass with me, I’ll take care of all of that.’

I looked down at the envelope and then back up at Satan’s minion.

‘I’m afraid I’m not following,’ I said as politely as possible. ‘Redundancy package?’

‘The company no longer has a position available for you.’ Raquel scratched her nose delicately. I resisted the urge to slap it. Only just. ‘At all.’

‘So when you say the creative director role has been restructured out of the business . . .’ I took a deep breath and tried very hard not to vomit. ‘What you are actually saying is that *I* have been restructured out of the business?’

‘The creative director role,’ she repeated with a nod, ‘is no longer viable in the current business plan. You are the creative director.’

‘But I haven’t even started the job. How can I have

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been restructured out of it?’ I was aware that my voice was starting to get uncomfortably high. I was even more aware of the fact that I was going to cry. I blinked twice and stared hard at the Oxford mug, trying to regain my composure.

‘I understand you are bound to have some questions.’ Raquel’s shark eyes had already glazed over. ‘Perhaps you’d like to schedule some time to go over them on the phone tomorrow.’

‘Or perhaps I’d like you to stop being a dick and tell me why I’m being fired?’ I shouted.

There was no stopping the tears. Between the blisters on my heels and my blind rage, there was nothing I could do to stem the sobbing. It was neither ladylike nor professional, but apparently I no longer had a profession, so who gave a toss whether or not I was being ladylike?

‘Perhaps you could explain to me why I’m being “let go” when you’re supposed to be promoting me? Perhaps you could explain to me who exactly is going to lead the creative team? Perhaps you could tell me who is going to win all of your business and lead all of your campaigns and who is going to work on New Year’s Eve so you don’t lose an account for a toilet cleaner?’ I grabbed the cardboard envelope and bashed it against the desk to punctuate my every word before flinging it across the room. ‘*And* it was crappy toilet cleaner.’

‘No one is disputing your commitment to the job,’ Raquel said without even flinching. ‘And we will be very happy to give you a reference when you find a new situation.’

‘A new situation?’ There was a chance I was screeching. ‘This isn’t *Downton* fucking *Abbey*. I’m not a scullery

maid. I'm the best creative you have here and you know it. Where's Michael? Where is bloody Michael?'

Michael was my boss. Michael was a cock. When Michael spilled a glass of wine down my top at the Christmas party every year, I laughed it off. When Michael referred to me and my breasts as 'his three favourite employees' in front of a new client last summer, I let it go. When Michael tried to cop a feel under the pretence of performing the Heimlich manoeuvre when I had hiccups *every time I had hiccups for seven years*, I kept my mouth shut. And now where was he?

'Mr Donovan isn't in the office this morning,' Raquel replied, actually sounding bored. 'I do understand you're upset, but really, this isn't a personal issue. It's just a matter of corporate restructuring.'

'Well, I think you need to restructure your face,' I yelled. Not my best comeback ever. 'This is ridiculous. I run that creative team. All of the accounts are working on my ideas. All of them.'

'This conversation really isn't relevant to the decision that has been made.' She stood up and opened her office door. I took this to mean I was supposed to fuck off through it. 'Your role no longer exists within the company. I will forward all your personal belongings and the details of our very generous package to your home address and include my direct line. I'd be very happy to discuss any questions you might have once you've had some time to reflect. We should probably do it over the phone.'

For the want of something else to do, I grabbed the Oxford University mug from her desk and threw it, as hard as I could, onto the floor. It bounced once on the beige carpet and then sat there sadly, a tiny trickle of coffee pooling beside it.

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‘Feel better for that?’ Raquel asked, one eyebrow raised.

‘Not really,’ I admitted, my chin up high and arm stretched out to knock a stack of files off her desk. Stamping a sore foot, I swiped a Pritt Stick off the shelf and brazenly stuck it in my pocket.

‘I’m taking that,’ I explained with added petulance. ‘You can knock it off my generous package.’

It was strange where your mind went when you were in shock.

Seven years of work and my boss hadn’t even had the decency to come in on time to fire me himself. I’d missed weddings and birthdays and dates to meet deadlines, deliver projects, give presentations, and I’d done it all with a smile. While all my friends were out puking in the street and snogging strangers, I’d spent last New Year’s Eve sat in the meeting room, throwing a stress ball at a wall for three straight hours while I attempted to come up with an innovative campaign for knock-off Toilet Duck. And I bloody well did it. My flat was full of books I’d bought but never read, DVDs that had gone unwatched and CDs I hadn’t got round to listening to. Good God, it had been so long since I’d listened to music, I still had CDs. But it hadn’t mattered before. Because this was the plan. No matter how often my two remaining friends had told me to ease up, that work wasn’t everything, I hadn’t listened. I was happy. I wasn’t missing out on my life; my job *was* my life. And now I had neither.

But what really stung, I realized as I rode down to my floor for the last time in the lift that always smelled ever so slightly of cat food, what really stung wasn’t the loss of the actual job, it was everything that went with it.

Most importantly, it was the dream of moving into my own place and leaving my demonic flatmate behind. Because once I was in my own flat, living would really start. I'd buy fancy dinnerware and nice curtains and learn how to make sushi and buy a cool TV with an amazing audio system. And then I'd invite Charlie round for dinner and we'd end up drinking a little too much and watching a movie which would almost certainly be something starring Emma Stone, and just when she was being her most endearing for the ladies and sexy for the men, I would rest my head on his shoulder and he would realize that I was his Emma Stone and we would kiss and then we would be together for ever. But no. That couldn't happen now. Because I didn't have my job. So there wouldn't be a flat. And there wouldn't be a dinner or an Emma Stone movie night or a kiss or any happiness ever again. Poof, it was all gone.

Having never been fired, let go or otherwise excused before in my life, I wasn't sure what the correct protocol was. For the first time, I was thankful everyone else in the office were such lazy bastards. There was no one to see me snivelling and shoving my belongings into a reusable Tesco shopper, except for a terrified-looking intern and the graphic designer who everyone knew sniffed Bostick in the toilets. The company was going under and I was being let go, but the glue-sniffer kept his job. It was perfect.

I picked up my stapler and stared at it for a moment. I couldn't remember a time when I didn't have a plan. Whether it was setting up the girl's football team in junior school because I had declared the PE teacher sexist, turning a profit on the refreshment stand at the village panto, or making sure I was sitting next to Jason Hutchins

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on the year ten bus trip to Alton Towers, I always had a plan. And the Cloverhill Panthers had come third from last in our local division, watering down the Ribena at the panto until it was basically pink piss had made exactly four pounds and seventeen pence, and for two precious hours and thirteen minutes, Jason Hutchins had been all mine. I always had a plan and that plan always worked. I dropped the stapler in my bag and walked out the door.

After a ten-minute wander down Theobalds Road, I found myself in Bloomsbury Square, shopping bag in one hand, dignity in the other. Hobbling over to an empty bench, I kicked off my new shoes without worrying what the British summertime mud would do to the gorgeous nude suede and stared vacantly at two dogs running up and down the park. They always looked happy, I thought, as I pulled all the pins out of my elaborate updo one by one. Dogs were always happy. Dogs didn't have a plan. Dogs hadn't been climbing up a career ladder for the last seven years. Dogs hadn't been hopelessly in love with their best friend for the last ten. Well, I couldn't hand on heart say that was definitely true, but it seemed unlikely.

I rifled around in my Tesco bag looking for something to spur on an emotion that wasn't pathetic. All that was in there was my stolen stapler, three framed photos, a brand-new box of Special K cereal bars and about seventeen different pens. (Lots of highlighters. I liked a highlighter.) That was it. Seven years and I'd erased all evidence of my very existence from the office in one half-full environmentally-friendly shopping bag.

I pulled the photos out, one by one, and laid them on my black-clad knee. The first was of me and Amy,

little-girl versions of me and my best friend, dressed up as princesses and hugging desperately for the camera. The next one was a more formal shot of me, my sisters, my mum and my grandmother, looking considerably less chipper. We weren't huggers, the Brookeses. Someone basically had to die to convince my mother to go further than a stern pat on the shoulder. When my first granddad had passed away, she had ruffled my hair. It was intense. The third and final photo was of me and Amy again, this time all grown-up and joined by Charlie, my co-worker, best boy friend and the man I had been in love with for the past decade. The three of us were slouched on a sofa in some random Parisian hotel in front of a huge mirror with another one behind us. My face was obscured by the camera that had gone everywhere with me that summer, but my denim cut-offs and stripy T-shirt echoed endlessly in the reflections of the two mirrors. Charlie and Amy's reflected faces smiled back at me. Amy was on my left, deep in her *Amélie* phase, black hair cropped close to her head and legs stretched out, draped across me and Charlie. To my right, the love of my life rested his head on my shoulder and held a lit cigarette off to the side, so as not to drop the ash on my bare skin. Even though you couldn't tell by the photo, I remembered I was smiling. We were the three musketeers. Rock, paper, scissors. Amy was the scissors, Charlie was the paper and I was the rock. I was always the rock.

Slowly but surely, I felt my breathing return to normal and the tension in my shoulders ease ever so slightly. Just in time for me to realize someone was sitting beside me on the bench.

'Morning.' An incredibly average-looking man with

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a shaved head and a black bomber jacket gave me a sideways nod.

‘Morning,’ I replied, carefully placing the photographs back in my bag. No reason not to be polite. This was my life now, after all. Just sitting around, talking to the other non-workers-slash-vagrants in London’s parks while I lived vicariously through the dog ownership of others. I wondered if the Tesco near Russell Square sold White Lightning. It felt like the day was missing a bottle of White Lightning.

‘Don’t make a scene,’ the man said, moving down the bench towards me and looking straight ahead. ‘Give me your wallet and your phone.’

‘Sorry?’ I wasn’t quite sure I’d heard him properly. Was I being mugged? After seven years in London, was I actually being mugged? Not bloody likely.

‘Phone and wallet. Now.’ He pulled a small Swiss Army knife out of his pocket and gave me as scary a look as he could muster. ‘Don’t make me make you.’

Still not quite with it, I tilted my head to one side and stared. I couldn’t help but think he’d be scarier with hair. He looked like an overgrown baby.

‘I haven’t got a phone,’ I replied. This was actually happening. I was being mugged by a giant baby in a bomber jacket. ‘And you can’t have my wallet. There’s nothing in it anyway and it was a present.’

‘Everyone’s got a phone.’ He sounded a bit taken aback. ‘Give it to me now.’

‘No, really.’ I opened up my handbag and tipped it upside down, emptying the contents out onto the bench between us. Three lipsticks, a powder compact, my keys, more tampons than anyone could ever feasibly need and even more pens clattered against the wooden slats. I

picked up my wallet and stuck it between my knees. I meant what I said – I'd already told him he couldn't have that and I wasn't about to go back on my word to a criminal. 'See? No phone. I just got fired. They took my phone. Have not got one.'

'You haven't got a phone at all?' The would-be mugger was visibly shocked. 'That's bollocks, that is.'

'It really, really is,' I agreed.

We sat in silence for a moment.

'Haven't got a job either,' I said as I started scooping up my belongings and dropping them back in the bag. It seemed he wasn't nearly as interested in highlighters as I was. Probably didn't have much call for them in his game. 'Phone's not such a problem.'

'Me neither,' he replied, grabbing a couple of tampons and popping them into my handbag for me. 'Had one. Lost it. Fucking Tories, innit?'

'I suppose the recession has been hard for everyone,' I sympathized. 'It's a tough time.'

'Do you need to call anyone?' the big baby asked. The man dug his hand into his non-knifey pocket and produced a brand-new iPhone. 'You can use my phone if you want.'

'Actually, that would be amazing,' I said, readily accepting the handset but ignoring the controversial cover design. Pretty sure they didn't sell Swastika iPhone cases in Carphone Warehouse. This was definitely home-made. 'Thank you.'

'Don't worry, I'll give you a bit of privacy.' He nodded curtly, stood up and wandered a couple of feet away. I watched as a worried-looking middle-aged lady in a waxed jacket and an Alice band took a very sharp and sudden detour. I looked away as he followed her.

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‘Hello?’

‘Amy.’ I would never answer the phone to an unknown number. Amy always would. ‘It’s me.’

‘What phone are you on? What’s going on? Did they give you a new phone. Did you get an iPhone? Have you got Siri? Can I ask him a question?’

‘It’s not my phone.’ I cut her off before she could come up with anything filthy to ask the omniscient Siri. ‘Are you at work?’

‘Yeah.’ She didn’t sound convinced. ‘Until five.’

‘Oh. I got the sack and I thought you might want to get very, very drunk.’

‘STELLA!’ I snapped my head away from the handset as Amy bellowed at her boss without moving the phone away from her mouth. ‘I’ve got a migraine. I’m going home. All right?’

‘I don’t think you can shout that loudly if you’ve got a migraine,’ I pointed out.

‘Be at yours in half an hour,’ Amy replied, ignoring me. ‘Don’t kill yourself before then, OK?’

‘OK,’ I said. It hadn’t actually occurred to me before she brought it up, but the Thames was awfully close by and it would save me from having to sign on. I didn’t actually know where the job centre was. Maybe my new friend could tell me. Or maybe I should just kill myself. Amy had hung up before I could ask her opinion and I noticed the phone’s owner hovering nearby. I hung up, smiled and held it out to him.

‘You know what?’ He waved my hand away. ‘Have it. I can always get another one.’

‘Oh no.’ I tried to press it back into his tattooed hand. ‘I couldn’t possibly. Really, I couldn’t.’

‘No, take it.’ He pressed it back into my hand and

stood up. 'How are you going to get another job without a phone? Just have it.'

'Well, thank you very much.' I gave him my cheeriest smile. 'That's really lovely of you.'

'No worries.' He held up his arm in a salute I vaguely recognized, and not from Brownies. 'And don't worry yourself. Fit bird like you? You'll be fine. Just remember, fuck 'em all.'

'Yeah, fuck 'em all,' I repeated, trying to reconcile the fact that his compliment made me happy with the fact that it came from a man who was clearly some sort of neo-Nazi.

I watched my fairy godmugger wander off across the park, the edges of my stolen, swastika-emblazoned phone cutting into my palm, and just as it started to rain, I started to cry. And I did not know how I was going to stop.