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Born in Paris, Stéphanie Tumba moved in London 7 years ago. After a Baccalaureate in French Literature, Stéphanie initially studied English Literature and Civilisations at Paris University, but after two years switched to Business Management degree in renowned International Business School.

Stéphanie worked for companies such as L'Oréal and LVMH before turning to an entrepreneurial career. Since she's been a kid, she always had an overflowing Imagination with a slight tendency to hyperactivity. Business lady by day and writer by night, she has always read and written songs, poems, or stories sometimes short, sometimes long, sometimes comical, occasionally sarcastic and sometimes dark & suicidal, depending on her mood, the music she has in her mind, the people she met and the amount of alcohol drunk on the day.

Well, now Stephanie who loves challenges is currently working on her second novel and working on a variety of creative projects.

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This book is dedicated to all the singles ladies on earth but
more importantly to:
Sabrina Ortega, my *partner* in crime in my singlehood life, and
all the acquaintances I lost touch with but made the dating
ride so much fun!

Thanks to

Should I start with my former husband? Allez... Merci, I am so grateful I made the mistake to marry you and made the best decision of my life to divorce you. I am grateful you made me live the most amazing human adventure on earth: Dating. It was fun, it was a learning experience and I met a lot of friends down the road. Thank you ever so much!

Thank you for all my lovely dates, LMAO.

Thank you to all the singles (or not) friends I met all through this adventure, some of them I lost touch with and a very few of them are still amazing friends of mine: Adaya, Akilé, Cecilia, David, Diane, Elana, Eric, Jean-Max, Marco, Mark, Matthias, Marie, and probably so much more people. Thanks for encouraging me sometimes without knowing what I was up to! Thanks for inspiring me and being your true self. Love you soooooo much.

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Merci to all of my six brothers and sisters and more importantly Asita, Api, and Khali; if I had to pick a family that will be definitely ours! Love you all and thanks again for your support. #Familyalwaysfirst #tumbz

Thank you to my parents Emilie and Joseph, without you, I would not be on this planet to tell about my tribulations and sorry for the sexual parts!

Finally, my dear Cassius thank you so much for your love, your patience, and your passion. I will always love you. You're definitely the love of my life! #Unitedsouls

Steph XoXo

DISCLAIMER

This book (sorry my secret journal) may content horrendous spelling and eye sickening mistakes

WHY?

Because it's a journal written in Frenglish.
YOU'VE BEEN WARNED! ;-)

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PROLOGUE - WAKE UP CALL

C'est la vie!

I AM FUCKING PISSED! First hangover as a single woman. I can officially say it: I am a divorcee, which I think is even worse than being single. Why do I need to remember that I married a mistake? After all, I am single full stop.

Well, officially, I am a divorcee with the worse hangover of my life with a reminder of my situation just in front of me, reminiscence of last night party a sign saying "JUST DIVORCED FREE AT LAST".

This headache is just putting me in a mood to eat a cow, drink an ocean and kill these singing birds outside that seem happier than me. What a night! And what a failure!

I have to explain.

Last night was my divorce party and also my birthday, but it seemed that divorcing in January 2013 was more important than turning 30. I was told that it was trendy now to celebrate the end of a shitty relationship. And for this so called party, we had the weirdest stripper I have ever met, and God knows how many hens' parties I have been to. In fact, as soon as we cheered the man up, he started to dance awkwardly in front of two ladies, one was a beautiful yet puzzled blonde lady, and the other one was an excited, and voluptuous Kim Kardashian look-alike woman. But did this explain his attitude? He felt sooo at ease that he started singing off key on top of one of my favourite tune that I won't be able to listen for the rest of my life without remembering him. My friends looked all amused.

Being the star of the party, he started dancing towards me. He

suddenly stopped to flex his arms in front of me terrifying, sitting uncomfortably on my so comfortable couch, one leg on top of another, and my arms crossed firmly hoping that he'll understand that I was not up to the challenge with raised eyebrows puzzled as he flexed and smirked at me seductively.

Not a slightest discouraged by my reluctant attitude and still feeling (too) comfortable, the stripper shouted to us the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard from a stripper: "Let me show you my 'helicopter' move. All aboard the helicopter! WOO!".

He was clearly oblivious to how ridiculous he sounded, so he continued his routine, swirling his penis around in his underpants, imitating the propeller of a helicopter while my friends giggled and exchanged mocking looks in the background. Camellia, pale-faced looked like she was about to gag. She held one hand to her throat to indicate that she felt sick, and she turned her attention towards the window. Bianca, however, stared at his moves wide-eyed with a genuine look of fascination and interest, and cheered him on and clapped happily.

Bianca leant in and slapped his butt. The stripper automatically got an erection, and stopped dancing. Second slap, he spoke in a high-pitched voice, gesticulating his despair dramatically with his hands in the air. Stripper sniffed and whined, "You slapped my ass, my only weakness!".

Everybody went quiet, and an awkward silence filled the room, with only the music still playing in the background.

Bianca was just so proud; she had proven herself being as powerful and manipulative with men. The scene horrified Camellia, and I looked in misery having the package just in front of me, this couldn't be worse.

The stripper left upset with his tail between his legs and muttering that we were the worst guests of his life. Voilà! My surprise striptease session had turned out sour because of a spanking, but what kind of stripper can't tolerate a good spanking?? It's part of the game, isn't it? I would have been very amused by the whole scene in a standard time, but well, let's pause here and let me explain.

I am Valérie Duval, just turned 30-year-old yesterday, and just so you know, as I don't think you can sense it through this book: I'm French. Very! I have been living in London for the past three years, in a relation for 7, married for 4, and officially divorced for 18 hours. Hopefully, my ex-husband and I didn't charge our suitcases with kids but solely with emotions.

That 'party' was an attempt to divert my thoughts. I have to admit, though, it has been 'interesting', to say the least! My two best friends Bianca and Camellia splendidly dressed for the occasion and myself the divorcee on my pyjamas were celebrating.

Camellia a sensitive, blond Venetian aged 39 will probably get over this trauma in another life or two. She is a sensitive, intelligent, romantic and a loyal person. Oh, and Catholic. Very. Her mobile number is the first on my speed-dial list plainly because she is the most reliable, affectionate, and discrete friend that anybody can ask for.

Oh, the Kim Kardarsh' look alike is Bianca, a creature out of this world. How would I even begin to describe her? Bianca is a 43- year-old Spanish Huntress and temptress. She's super rich; she could buy Camellia and I a few flats in Chelsea. Like Camellia and I, Bianca has also had quite a troubled past, but unlike us, she seems to be built out of iron. Everything about Bianca is sexy. She is a social butterfly, a committed rebel, naughty, confident and direct woman. I am so grateful I have her as a friend.

Bianca and Camellia are complete opposites, but in a strange and spiritual way, their differences balance our trio clan to perfection.

Poor stripper guy, he was probably the most traumatised after last night show. We may all need therapy except Bianca! I know for sure, I do. I'll explain.

London has been my home for the past three years, yet I now realise that we haven't been properly acquainted. My husband... Well, ex-husband and I lived in our very own 'French bubble' that had nothing to do with the dynamic, multi-personality of London. That bubble had now burst, due to a 'little flaw' in our otherwise perfect marriage.

I think I loved Pierre. He was my husband. Or maybe, I was more in love with the way he treated me. I was his Queen; he would cherish me, take care of me in that old fashioned romantic French way: doors opening, umbrella opening, love notes and love letters... Will I ever find a man like this? In fact, I would like an upgraded version of him: all the good stuff without the dark side of him.

When Pierre and I were introduced to London, it was an anonymous and glacial city. Pierre and I quickly became aware of its rudeness and its impatience. We were new to all its mood swings: its gloomy skies and unpredictable showers of rain that always seemed to catch me in my very best outfits. The pale-faced strangers lost in thought and trapped in routine in the crowded morning tubes.

Making friends in London and planning to go out felt like jotting down business appointments in the few tiny spaces remaining in our busy agendas. Rush, Rush, Rush.

Pierre and I juggled too much, and once one piece falls, the

rest fall with it. The occasional hug at the end of the night, and a soft “Je t'aime” would be the enough amount of compassion to get us through the night, and up the next day. Often, I would have to do without the compassion.

With Pierre unable to find work yet again, I would arrive from my daily 12-hour slave work, hoping for a hot bubble bath, only to come to terms with the fact that I now had to comfort his increasing restlessness and frustration which were brewing within him as every jobless day passed.

C'est la vie. Life knocks you down, and that very moment when you realise that you have hit rock bottom, you stop and smile, because there is only one way to go from there. Up. Get back in the rink, numb from all the previous hits. Fearlessly embracing the challenge.

And so, we did.

London had awakened our senses for the past years. We no longer minded or even noticed the occasional rudeness, the pushing and the shoving that was hardly ever followed by an apology. If London couldn't break us, nothing could. We took the good with the bad. The happy with the sad. We discovered the places that gave us a short but sweet reminder of Paris. We were quite happy.

Pierre had finally found a job, which meant that we now no longer had time for tantrums, frustration and worrying. We had filled that time going out and meeting people. We danced, and dined and nearly every night was concluded over laughs, red wine and background rhythm and blues.

And the best part was yet to come. I had met the two other loves of my life: Camellia and Bianca.

We had hit it off straight away, and as each day passed, we grew closer and closer together, which gave Pierre and I some

space to breathe, and therefore the chance to miss each other. When we were together, everything else blurred into the distance, and all we could see is each other's eyes. We danced in the middle of the street, slightly buzzed at night, with no music on. Those were fantastic moments. Or so I thought.

Everybody admired our marriage, and the obvious love we barred for one another.

Having new friends was wonderful, and so was being employed. But hey, what we failed to realise perhaps was that despite our French-bubble illusion, we were still living in London.

London, the restless, agitated and demanding city which sucked the energy and life out of its people, in the same way that a workaholic boss will toss a few dimes at you to keep you fed and alive just enough to keep on working. Pierre couldn't cope. He had turned to alcohol. He came home late, waking me in the too-early morning hours. His breath reeked of liquor and whisky. I would shout at him, scream, and slam doors. He would do the same. Then, when he was too drunk, and I too exhausted to argue, his snoring kept me up.

Pierre had gained weight. A lot of weight. I loved him regardless, but the attraction was gone. Everything was all slipping out of control, and I didn't know how to stop it anymore. I couldn't. We couldn't. We went down fall, Pierre lied to me. He hid a few things. We were not a team anymore. The more lies I discovered, the more I was upset.

7 Years full of history. Love, friendship, sex, endless conversations and walks, sleepless nights, thousands of red roses, our private jokes, our secret connection; and here we are, so much left untold, and yet it all comes down to nothing at all. As if we never were anything. I couldn't trust him

anymore. A few days after our biggest fight ever, I asked Pierre to leave and filled the papers for a quick amiable divorce. I announced my decision to the girls over a coffee in a rainy and windy distraught London. They didn't say anything, didn't give an opinion, they respected my decision. Their hugs meant everything and worth all the comforting words in the world. It felt great to be supported and loved. I was so happy I found the girls years earlier. Pierre had left, and my life felt so empty without my best friend who discovered London with me. I will be all alone now, I thought of going back to Paris but why? London welcomed me and I, now, finally getting acquainted with the city.

Life is full of challenges, but nothing is too big for me, right?

A few weeks later, I received my summons to the court of Paris to officialise my divorce with Pierre.

My heart was breaking into pieces, and a huge emptiness invaded my soul. Pierre had called me almost every day to make me change my mind. I didn't even want to try, why would I? Why would I stick around for a mediocre marriage? I had to let Pierre go.

I was ready; I had to go and keep on going with my new life. So, I went to this divorce, looked at Pierre in the eyes, he signed the papers leaving tears on them. He agreed to not fight over our Parisian duplex. I signed them being stronger than ever leaving a bit of my past on them. It was the end. It was real and impersonal.

I left the Court with a weird feeling. I was adding myself to the long list of singles in a city I barely knew. But I was full of hopes that I would find the man of my life and meet deep, never resting, sexy, uncontrollable and passionate love. Once one chapter of life falls apart, another goes wonderfully well.

C'est la vie!

Introduction

After my divorce, I had a busy life at work. I decided to hoist my new life and change a lot of things. After thinking of moving out, I simply redecorating our apartment in Knightsbridge, started taking care of myself, started electronic cigarettes (it didn't last) and embellished my life with a new wardrobe. It was not a cold winter, but my mood and my heart were freezing. So, I decided to hibernate and get into a TWS: Tube, Work & Sleep.

One sunny afternoon, the girls decided to visit me at home and faced to my unusual unwillingness of going out to one of the trendiest places in London and my incessant therapeutic condescending speeches on Pierre, Bianca interrupted me "You know something? This seems like the perfect opportunity to finally meet Prince Charming. Someone with a six pack of abs, not a 6-pack of beer belly fat. Someone hot, intelligent, and fun. Just like you!"

I was intrigued. Who did Bianca have in mind?

"Someone real? Let me guess, he will come riding on a black horse, and he will carry a large sword." Interrupted Camellia full of doubts.

Bianca ignored the iron and added, "Oh, I don't know about the horse, but he should have a big one.... a big sword."

"I don't have time for this; I have so much work, and I'm taking additional responsibilities, I oversee a whole new perfume project for a big company. I might be promoted", I added.

Bianca insisted "Val, what you need is a dating website. I know a good one. It's called 'shagaholic'. That's where I met that hot, sexy, charming, polite, well-educated guy with a big hot c..."

Camellia abruptly interrupted Bianca: "We get the idea!"

Bianca pushed back on the couch, gesticulating with her hand that her lips are sealed.

Camellia turned to me "Look, maybe Bianca is right. Maybe online dating will distract you. But no shagging website. There are a few decent options such as "EHarmony". I think a drop of puke escape my mouth. Too much of a cheesy name to me. "Seriously?" I thought.

Yes, it isn't the most romantic way of meeting somebody. But at this point, it's the best option we've got since you're super busy!"

I flinched out of my chair. I expected Bianca's nonsense, but now Camellia was suggesting dating?

"And what is *dating*?" by the way I asked with curiosity.

Bianca answered my question with excitement "it's great fun, you'll see... It allows you to take your time in deciding which man you want for the rest of your life. Or you can just have fun. It's so British: decadent, edgy and it can be romantic if you

want it to. I am dating three guys now."

"Oh là là! Three guys?? Why? And for how long?" I asked terrified.

Bianca proudly responded "3 months".

Outraged and curious I promptly asked, "How do you find the time to see them? And why don't you just pick one?"

She retorted, "Why pick one when I can have all three? Together they form the perfect man".

"I want the perfect man in one" I whispered uninterested.

Vicious Bianca taunted "That's a bit much, coming from someone married to a fat transsexual for seven years. Plus, I don't feel you're ready for a long-term relationship. You need to have fun!"

Camellia responded "Smooth, Bianca. Real subtle".

"He wasn't always that fat!" Was all that I could muster to respond. Intrigued by Bianca's story, I asked if she was having sex with the three of them.

"Just two." she admitted. "I am playing hard to get with the third". I was surprised. I knew Bianca had a very active sex life, but I thought she was seeing those guys one after the other. Not on the same day of course (I know she could though) but after a small kind of pseudo-relationship.

I retorted, "You sleep with 2 of them! That is unfaithfulness to me!"

"The only person you should always be faithful to is yourself. If not, the one you put your faith in will deceive you", she declaimed.

Camellia quickly disagreed, "That's not a rule. What happened

to Val is just unfortunate."

"Which is why she should be more careful this time", emphasised Bianca, "and have fun".

"I just want a romance like in the movies, love at first sight, passion and amazing sex. I don't want to meet strangers," I whispered.

"This is how it works in this country honey," responded Bianca. "It's like walking in a supermarket. The more options you have, the better you choose. The better you choose, the more ingredients you have to cook the perfect dish. In other words, you will be well fed. You try, try, try until you find somebody that is worth fighting for and this takes time honey."

"In France, it's so much simpler", I thought "you are either in a relationship or you are not! I do not understand why it's so complicated here. Dating, dating, dating, dating, relationship marriage? When does start the relationship? When the dating stops?"

I finally agreed, "Okay, fine. It's not like I have a better option. I'll try dating. After all, clearly my decision making process is not the best. Now that I'm in London, I should open my mind to other options and date the English way. But I asserted that I would not sign up on any website that has a word SHAG in it. Naughty Bianca quipped "There is also one called www.voulez-vous-coucher-avec-moi.co.uk I mean if you prefer French dating". I laughed at Bianca while Camellia rolled her eyes and threw Bianca a funny look.

Bianca winked at us and walked over to my laptop and started signing me up to match.com. A compromise between Shag something and e-harmony that was too boring and old fashioned to Bianca's point of view.

"Welcome to the fucktastic world of Internet dating," says Bianca all excited. "Let's have a look to your future Sleeping Dates".

Camellia rolled her eyes "Language Bianca!"

"I said fantastic. Cam, you have a dirty mind!" claimed Bianca.

Camellia giggled and blushed.

Bianca started signing me up on Match, "Ok, so I'll put you down as 'single' not 'divorced'. I don't want you to sound desperate."

Bianca read out while she was typing my profile "I am looking for a fun and intelligent man, who can stimulate me in a conversation and other areas as well."

I suddenly retorted, "No! Bianca, I sound just like you. And I definitely don't behave like you. I don't need any stimulation. I just need to be distracted for a while. That's all."

Bianca responded, "Look, this is just to get some attention from more attractive men. What you discuss after is up to you."

Camellia added, "Yes, but she will target the wrong category of men who are only in it for the sex".

Bianca responded Camellia "Sorry, how is that the wrong category? What category are we looking for? Pathological liars?"

Interrupting my dear friend, I smirked "Look! I'm sceptical about this whole thing. And about men in general. I don't want to jump into the pool head first again, only to realise that it is empty".

"Well, what if this time the pool has water in it?" asked Camellia.

"Well, then I may drown!" I replied.

Bianca exclaimed excited, "Oooh, what do we have here. Hello, Martin! He is hot, blond, tall, blue eyes, and he works for the media"

I barked back," The media? Yeurk! But hell, he's hot!!!"

Camellia amazed, "Oh, how about Adrian? He looks nice. You are attracted to this type of man.... dark eyes, dark curly hair. He is dreamy and look, he is an entrepreneur."

"Oh, my god", I replied, "that guy looks hairy. Probably has a hairy back too. And he's red! Look at his tan! Next!"

"Right on babes, at least you haven't lost your sight" sniggered Bianca.

"Well, at least he's the first to send an email to Val. Clearly, he is a man who knows what he wants" Camellia smiled.

"Yeah well you obviously have no idea what that is. Plus, Martin has just written too. Ha! So, now she can write to both!", added Bianca.

But I liked Harper more. There was something honest about him. He wasn't trying to show off.

Bianca whispered to Camellia, "Probably has a small one or he's a short-comer".

"I heard that Bianca!", I laughed.

Bianca all smiling, "Come on already, just do it!"

Concerned, I confessed to the ladies, "I don't want to start anything and be unhappy again."

Camellia reassured, "But if you start something, you have a chance to be happy! You always say to me "if you try something, you might fail..." I ended with her "but if you don't try you definitely won't succeed!"

"Oh look, Harper just emailed you", said Camellia.

Bianca pushed forward, "Let me see..." and read out loud "Hello Valérie. My name is Harper. Thank you for your flirt. I like your pictures. You're beautiful, and you have a genuine smile. Please note that at the moment, I live with my two adorable kids, if it's not a problem for you. I will be very pleased to know more about you. Hope to hear from you soon. Harper xxx."

Bianca apprehensive, "Ok leaving happiness aside for a moment, this Harper guy has children. Two little buggers. And, I..."

All these men, I started being very excited by this all game and I interrupted Bianca, "ok, all is going too fast here! But it starts to be kind of interesting and fun! I'll write to all of them: Cute Harper, Red-face Adrian and hot Martin! And we'll see what's next!"

I hastily grabbed my laptop from Bianca and started replying to all of these guys, and that's where a new chapter of my life started... A new journey to find love again? Maybe... Next!

PART 1 - WELCOME TO THE DATING JUNGLE

Chapter One - The dreams' seller

My adventure started! Once upon a time, MOI a charming divorced French lady decided, after 300 winks and a hundred emails, to give the red tan guy a chance. Ever since I downloaded my pictures on my Match profile, my profile has been fantastically successful! Exciting! I received billions of messages and a few shy winks, and I did not even know where to focus.

Wow! There were hunks in this country, almost as handsome as the French, why haven't I noticed until now? I was super enthusiastic about finally being able to meet other men.

I decided to opt for Camellia's option by choosing Adrian who had five photos on his profile. Even though, I was concerned by one of his pictures, where he looked like he had greasy hair or a full gel tube on this head with a tomato red tan! The ugliest picture obviously! But the other pictures were quite nice. And he was trying so hard to meet me that I was willing to give him a chance and meet him. And unlike the others, he was not shy, and he quickly offered a date. So why not? He could be my mistake-allowed-date until I meet my real love.

All through our emails' exchange, I realised that Adrian was an edgy businessman, he had a recruitment company with several agencies in the Yorkshire, he liked travelling, loved the sun (I could tell!), liked concerts, golf, sailing and other things. We shared a few interests. After some relatively formal exchanges, which contradicted his rock'n'roll side, we exchanged phone numbers.

He called me almost immediately; I couldn't pick up, I was

panicking, his accent???? What if I couldn't get a single word? Shit, I didn't think about this... What a fool... I let my mobile rang... Phew! He left a voicemail; let's see if I could understand "Yorkshire".

I listened to the voicemail. Hallelujah! No accent!!! Reassured, I called him back pronto. Our conversation was fun! He sounded rather friendly over the phone. We were meeting next Friday. The first date sorted!

Friday arrived, and I didn't have any news from Adrian despite his confirmation the day before. Weird... Having dates here and there and being overwhelmed by my Match mailbox, I forgot about him. Then a few days later, I received a text asking me if I was okay... No apologies for standing me up a few days earlier which showed too much of disrespect to my taste. Astonished by his effrontery, I decided not to reply.

One Friday morning Adrian sent another text asking me out for dinner the same evening. This time, I responded that I was one week ahead or he was a week late. So I snubbed him by telling that I was not available. I offered him Saturday and he had no choice but accepting.

Date No.1

Rendezvous in Picca and more precisely in front of Lilywhites to 7:30 pm. Oh, oui! Where's Picca you're wondering? Let me explain, Parisians tend to shorten words and places, "St Michel" becomes "St Mich", "Les Champs Elysées" becomes "Les Champs", Piccadilly Circus becomes to me "Picca", French Attitude. Very.

I left my apartment to 7:15 p.m., jumped in a cab and sent a text to Adrian to let him know that I was on my way.

When my cab arrived at the Roundabout of the Shaftesbury

Memorial Fountain, I was horrified... I almost asked the cab to go back home... I could see Adrian from kilometres away, his lemon-yellow hat with his shrinking tomato red tan; What is the delirium there! He reminded me of a scary clown with his Bozo look. And then the flashy blue t-shirt, dark jeans (thanks God!) and a dark purple rock'n'roll jacket... He looked like a human rainbow on that cold January night. He looked like the ugliest picture.

When I got off the cab, I was caught by a crazy sick laugh that translated into a warm smile when I approached him; I kissed him twice on both cheeks *à la française*, which at the look on his face wasn't expected.

Merde... I couldn't help saying to him that it would not be possible because he was not my style... Then he almost begged me to stay as he travelled from Leeds to meet me in London and that at least I could have a friendly drink with him. I admitted that this was not nice and why not just have a night full of fun with him? It's not like I was marrying him now. So I agreed. And that night happened to be a great date; I've never had so much fun.

The drinks and the dance at St James Tavern, the meal at the charming Wan Chai Corner, the snow battle in the streets of Soho and the clubbing in the very touristic Piccadilly Institute until no time... It was a cheerful night; I could have stayed with him all night.

When I decided to leave around 4 am, he gave me a cute little peck on the lips and hailed my cab that arrived illico. I was driven away home with my heart filled with memories.

Confusingly, I wanted to see him again; I loved the feeling I had around him, the way he took care of me and the way he talked to me. After all, his physical appearance could change. I would confiscate his gel and cancel his subscription to his tan

salon.

We exchanged texts all day, every day. I couldn't wait for our next date and was so into him that I forgot the dating website and the other latent dates.

Date No.2

Adrian & I were going to the cinema to see a film for our second date. In just a week, I was amazed how my feelings have changed towards him, I couldn't stop thinking about him, his words, his accent, his texts and our night together in Picca... So, we met at the Electric Cinema in Notting Hill on Portobello Rd, I've always loved their comfy sofas and the very nice decor and bar.

Well, not on that date, I've never felt so uncomfortable in a cinema. The film was good but way too long, so not "date appropriate". I didn't know if I should touch him, kiss him, lean my head on his shoulder, touch his hands, I remained stiff on my not so comfy sofa. I couldn't stop moving; I wanted to comment the movie, but I did not dare because Adrian was really into the plot. I kept moving, went three times to the bathroom, he was into the intrigue and didn't acknowledge me all through the film. I was comfortably uncomfortable; it annoyed me not to talk... That pissed me off not to be myself. I was desperate to get out of this! The wine didn't help...

Then, we went to eat in Notting Hill Kitchen. There indeed, I couldn't stop talking like a speechless dumb recovering her voice. I was even afraid of having revealed too much; I was babbling about my life: MOI, my loving family, my life and my expectations but not my recent divorce. I asked him questions, but he did not seem to be ready to talk, was it too soon?

The food, the wine, the laughs turned me on, and that's why I

was determined to follow him to his hotel, I wanted him. And this was happening, he was staying at the Kensington Court Hotel, cute little hotel near Earl's Court, the room's door wasn't quite opened that we began to peck passionately. But where were the passionate French kisses? He pecked me all over my neck and my face, then we started to undress and unfortunately. We made love in a funeral silence, without passion, without energy... I was devastated... When I started to speak, I realised that he was sleeping like a dead old man, snoring, while I wanted so more of him...

Valentine

The week before Valentine's Day, I had a huge smile stuck on my face. I have never been in such a great mood. Adrian cared about me. He sent me messages reassuring me about his feelings. He consistently missed me "like crazy" despite the night without the sexual passion that we had last week. Bianca had been harsh about it "Sex without French kisses and passion is like a sex toy without batteries, tiring, inefficient & useless", she already hated him. But Camellia had reminded me that the first times were rarely the best, I decided to go for Camellia's opinion on that one.

The more we got close to Valentine day (I was expecting us to spend some time together), the less I received texts from him, and we didn't speak over the phone since that terrible night.

Then, Valentine's weekend arrived, no news, Adrian didn't reply to any of my calls and texts. I was terribly sad especially since I bought a card for him on this occasion. I did not understand; I was just hoping that nothing bad happened to him... The day after Valentine's Day, he called me saying that he was ill and needed a rain check. That's when the stampede began: the following weekend he had construction works at his house, the following he had matters to deal with and after nearly three weeks without seen each other, Adrian asked me

if I wanted to come to Leeds. I accepted with pleasure, I was so happy to discover his city, I just couldn't wait.

Leeds

I was longing to see him again, after the shitty sex we had, I was already thinking of a revenge party, something sexual and wild.

... And then later in the night, we'll go for something nicer, gentle, but passionate... And real French kisses, not these kindergarten pecks. I was in need, and these were my thoughts in my train leading to Leeds. The most important thing was to see him again.

Adrian came to pick me up at Leeds train station, I was like a child, and I jumped at him so happy to see him again. Then to my biggest surprise, I realised that we were not going to his place, we went to drop my luggage at the Park Hotel near the station. But I was too blinded by the joy of seeing him again to complain, we spoke the night away, and Adrian opened up a little bit more about his life and past relationships.

During that weekend, we couldn't stop drinking: noon, teatime, evening and night. I've never drunk that much in my life; I bet skin-smelled alcohol. Adrian showed me the best pubs and clubs of the city but stealthily and superficially the artistic side of it. Passionate about history and culture; I was rather disappointed to spend our time drinking, eating, bad sexing and still pecking. I realised that something substantial was missing. My instinct told me to finish it but my heart this brainless thing shuddered at every word he stated and made me addicted to him. I cursed this ambivalence... I was lost.

Chicago

The following Monday, I wasn't feeling great about that weekend... Something deep down in me was telling me to let this *merde* burning... I knew it should be over... We had clearly not the same interests.

That same week was terrible as I also received the official papers of my divorce. It was official; I was not Valérie Martin anymore... Well, tears were invading my face... It was too hard: the divorce and the Adrian case. I decided to put myself back on Match and follow-up with all my fondest admirers.

Two weeks later, I received a text message from Adrian, and my heart was racing, I read the text message and was really excited at his invite to the farewell party of an Olympic celebrity at Club 10 in London near St. Paul. I was so glad I forgot the two weeks without news. And we started texting each other like old days, and he suddenly sent "I'll have to sack people at work because it is a mess when I'm not there" I was intrigued "where are you" I asked curiously, He explained that he was in Chicago for business. I was really annoyed as I was not even aware of this trip...

Then he sent me the following < can't wait to see you and hug you babe> and < awww Darling miss your kisses and hugs >, < next time we're together I swear I'm going never to let you go! > He was clearly in love mood; all these made me melt into pieces. I was thrilled to read these words. What a relief! We're getting back on track... I realised, it was also annoying because every time I would fall in an ocean of pain he would send me the nicest words to fish me out of misery at the right time at the best moment... Where all this was going? I thought.

Back in the U.K.

Adrian is in England now, and unfortunately, we will not go to Club 10; this fabulous Donna Karan dress will have to be patient to be worn. What a shame, Adrian, this time, had an ear infection. I wasn't getting a flap this time too, our constant calls and texts comforted me, and Adrian was falling in love with me. He sent a few texts showing it < I wanna be your man > and he reiterated his feeling with < I Want to be your

fella, I'll always be here for you babe > I thought my heart was going out of my body. I was very glad and didn't worry at all. He was just a bit too independent, and I am not used to this.

I thought he had doubts about me or that he didn't want to see me again... Maybe he wanted to test me, and he realised that it would not improve our relationship, that he needed to open up and be more honest about his feelings to have a healthy relationship with me. Also, he wanted to go on vacation with me for Easter. We agreed on dates, and I rushed to book my holidays at work. I couldn't wait... He wanted to spend more time with me, spend some "quality time" to get to know me better.

So, Adrian was now my boyfriend. Were we not "dating" anymore? This is what Bianca explained to me, didn't she? We've just re-qualified our relationship. He was coming the following weekend to book our holidays! Yippee!

Square Pig

Three weeks later, completely love jaded, I got a surprise text from Adrian, he was in London and wanted to dine with me... I was delighted.

We arranged our date at the Square Pig. Having been upset for so long, it was not the greatest reunion... Shy... impersonal... The English way to be honest: pecks on the lips with a discreet little hug... So I asked him angrily how was Chicago, but he didn't seem to notice my annoyance. He told me that next time he wanted me to be there with him... Pleased to hear but not convinced, then he quickly explained on which projects he was working there and how Chicago's jazzy clubs were nice. But, I interrupted him, and I walled, "Adrian, I felt abandoned." No drama, no scene... I was very serene and sincere. I saw that I touched him but I also saw that he would not tell me more, and he just stated "never ever ever, we will be separated for so

long, never again... I missed you so much; it was hell. "

After that, he asked me what I was doing next weekend? I told him exasperatingly (was he serious?) that I had days off for our holiday together. And then he asked me if I still wanted to go. I hastily replied affirmatively. We started looking on his iPad for sunny destinations. I was excited. We chose Alicante and the beautiful Asia Gardens. He said he would reserve upon his return at the hotel. I was thrilled.

After a few awkward minutes, we finally started to have a good time... It finally ended very nicely. But too fast, Adrian had to take his train back to Leeds. It was weird, and we have not seen each other for two months and our relationship has evolved... I felt we were just closer somehow.

Win front of Holborn station, we kissed passionately in the middle of the mayhem of the rush hours while the world continued to press and walk to catch their tubes around us... I felt like being in another dimension... I felt that the world had two speeds, ours and theirs... I was in heaven, after having spent two months in despair...

The hard truth

Since I sent my details to Adrian for the trip, I had no news. On Monday, the day before our supposed trip, I had a bad feeling... I smoked like a chimney and not my healthy (?) electronic cigarettes! Everything irritated me: TV, writing, walking and even music.

Past midnight and I couldn't sleep. Adrian didn't answer any of my calls and texts... I was in my bed in a very sombre room. I was lost...

6 am, I told myself that I would never book days off for Adrian without seeing the plane tickets! I was sick enough to want to

see him again after all this! This was the cherry on the cake and very disrespectful...

Tuesday... We should have been on the plane, and I had no news of Adrian, and this was the end of our relationship. I went on Match to get some new dates and realised that Adrian had signed up again. Voilà! I feel betrayed. In fact, I realised that he probably never had the intention of going on holiday with me. All of this was lies.

Why? Why talking about having a relationship then? Was it my fault? Is it so complicated to have an open, honest relationship with someone? I did not understand... And what did I do to displease him? I was in pain but at the same time relieved... So I decided to move on but before I sent this email on Match to Adrian:

< Happy Easter, I hope you're ok. I got a feeling that we're not going to go anywhere this WE. I wouldn't have booked these days off if it wasn't for you Adrian. I don't know what you expected from me ... Did I do or say something wrong? I just wish you were honest with me. Anyway, enjoy your weekend. Xxx >

Well, Adrian left me without notice, he had those additive words; words that a fragile woman like me needed at the time. He was selling BS to me, and I purchased them blindly, I swallowed everything up.

The "break up" with Adrian was a real slap in my face on a scar still open by my recent divorce so really painful. To be totally "over", I had to make a list of what I did not like about him, and it was rather long! When I was thinking too much about him, I would reread it, and it will make me feel better.

I learnt the hard way with Adrian... I looked forward to dating as it should be, Bianca's way, no ring on my finger no

exclusivity... She was right on this one. I acted like a naive chick believing Grimm's tale and fairy tales. Here was London, and London is hard, callous, cold, cynical, windy and rainy but the most beautiful thing here is that after every shower, there is a rainbow full of hopes. I was ready for the adventure...

Believe it or not, Adrian contacted me 18 months later a few days before New Year, he asked about my new resolutions; I blocked him after he invited me to celebrate NYE in Tenerife. I thought it was a joke! I laughed out loud and obviously never replied. Next date please!

Chapter Two - Date à l'Américaine

Background

Meet Paul, a romantic American in search of true love.

His profile was quite explicit about it that made me wondered if he wasn't desperate. I was very much surprised by such honesty: « I am looking for someone to create something special, an attractive, down-to-earth, fun-loving lady who is articulate, and appreciate the finest things in life. Someone who believes honesty, trust, communication and affection are keys to a successful relationship. Someone with a good sense of humour and a good sense of perspective on life, a companion for life who wants to build a future together free of hang-ups from the past». Well, interesting...

Meet Paul, 5 foot 9, 40, American, brown long hair, brown eyes, thin traits with a cute Roman nose; he is an international lawyer working for an international firm based in London.

I replied to his first email two weeks after he wrote his to me, my mind being too busy with Adrian. Now, left aside, I had to date other men. Paul and I chatted a bit online, and we quickly exchanged numbers, texted to hatch on plans for our first date pencilled the following Friday.

Pre-date

Thursday night, Paul dropped me a line, and we had a rather fast and formal conversation. He had a very sexy and robust male voice (J'adore!), he confirmed our dinner for 8 pm the next evening and promised to choose a place at the level of my

sophistication. I was not very impressed by this first call (except his sexy voice) because he didn't have Adrian's fun and sounded too serious to my likings. But, I agreed to meet.

Friday night arrived, and I must admit I was not very motivated to go to that date, not having heard from Adrian for some time and not in the dating mood, but I could hear in my mind Bianca's multi-dating advice.

The date

I finally managed to get my derriere out of my coach around 8 pm, I was heading to Martin Lane, all stressed out, nervous, and late. Grrr...

I almost wanted to go home, but the doorman opened the door of my cab and behind him, a man who seemed to be Paul greeted me "Good evening Valérie, you worth the wait, you're gorgeous. I am delighted to have dinner with a woman like you. " He took my hand and lead me to the splendid Asia de Cuba.

The host greeted him "good evening Mr Willis, your table is ready" as if he was a regular in the restaurant, we sat at our table where a vintage bottle of champ was waiting for us.

At first, he was a bit cold and distant... I wondered if he did really like me... But over the course of the dinner, he relaxed, and we talked the night away about politics, culture, Beckham, football, wine, kitchen, his divorce, my divorce... I happened to have such a great evening I knew more about him in one night than Adrian in anyways.

The restaurant was nice albeit slightly noisy and so totally my type. Paul made an excellent choice, and the food was divine, I had scallops, then chicken, and plantain and we finally shared a chocolate fondant.

The evening was great. Yet, I couldn't stop thinking about Adrian, but I should not have qualms about dining with another guy because I haven't heard from him in weeks. And I was just dating, wasn't I? Just fair.

Anyway, back to Paul Willis, we were sharing a great moment, when I decided to go to the bathroom to check my phone for Adrian's text. What was my problem? Like a perfect gentleman, he stood up and pulled my chair. I smiled face to such attention and went all ashamed to the Ladies. I couldn't comprehend my behaviour, I was dating an amazing man and was still thinking of that asshole of Adrian.

No text from Adrian, I came back determined to enjoy my evening, when Paul got up again and flew me a passionate kiss before the whole assembly of the restaurant adding sensually "you're absolutely beautiful my dear". Wow, I wish the ground had swallowed me up, I did not know where to put myself, I was so uncomfortable. I immediately put my head in my bag pretending to search for something, I felt like everyone was watching us. And Paul was looking at me with a charming smile and amused by my shy attitude then we resumed our conversation until the closing of Asia de Cuba.

We left the restaurant and decided to share a cab heading towards the same direction. And there, I was taken by surprise by Paul's fiery and passionate attitude, he took my head, kissed my neck, passed his hands in my hair, gently licked my neck and made the most inflamed French kisses. Wow, he was so delicious to kiss... He managed to arouse me, and I wanted him now. But as a perfect gentleman, Paul prompted me to go home when the cab arrived at my destination. He kissed one more time, and I was gone.

Post-date

The next morning, I had goose bumps at the thought of Paul's kisses. He texted me, very cordial, he was so uptight, it was boring. I did not see myself going on further dates with him, despite the flowers sent several days later and all the romance in the texts and calls. I did not feel comfortable with this multi-dating thing, I felt like I was cheating on Adrian... I could not help myself but think otherwise.

Conclusion

Paul Willis phoned me and texted me for almost a month after our first date and I were still sorting out things with Adrian, I declined or cancelled each time until he got tired of asking.

I never heard back from him. Too bad, he was such a charming, romantic and attractive man. He was too good to me. I probably was not ready for this, still unknowingly healing from my divorce. Just the wrong timing! I still had plenty of mistakes to make, a full lot of funny dates to understand what was a good match for me... Next story!

Chapter Three - The Vagabond

Background

Meet Stephen: a good-looking gentleman, 5ft 10in tall with dark blonde hair, deep blue eyes, full lips and an amazing natural tan. He was a 40-year-old divorcee with no kids, and didn't look his age at all, at least in pictures. He was quite an interesting profile to me. But he lived in the middle of fucking nowhere - Leyton. I didn't even know where this place was!

Stephen and I chatted quite a lot online, and often late into the night. One of the most touching statements from him was, 'I hardly talk to anyone on that site and will happily come off it if we are together...and you want me to. I really do only have eyes for you.'

This was quite an unexpected statement, but it seemed to confirm his desire to have a sincere relationship with me.

According to Stephen, he had previously lived in central London in a flat he owned, but got tired of the buzz of the city. He moved out of London and had (rather cleverly, I thought) rented his London flat out. Later, as a newly settled entrepreneur, he had realised that he still had a lot of meetings in London, which was obviously a nuisance with tenants living in his flat. Rather than serve notice on his new tenant immediately however, he had decided to stay with friends in Leyton until a later date, when it became free again.

He explained to me that when he needed to be alone he stayed at various hotels, adding: 'I'm a nomad. I live in eccentricity.'

I wasn't a fan of that last part, I must admit but I fell when after another week of chat, he sent me a poem inspired by one of my pictures.

I found it very cute:

THE GIRL IN THE BLUE DRESS

*I knew when I first saw
the colour of your dress,
that it wouldn't be like this
with every girl I met.
It wasn't just your smile,
or the way you wore your hair,
it was something deeper still,
an infinitely sweeter thing.*

*And it's not the way you smell,
of peaches, lime and sandy shells,
or the way your arms entwine
like trails of springtime flowers.
No, it's much more than that,
something deeper still.*

*It's more than all these things,
and the many others I have hid.
But when it's time to act,
to force those summer days
to their looming conclusion,
will I dare to stroke your face?
and allow eternity to force or break
such a tender, almost hidden embrace.*

Then, such a character intrigued me; romance was exactly what I needed. It was now time to arrange a date, so we exchanged numbers.

We talked twice on the phone and he confessed that he was

impressed by my voice, but that it also made him a little nervous. For his part, he had a very sensual and deep voice - a quality I really appreciate in a man. I thought it was very sexy and found myself falling for him a little bit more.

He aroused my curiosity more and more with these romantic texts, which were all similar in tone to the poem. But I couldn't help but wonder - was he sincere? What if he was another pick-up artist, or a master-manipulator like The Dream-Seller Adrian? I had to be more careful this time.

Date No.1

It was time to leave the office for our lunch date and I was already stressed to hell. Stephen was a nice, educated man with a charming voice who wanted a meaningful relationship, and I could feel the pressure for this date to go well through my whole body. And the fact that we had been talking for nearly two weeks put even more pressure on. I was about to meet a stranger that I felt I already knew.

So, I arrived at Pearl Restaurant in High Holborn. The atmosphere was wonderful: a very intimate *brasserie* softly lit with tables placed to maximise privacy. I loved it, it was an excellent choice and now one of my favourite places in London.

I text him before I went inside and he, being there already, greeted me at the door.

The first moments were a little strange. We chatted, bantered and laughed; he sniffed through my neck, hair and hands... It was wild, but discreet and felt somehow appropriate. When we kissed, it was soft French kisses, which really exhilarated me. I felt good... Comfortable. Like I had known him for a long time.

He asked a lot of questions about my past, my present and my future. He even asked questions and then me if I wanted children, if I wanted to get married again about my career. This all reassured me, because it showed he was interested in me and really wanted to know more of me.

It made me realise that with Adrian, everything had been meaningless. We had not known each other at all. Everything had been completely superficial. I was excited to have a fun relationship again. *This* is what I had needed right after my divorce – not lies.

Stephen was very mature and solid, albeit a lot of fun. Our date went too fast and I had to go back to work.

I returned to the office feeling light and perky wishing I could have stayed longer. Stephen was charming, kissed like Apollo and was very cultured. I wanted to get to know him better.

Date No.2

Date two was at Ronnie's Jazz Club in Soho, which made me truly appreciate how many things there are to do in London. All these dates and so many wonderful venues!

Soon we were sat at our reserved table not far from the stage, where we could enjoy our dinner while listening to modern jazz. The gig was great fun and the acoustics there were fantastic. I am not usually a jazz fan, but the band was just magical - belting out contemporary songs from pop acts such as Madonna, Beyoncé and Michael Jackson – but all in a *jazzy* kind of way. Everybody was singing along and it was excellent! The atmosphere was friendly, so we could converse with the people around us. And I got to know a little bit more about Stephen in a more sociable environment.

The live music finished, we left our table and we were heading

to the exit when I began to wonder where and when we were going to pay the bill. We had reached the door before I had a chance to say anything, but then Stephen realised he had forgotten his glasses. He looked super angry. It seemed to take him a minute or so to decide if he should go back to the table, and I was waiting in the lobby when he came back with an unpleasant look on his face.

"How funny, we were leaving without paying." He said with an unconvincing smile.

Frankly, due to his reluctance to return to the table to collect his glasses, I already suspected that he had tried to dodge the bill deliberately. I began to question his attitude and values.

We had a few drinks locally and then shared a cab. To my enormous surprise, got out with me at Knightsbridge! He didn't ask, he just did. I felt trapped as the cab left - like a mouse being chased by a cat. I invited Stephen (rather unwillingly) up for another drink.

Fuelled mainly by the alcohol, we made love. But it was sweet, sensual, captivating and reasonably passionate. In fact, it was quite delicious. We fell asleep rapidly afterwards, stunned by the wine we had both drunk.

We had another round of sex in the morning, which *thank God* I didn't need to beg for. But afterwards, while he lay in my bed so comfortably, I started to panic. I hoped he would leave first thing in the morning, but by noon he was still in my flat! I really wanted to be alone to think about all of this.

1pm - he still had not left. I did not know how to get him out of my flat. The atmosphere was heavy and electric.

2pm - I finally decided to tell Stephen that I was going out for lunch and implied gently that he was not welcome anymore.

He finally understood that he had to leave - phew! But he stayed at the Starbucks in my neighbourhood and he sent me texts all day to ask if he could come back to mine later. He said that he was already missing me and he was still in the area.

8pm - He sent me a text message to say he had arrived home in Leyton.

Date No.3

I was willing to give Stephen one last chance. I was a bit of a tough cookie by then, with scars from both my ex-husband and Adrian not quite healed. But I enjoyed the conversations I had with Stephen and the air of maturity that he seemed to possess was attractive to me. So, when he asked me to go to a spa with him in Camden, I accepted, knowing that this would be the decisive date.

First, we had a quick dinner at the Pain Quotidien in Notting Hill. But this man was really starting to push my buttons: he had the nerve to ask me if he could move in with me and I almost spit my sandwich out my nostrils. The request was wildly assumptive and completely absurd - especially after two dates! I declined politely, saying that it was way too early for such a thing. He could try to butter me up with his desire to have a family with me, and his declarations of his love and admiration. But I refused to be fake and pretend. I could see a trace of despair and disappointment on his face. I didn't care, I just ignored it.

We took a cab to Camden and stopped at The Rio. Just by seeing the entrance, I immediately understood that this was not the kind of spa I would normally frequent. From the outside, it looked very tacky and once in the queue, I realised it was a nudist spa.

I asked Stephen to confirm my suspicions and he acquiesced. He asked if I was OK with it. Honestly, I wanted to try it out; I

was curious. But I was upset that he hadn't mentioned it before. I felt a little tricked.

"I am OK, but you should have asked." I said as neutrally as I could. Once I had decided to go in, I weirdly became quite excited by the idea.

But...wow. The disappointment inside was such that it was like going to a strip club and watching in horror as the wrinkly old janitor throws his mop bucket to the side and starts to unbutton his shirt. Inside, most of the guests were old and very unattractive. Unfortunately, (for me anyway) they were delighted to see some fresh skin.

People had various interests in being there: socialising, getting you to go home with them for a private libertine soiree, threesomes, foursomes, fuck the girlfriend - you name it! And I was getting far too much attention.

All through the evening I was solicited by women, men, grandpas, grandmas, great *great* grandpas and great *great* grandmas. And the rest...Well, trust me - you don't want to know. Stephen however, looked to be in his element. He took immense pleasure in showing off his trophy girlfriend as he strutted around the club like a Gallic rooster with me on his arm.

I got bored after about two hours of watching the men watching me. Their wicked and perverted eyes roamed all over me, and their sometimes not so dormant penises were hard to avoid - especially in the pool. Stephen started talking about us sleeping in this place and, utterly horrified, I urged him to leave.

Finally, out of that horrible place, I explained to Stephen that I was going home. I said that I was tired and I had work early the next day. I really just wanted to put an end to this shitty

night. I desperately wanted to grab a cab, but after what had happened the last time we shared a taxi, I was too afraid to get trapped with him at my place again.

I decided very reluctantly to use The Underground. Of course, Stephen came along too. Beneath the unforgiving lights of the tube, I realised that he did look his age, maybe even older. Standing beside him without make-up, I felt far too young to be his girlfriend. The insistent and questioning looks that I felt we were receiving from our fellow passengers made me feel very uncomfortable, so I did not even want him to kiss me, nor hold my hand.

Once at my station, he asked (of course he did!) if he could stay for the night at mine again. He insisted that he wanted to learn how to make love to me. I refused with indifference and we went our separate ways. Later that night, he sent me a text stating that he'd missed the last train and did not know where to sleep.

"Grab a cab, idiot!" was one of my nicer thoughts before falling into the arms of Morpheus. The next day I had another text from him saying that he went back to The Rio to sleep.

Conclusion

I never understood what was really going on in the life of this man. He was too inconsistent and all his actions, explanations and reactions to things were ambiguous and dodgy. I did not want to get involved in such a relationship. I did not respond to any of his texts of love after that last episode. His emotional manipulation attempts would not work on me anymore. But I had learned the hard way, yet again. *Sacré British!*

NB - A month later Stephen texted me once more: < I was sad with how things ended... I don't normally sleep with someone once; that was not my intention. I was serious about you; I liked you a lot – you

are a great girl, S x">

I never answered.

Three months after that, his mailbox got hacked and I received copies of mails and photos he had sent and received from other ladies. I discovered that he had sent the same poem to every girl he had met. I read "The Girl in the Red Dress", "The Girl in the Black Dress", "The Girl in the Yellow Dress", and even "The Girl in the Blue Shirt"!

I was right to cut ties with him. He was a complete con artist. But wait! That's not quite the end...

6 months later, a lawyer contacted me to enquire about Stephen: a collective complaint (probably by several women) had been filed against him. He had stolen money from people, sold fake luxury watches, and disappeared with the money from the buyers. I also learned that he had four children from three different women, he was no longer paying for child support, he never owned his own apartment, he was 47 (not 40) and had been living basically as a vagabond for ten years in different people's places all over London.

Stephen definitely needed a high five in the face. What a dick! Next!

Chapter Four – The Light of Love

Background

Meet Harper - a 38-year-old carpenter with long blond hair. 6ft 4in, slim with amazing Pacific blue eyes. I liked his profile from the beginning. Usually not my type, but who would decline a date with Leonardo DiCaprio's secret surfer twin? He seemed sweet, sincere and family-orientated. The catch: he had two young children. Plus, he wasn't a Londoner; he was living in Birmingham and was just occasionally working in the big smoke.

Bianca tried to persuade me to ignore him, because of the battle for his children's custody with his ex-wife, which was horribly complicated and far from being sexy. I did not want the drama, but eventually, I figured - why not? Dating was just supposed to be fun.

First contact

After a few emails and a phone call from Harper, I learned that he could speak French (*great* bonus!), his father was living in France and he had two brothers and a sister. I liked his attitude on the phone; he was a bit of a prankster, which made me laugh. He seemed trustworthy, honest and was not just trying to be nice - he seemed to genuinely be a good guy. But he had asked me to be patient with him if I wanted something serious. All because of this awful battle for custody that he was embroiled in.

His complicated legal troubles didn't really tempt me to continue at first, but I decided to look on the bright side - I could speak to him and date other men at the same time -

Bianca's style!

Virtual dates

Bianca's love-style would certainly not include virtual dates, however. I began a different kind of relationship with Harper and our first date was on Skype. Who would have thought that a date on Skype required even more preparation than a real date?? It is an art. Select the location of the laptop, pay attention to the background, arrange the lights, check how you look on screen, put on the right make-up, dress-up in all your finery etc. It was like dressing a film set.

The call came. I picked up. We analysed each other, checking if we looked like our pictures. This was followed by a few awkward seconds, then we finally started talking. It was weird; the virtual date had the same malaise of a real one, but without the glass of wine (well mine was hidden). On that first night, we had a blast for two whole hours.

During our second virtual date, we teased each other, we laughed and we called ourselves by our family names, which were replaced promptly by "Monsieur Roast Beef" and "Madame La Frog". It was very sweet and genuine. I loved those secret moments between us, we were exactly on the same wavelength. I really started to like this guy and even the whole virtual date thing.

Despite being "virtual dates", the same sorts of feelings were brought to my heart as "real dates". I recall one time when I was stood-up by Harper for a Skype date...Oh my, I assure you, I experienced the same feeling of desolation that I would have in real life. The disappointment seized my whole body! After so much preparation for this date and then it didn't happen. I packed up everything. I turned off my laptop, switched off the lights, washed my teeth, undressed and finally - going to bed sulking - I removed myself from the surface of planet earth.

The next morning, Harper made his “sorry” call: he had not slept at all, as he had spent the night in the emergency room at the hospital, thinking his daughter had appendicitis. Thankfully it was just a nasty infection. Fair enough, I thought. I hoped it was the first and last time. I did not need a second Adrian and wouldn’t tolerate this again.

Over time, our virtual dates became more frequent. We were talking until late into the night both on weekdays and the weekends. I was starting to really become attached to Harper despite my dates with Nathan, the other man I was dating at the same time (Bianca-style remember?). Harper was expressive, passionate, friendly, cheerful and handsome. And his surfer’s look... Well, we all like a Harper look.

I loved our relationship: each compliment was like a caress on my face, a smile from him was like a kiss on the cheek. It had such fresh momentum and I had butterflies in my stomach before every Skype call.

We began to really know each other. He knew that if I did not reply to his morning text before 9am, I was running late for work. He knew when I went jogging, or even the dates of some of my important business meetings - reminding me to prepare documentation. Wow! He had such a good memory, he could have been my personal assistant.

One night, he asked me if I wanted to come to Birmingham for our first date. He apologised for the sudden request, but he explained that with the children, a trip to London would be more difficult to organise and it would take ages for us to meet. He said that he couldn’t wait anymore. I was not sure if I really wanted to see him in Birmingham at first. I strongly thought that if he really wanted to see me, he would find a way. I offered to think about it, but I think he understood my point.

For my part, I would consult with my friends to get their views.

Bianca did not fail to tell me how exhausted I looked and that I needed to stop these late virtual dates. She added bossily that I needed to pull myself together. I was not going to attract anyone with the second pair of eyes below my beautiful ones.

Camellia was almost speechless, and it was a little scary. I imagined that she was thinking the same thing as Bianca.

I knew what I had to do.

I skyped Harper a few days later and I was not comfortable at all. I was at my worst: awkward, almost deaf and dumb. I couldn't even speak English anymore. I still had Bianca's and Camellia's faces and the venom of Bianca's words in my head. Plus, I was just back from a date with Nathan and I really felt like I was cheating on him. I wondered if it wasn't time to 'virtually break-up' with Harper. I really didn't want to though... That Skype call was the shortest we ever had.

I ended up mastering my thoughts enough by our next Skype call, and we had a relatively good date. I had grown very fond of Harper and truly wanted to see him. In fact, I wasn't sure I could wait anymore... and that's when he announced that he was coming to London at the end of May to see a football game! He wanted to have a coffee date with me. I couldn't have been happier. This was going to be real and I was delighted! But the end of May seemed like in an eternity away.

Pre-date

I really liked Harper by this point: his little cares and his jokes. We listened to music together, we watched shows together via Skype, and we even played "Who's Bluffing?" together. We started to have a "real" virtual married life. It was almost too comfortable.

After a few *long* weeks, our first real date was upon us. I could not wait to see him and was hoping there would be some real physical chemistry between us. I was already seeing myself touching, kissing and genuinely starting to love him.

The date

Monday 27th May - I had waited for this date for an eternity! I could not wait to finally meet Harper. But I already had plans to spend Sunday to Monday with Nathan. *Oui*, Bianca's style! So, here I was on Monday at 3am, tossing and turning around in the small space that was mine in Nathan's bed in Chiswick - desperately impatient to meet another man. I couldn't sleep properly, waking up every half hour. I wondered if it would be rude to leave that late at night. This went on for quite a long time...

6am, now and I was getting mad. I was being silly; I wasn't seeing Harper until 6pm and for now I was in another man's bed. I finally managed to get to sleep...

7:30am my alarm rang! Shit! I had forgotten to turn it off. As I got out of bed and checked if I had a text from Harper - nothing! No news! Good news! I tried to go back to bed alongside Nathan. I got another two hours and I decided to get up, because my stomach cried out loud for food.

This is when Nathan got up to use the toilet with an erection that instantly excited me. I suddenly wanted to stay but my phone beeped, signalling that I probably had another emergency to manage: it was Harper.

In a few minutes, I was dressed and had gathered my things and I had one foot out of Nathan's door, when I got another text from Harper. This time he was asking to meet at 11am instead of 6pm, because the football game was likely to extend!

What????? I was panicking. It was now 9:50am and I had to get home first. I couldn't be dressed in clothes, which probably still smelled of Nathan's penis! Plus, my make-up was a day old. Yuck!

I caught a cab home, charged my phone, booked a cab, took a shower, picked my clothes, packed my make-up, and was trying to dry my hair when the taxi called me. He was already at my door and I was still looking for my shoes. I left the apartment looking like a junk shop and I was late. I arrived at Baker Street at 11:13am and there were Crystal Palace fans everywhere. It was madness! But the sun was shining and the weather was beautiful. It was a promising romantic afternoon.

I called Harper upon my arrival, but we could hardly hear each other with all the yelling and chanting. To make things even worse, the reception on both of our phones was terrible. We laughed at the ordeal over the phone, yet we couldn't locate each other. We were disconnected, reconnected, disconnected, disconnected. When he finally called me back successfully, all I could make out were the words 'HSBC building'. I could see the building from where I was, and we finally managed to find a place to meet.

Our eyes met, I removed my large Prada sunglasses and I was twitterpated. I felt like I was seeing him for the first time. We were mesmerized by one another, intimidated by one another, and in admiration of each other. It only lasted for a few seconds, but it was long enough for my heart to start racing. Wow, he was handsome...and tall. I wanted to kiss him instantly...

We got a little closer and he gave me two kisses on the cheek - very conservative. We stayed still for maybe two minutes, just looking at each other. Then we finally stopped smiling at each other long enough to talk for 15 minutes, all amongst

thousands of drunken fans singing and heading towards the surrounding pubs. The atmosphere was very festive. We decided to go to a discreet little café.

There, after a few mutual compliments, we started talking as if we were already a loving couple. It was fluid, natural, and fresh. But just as the date got going - that was it! It was time for him to go. I felt that our date had lasted only five minutes, yet we had been together for two hours.

He promised he would try to meet me after the match, but he was so pleased to see me that he seemed to want to stay too. He was undecided for so long that it became almost awkward. Eventually, he started hesitantly to leave, but I could see he still didn't want to. I nodded and looked away. When I looked back he was gone and I was left alone in the café, dreaming of our next meeting.

I went home as soon as the fatigue began to take hold of me. But throughout the afternoon, emotion began to overwhelm me to the point where I felt like I was suffocating. I was shaking, I wanted to faint, eat and puke, all at the same time. Those few minutes with Harper had really affected me. I wished that I could see him for a bit longer, or touch him again. And that longed-for kiss that never happened... What were Harper and I to each other exactly? Friends? Why didn't we kiss? What about the romance??

I was not finished asking myself these questions, but at that point, on that day - I felt as flat as a pancake, frying under the sun on my terrace.

Post-date

I was thinking about Harper constantly. I was completely blown-away by his beauty and I already appreciated his personality. He was a great dresser: simple, sleek, and chic,

just as I like. And he had a gentle tan that was quite lovely. I really, *really* liked him, even though our first meeting had been furtive. The only thing I regretted was the lack of a kiss. I should have kissed him when I had the chance. It would have helped me to evaluate my attraction to him before going further.

It was frustrating - I felt like I had a chocolate bar that I was only allowed to nibble at. Nevertheless, I desperately wanted to see him again and the sooner the better. Would I be strong enough to maintain another long-distance relationship? I had a bad taste in my mouth (called Adrian) at the thought of it.

Pre-date number two

The previous weeks had been great; our virtual dates had made us more and more intimate. He introduced me to his favourite boxing fighter (wow, the guy was fit!) and I showed him my collection of lingerie.

One evening however, while I was with Nathan, I got a text from Harper. The text was inviting me to meet him in Nice for two days for the Tour de France. My heart jumped guiltily while reading it, I was supposed to be having a date with Nathan.

I just answered "Nice". I did not know what else to reply. This was not the first time I had been promised a holiday by one of my dates, so I was on my guard. And what if we were to ruin the relationship by going on holiday together too soon? I didn't know him that well after all, and I would have liked to have met him a few more times before going on holiday together.

The next day on Skype, Harper rushed to apologise for texting about Nice. But by then, I was no longer uncomfortable about it and his decision to take it off the table made me rather upset. I suddenly asked him, 'Why are you apologising?'

I wondered if he had maybe been drunk when he suggested the trip to Nice, or maybe he had simply changed his mind and he had realised that he did not really like me that much. But when he replied, he said it was because I didn't show any enthusiasm about the idea, so he had concluded that it did not appeal to me. He wanted to apologise, particularly as it was perhaps a bit premature to ask.

And there, a great relief invaded my heart. I was not afraid anymore and I really wanted to go with him to Nice. The Tour de France was in two months and it allowed us the opportunity to meet again a few times. Plus, I knew I definitely wouldn't get bored in Nice, so I happily accepted the offer. We were both very excited.

I joked that his invitation to Nice was a smart way to get me into his bed. He went the shade of a tomato and added he was going to behave. I told him that I didn't know if I could behave myself, having a charming young man like him next to me...

The days passed and we had more and more virtual dates. We were talking almost every other day and I was falling a little more for him with each, and every, Skype call. He became more and more present in my life and we became virtually affectionate, romantic and caring for each other. Although we were only video calling, he was almost more present than my real-life dates.

Harper began to send me texts saying he was falling in love with me...that he felt really attached to me and that I was the most important person in his life (except for his kids). I replied with smiles, I pretended not to understand... those feelings were true for me too, but I did not know how to answer these texts, when I had only really met him once. Things were not making sense to me.

Skype, Skype, and some more Skype...

We talked about our families, our fears, our childhood dreams and our ambitions. We even exchanged childhood pictures. We spent some magnificent moments together, even though we were physically apart. Sometimes I catch myself thinking about those tender moments and it still puts a smile on my face.

When we didn't have our chats, I'd miss him. It was all just virtual, but the sore heart, the laughter and joy were so real. Since my divorce, I had not shared such magical moments with anybody and my heart was blossoming.

He inspired me to be myself and I felt I could be completely natural with him - I could be myself without being ashamed. I would be silly, I would dance. Then we would talk politics, religion and marriage...

It was wonderful to share so many emotions and such cultured conversations before sharing our bed. We knew each other very well by then; we were deeply connected. The chemistry was there and the raw sexual attraction too. I felt that we were more than ready to have sex.

But Harper had more serious matters to deal with at that point: the court would finally conclude who would have sole custody of his children and he was very stressed during the days leading up to the court date. I had been waiting for this for months. Finally, he would be able to resume his life and come to visit me in London. I knew he would get custody and I comforted him - he was a great father, he had nothing to worry about. He was also eager to end all this, because then he could hire a permanent au pair and spend more time with me.

And so it was - Madame La Frog and Monsieur Roast Beef developed a beautiful and genuine relationship after five months of virtual dating and one brief encounter. Soon will

begin a great love story...

Celebrations

Thursday 3pm - I received a call from Harper. The judge had granted him sole custody of his children! He was so pleased and reassured. His joy was so contagious that I almost wept for him.

This is when, for the first time, he vocally expressed his feelings for me: 'Valérie,' he sounded drop-dead serious, but I thought I also detected a hint of excitement in his voice, 'the messages I sent you, they were real, I am falling for you.'

My heart vibrated so much that I was sure my body actually swelled. I was exhilarated and I wanted to kiss him so badly that I just blurted it out: 'I want to see you, I want to kiss you, I *profoundly* want you.'

'It's all about you, Val', his voice was soft and sensual in my ear 'your voice, your skin, your smile, what you tell me of your family. I just love your whole personality...and that accent...' he didn't finish that part, but I got his point.

Harper continued, 'I want to be part of all this. I want to start a real relationship with you. You have to come to Birmingham this weekend. I love you, La Frog.' he ended with a smile in his voice.

I was almost crying. I couldn't find the words to reply to such a declaration of love. All I knew was that my heart reacted violently to his words and I knew I had to go to Birmingham that weekend.

Date No.2

I was so excited that I didn't sleep at all on that Friday night.

But curiously, when I woke up, my face was glowing with happiness and I felt beautiful.

My train wasn't until 9:30am, but I was already awake at 5am. It was far too early to leave, so I watched silly stuff on YouTube for a while. Then I read, I danced, tried different clothes on... the time didn't seem to move and I couldn't wait! The time to leave finally arrived and once in the cab, I started daydreaming of Harper kissing and touching me, then making delicate love to me. I could sense it all, as if it were real. I wondered how he would kiss me - tongue or no tongue? How would he undress me - savagely or delicately? Would it be passionate or romantic, or perhaps both? I even started imagining our relationship in the *real* world. The friendship was already perfect, the chemistry was indescribable, so the love and the sex were very promising. Oh god, I wanted that man so badly!

And my thoughts began to wander to my first love, Eddy. I cheated on him whilst I was studying in Australia, despite the promise we both made to stay faithful to each other and get married upon my return to France. Then I thought about Chris: my first official fiancé. I cheated on him too. This time, we were living two hundred kilometres away from each other.

I started to see a pattern in my experience with this long-distance thing.

Finally, there was of course Adrian - the worst and probably the most hurtful long-distance relationship I ever had in my life. I didn't cheat on him, but I couldn't seem to manage that relationship properly either.

In addition to this, I could not help imagining Harper battling with his ex-wife every day over the phone. Maybe she would hate me for being part of his life? Or now that he had full custody, maybe she would resent me for being more present in

her kids' day-to-day lives than her. I started to wish that she had got custody instead; at least then Harper would have to start a new family with me and he wouldn't have to have much to do with her anymore. This last thought was very selfish of me and I knew it.

I started panicking...was I really ready for all this? Would I ever be ready?

By the time the cab arrived at Euston Station, I was feeling very down. My eyes were blurred and I felt like there was some sort of fog in front of me. Nothing was clear. I went to my platform and sat on a bench in front of the train.

Harper texted me <Can't wait to see you, my love. Hope you're not late. >

I looked at my train, I heard the departure announcement...and I let the train go without me.

Tears ran down my face as the train left the platform. I shut down my mobile, left the train station and walked home, which took a good hour. It was raining, which was great because it hid the tears on my face... I couldn't help thinking, why? Why did I do this to myself? And to Harper? I had no explanation for this. It wasn't because my feelings for him weren't real - I loved Harper, he was my light of love and he illuminated my spring...

I stayed imprisoned at home for that whole weekend. I didn't switch on my mobile until Monday morning. That is when I called the ladies for a reunion; I needed to talk to my friends.

Conclusion

I treated Harper just like Adrian had treated me. I stood him up without notice, despite all the promises of love and I wasn't proud. It took me around a month to pull myself together

enough to reach out to him to apologise, but it was too late. He blocked me in every way possible: Facebook, Skype, phone calls, texts...

Now I think it was better that way. I would not have had the heart to talk to him and explain the unexplainable. I felt sick thinking about his diatribe of me, but I accepted my lot. It was over. I have struggled to forgive myself ever since.

I missed our Skype calls for a long time, but I made a choice and I would live with it.

I will always think of Harper as the virtual lover, who troubled my heart like no one else, but I think it was time for a *Next!*

Chapter Five – The Elusive Panda

Background

Meet Nathan. On paper, he was totally my type: dark, loads of hair and tall. He was a kiwi living in London, he was single, he had no kids and he was looking for a long and sound relationship. Jackpot!

Physically, I wasn't so sure to start with. He looked fine in his pictures, but I wasn't immediately attracted to him. I didn't dismiss him, however. Some people are not very photogenic and I have to admit that I am one of them. So, I gave him a chance.

Nathan had a very interesting job - he sold sophisticated cocktails to bars, hotels and pubs in the Greater London area. I suspected he might be a bit of a boozier-type guy, the kind who could drink barrels without becoming even the slightest bit dizzy.

After just one email we exchanged numbers, and before I knew it, we had arranged to meet the following day in Hammersmith.

Pre-date

Come the next morning, I wasn't looking forward to the date. Harper was strongly on my mind and I didn't feel ready to start seeing another guy. But just as I was in the middle of composing a text to Nathan to reschedule for some other time (or possibly, never), I received a text from him asking me to meet him in front of the Starbucks near the station. *Merde!*

I texted him back pretending that I had a late meeting and needed to postpone, but he was adamant about seeing me and eagerly suggested a time later in the day instead. I could not think of another excuse on the spot; he had me trapped. I agreed to see him later and after a moment of irritation, I resigned myself to it. What did I have to lose?

The Date

I almost didn't recognise Nathan from his pictures online. *Ooh, la, la...* I thought as my eyes settled on his for the first time. He was very handsome, well-built and solid. I could tell just from his posture that he was a confident guy, and when he squeaked a 'hello' to me in his measured New Zealand accent – I found it adorable. His voice didn't quite fit his appearance, and although it took me a little by surprise, it wasn't a turnoff. His voice wasn't higher than mine, after all!

Greetings out of the way, we headed away from the hubbub of Starbucks and the area around the station to the nearest pub, The Swan. Nathan asked what I wanted to drink and I asked for a small glass of French red wine. He ordered an Opihr Oriental Spiced Gin – just the name of it made me feel drunk. I smiled.

Nathan looked a bit stressed and nervous and he kept scratching his beard, looking around as if he was lost in a jungle. He also kept gnashing his teeth every two minutes. I tried not to notice it, but it was really irritating.

Myself, I tried to be cool, smiley and talkative. I could tell he was nervous, so I tried to joke about it a few times, in a way I hoped was reassuring. However, after only the second round of drinks, we were standing up to leave.

This date was very strange to me. I am usually absolutely full of opinions, yet I am still unable to say whether this date was

good or not. I was constantly looking for his eyes and they were always darting away. We shared one or two intense moments of eye contact, which may or may not have been stares of approval. But there was no room for chemistry between us – especially with chatterbox Valérie in full attendance.

Still puzzled, I walked with him to the bus station. When I saw my bus coming around the corner, I turned to give him a peck on the cheek. But he kissed me squarely on the lips! Now, even more puzzled, I got on the taxi without even looking back at him. I was flustered, spun, out-of-sorts, disorientated...no, not exactly. I was, how do you Brits say it? *Ah, oui* – discombobulated!

Post-date

Once I got home, I decided that our date had been just lousy. It had been filled with awkward silences to follow my many corny jokes. But without my corny jokes there would have been nothing *but* silence, awkward or not. Creepy...

I consoled myself with the idea that at least the other customers in the pub would have had some entertainment. Even if I am on the most boring date in the world, I like to think that anybody nearby will at least have a good laugh at my manic monologue.

I stopped criticising myself for something as trivial as talking a bit too much and turned my attention to my date. There had been plenty of things for Nathan to talk about if he had wished to contribute to the conversation – literally anything would have been better than nothing. “Hi Valérie, you look lovely,” is an excellent conversation starter, for example.

Then it dawned on me that Nathan had made no comment on my appearance. *Niet, nada, zéro* compliment on my looks or my

clothes - NOTHING! This was a dating first - even for me.

I ran over the evening quickly in my mind until I was certain that I had complimented him. Yes, I had mentioned straight away that he looked better than his online pictures. He hadn't returned the compliment.

We may live in a very virtual world these days, but for me that only enhances the importance of meeting in person. You can learn a lot about someone via emails and texts, but you cannot fully know them until you have had a proper face-to-face conversation.

Conversation is also a huge part of the seduction process, isn't it? How do you seduce someone without a bit of banter or flattery? Flirting is essential for me and it is never a one-way street - it must be reciprocated.

Eventually, I began to deduce that Nathan was just not that into me. But why did he stay with me for almost three hours? Why even bother with the second round of drinks? Then I remembered the second round had been on me - he must have stayed to claw back some return on his investment.

But what about that kiss? What did that mean? Why was I wasting my time thinking about this guy? Next!

Pre-date No.2

Ten days after, what I was now thinking of as my catastrophic date with Nathan, I was surprised to receive a text from him asking me what I was up to. I was dining out with my ladies and I replied as such. He responded saying that he was in Zurich for business and that he could not wait to see me again upon his return.

This was so unexpected; I had to check several times to make

sure it was really him. Was I missing something? Had he been on the same date that I had?

I remembered being completely confused as to whether he even liked me at the time, and now he was texting me as if we had shared the best date ever. Maybe he had a stroke or something? Or worse, maybe he was confusing me with someone else.

That didn't seem to be the case however, because three days later he contacted me again. I agreed to see him the following Friday.

But I promised myself that if I ended up serving the pub a monologue again, I would leave early.

Date No.2

We were in The Crown and Anchor pub in Chiswick and you could hear my laugh for miles around. Wow, who was this guy I had in front of me - Nathan's charismatic twin? I couldn't believe that this chatty and smiling man in front of me was the same man I had met a couple of weeks ago. He was full of compliments, very touchy-feely, caring, full of life...

I was having a lot of fun in that pub and I really liked the Nathan who had shown up this time. I was completely charmed.

Afterwards we went to The Bull's Head where a friend of his was singing. The pub had a convivial atmosphere and everyone was talking to us. I felt like we were very welcome. I drank, spoke with his singer friend, drank some more, danced with new (or temporary, whatever) friends.

The night was magical. Until I woke up at around 6am without knowing where I was.

I was naked and apparently in Nathan's bed, who wasn't currently around. Judging by all the condoms on the floor, we had had sex. Thank God, I used them! I must have had a complete blackout. I did not know what had happened for a large part of the night before, especially the later part. It was crazy - I didn't even recall leaving the pub with Nathan. But I certainly did, didn't I? Shocking!

This was the first time that this had ever happened to me. I cursed myself for getting drunk and having a stupid fucking teenage attitude. I was so ashamed that I finally understood the expression 'Walk of Shame'. I just wanted to get my clothes on, call a cab and hide under my covers for the rest of my life.

I started to restyle my hair, put my granny panties on (shit, he saw these), then my sports bra (damn! *Putain!*). Just as I was adjusting my mini dress and putting on my shoes, Nathan returned, all smiles. He asked me where I was going.

I smiled back, embarrassed, "I should get going, I have a lot to do today." I don't think he understood (or he just pretended not to hear me), because he lifted me up gently in his arms, stroked my *derriere*, then started licking my ear lobe. It was delightfully exhilarating, so instead of doing my first walk of shame, I went back to bed with him. I was determined to remember our intercourse fully this time. We made love quite deliciously that morning, but I was too hangover to enjoy it properly.

I went home later that morning, still a little shocked by what had happened. It had all happened so fast! Thinking of my mismatched underwear, faded pedicure and my very hairy vagina - actual, physical evidence that I hadn't been prepared - I became quite upset. Even more regret crept in when I remembered that I had slept with him again that morning...I

couldn't blame the alcohol for everything.

Aside from everything else, I was very angry with myself for not remembering anything from my first night with him. But I had a banging headache, I had to sleep.

Post-date No.2

After a well-deserved nap, I felt much better. I could now try to assess things. Sadly, I began to realise that I had hated that second date. Not because of Nathan, but simply because I remembered absolutely nothing about the night after a certain point, the part with all the sex.

Many questions coursed through my mind. If I was really that drunk, how did I get from the pub to his place? Did he carry me? Did we take a cab? I was trying hard to remember, but I had absolutely no recollection. Pff... And then we made love several times? How was that even possible if I was that drunk? Maybe I should go to a hypnosis session... Well, maybe not. I would hate to find myself describing a super graphic and/or pornographic scene to a doctor...

I did not like this feeling. I felt powerless somehow, and I knew I needed to talk to Nathan.

Until then, I would speak to The Ladies.

Date No.3

Ladies' night and the girls were on top form. Camellia was totally into Nathan, she loved my story and thought it was funny, like the addictive reality TV shows she watched and was always so eager to see the next episode of.

In contrast, Bianca had almost too much of an opinion on this one. I thought she was going to slap me like a naughty child!

She was nearly out of her mind with concerns like, "He must have used a date rape drug," and "are you certain he used those condoms??"

Her lectures ended with a disappointed condemnation of my character: "How such a sophisticated and classy lady like you could end up like a drunk teenager in a shit hole outside of London, I will never understand".

I felt ashamed all over again... I didn't know what to say. Thank god Camellia was on my side. I knew it was a serious matter and probably warranted a longer discussion, but I was meeting Nathan that evening. I hid it from the girls and left early, pretending that I had a deadline.

I joined Nathan at Chiswick Station, near where he lived. This time I had been waxed and was wearing sexy underwear. I reflected naughtily to myself that I was probably going to need a glass or two of something to keep cool.

We ate in a small pub and had "The Best Caesar Salad in London". During dinner, he was as shy and inattentive as he had been before, on our very first date. He was watching everyone except *moi*. I felt confused again and after dinner, the atmosphere between us was as cold as the North Pole. I thought it probably wasn't the best time to speak about our last sex session. Upon receiving the bill, he coldly asked me to pay my share of the tip. Fair enough, I put my money in.

His tone bothered me though, plus I did not understand his request. We always shared the tip anyway – he hadn't needed to ask me so pointedly. I must have made a face, because he added apologetically that he was saving to buy drums.

Well, that made me feel better... Drums over me! I don't know how much drums cost, but at most he saved twelve pounds that night. At that pace, he would be able to afford his drums

in only... Let's say ten years.

I decided that I would not spend another night like this and was about to get up to leave, when all of a sudden, Nathan 's attitude changed. He became warmer, and later when we were walking to his place, he held my hand. I was reminded that I wanted to relive the sexy bits of our last date.

Once indoors and after a glass of Baileys, Nathan became funnier and even more charming. He spoke a few words of French and made fun of us eating frogs. I became more and more relaxed.

We spoke about our families and friends. I was pleased that he showed a bit of interest and asked the names of my sisters; he wanted to see their pictures.

We made love twice. It was slow, delicate and gentle.

Pre-date No.4

After spending a few days in Paris, I returned to London and the first "welcome back" text I received was from Nathan. He asked if I was back in the UK, how was my trip and my family. We agreed to meet the following Friday.

It would be our fourth date and I wondered, not for the first time, where all this was going. It was still all very mysterious, but I decided to go with the flow.

Date No.4 - What a Night!

Whenever I was with Nathan, I found myself constantly flitting between different emotional states: from surprise to satisfaction, maybe throw in some disappointment, and then back to surprise.

We had not agreed on a specific time for our fourth date, but Nathan called me at around 8pm. He had been drinking with his colleagues and he merrily revealed to me that he would shortly be joining me at *mine*. Oh no! This was a nightmare; my room was in an utterly un-showable mess. There was at least two weeks' worth of clothes, bags and shoes strewn across the floor of my dressing room, and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

I had to be super quick. I made my bed, then hid all the clothes in either the dryer or washing machine. I seriously did not realise how many clothes I possessed until I had to hide them all! Sex toys were cunningly hidden under the bed, then I put all the dishes in the dishwasher. After about an hour of manic almost cleaning, I was done. But I was exhausted, feeling like I had run a marathon.

I went to meet Nathan at Knightsbridge station at around nine-thirty pm and to my surprise, he immediately took me in his arms and kissed me impetuously. It was lovely! Then, on our way to my apartment, he smothered me in little kisses every few minutes. The catch? He bought himself a burger at McDonald's, but didn't bother asking me if I was hungry. I resisted saying what was on my mind after that: *"Oh sorry, you're probably still saving for your drums. Well, that's another four pounds in the piggy bank. Good for you."*

Anyway, when we arrived at mine, I found myself curiously feeling timid. I am not a shy person, so would usually find this inexplicable. But I think it was seeing him drunk for the first time (while I was sober enough to notice anyway) and so infatuated by me. It was sort of intimidating.

Despite being a little drunk, he was incredibly hot and sexy that night. He was unself-conscious and seemed comfortable, dropping his chips as he ate – he was so hungry. It was sweet. We chatted about his job, his life in New Zealand and the

reasons that had prompted him to come to London. I finally felt like I was beginning to know him a little.

We chatted until around 2am, and then called it a night. At the sight of my bed, he was shocked by the number of decorative pillows on it, but it didn't prevent us from making love tenderly. Afterwards, Nathan took me in his arms again, gave me a kiss on the forehead and slept almost immediately.

Finally, a genuine and affectionate gesture.

Curiously, that night I began thinking of my ex-husband. It surprised me because I rarely did so anymore, especially after having sex with another man.

After a while, an indescribable feeling of sadness. But then Morpheus took me in his arms, as he eventually always does, and I fell asleep silently.

Pre-date No.5

We made plans for our fifth date during our fourth, and the day before, I had the following text chat with Nathan, who I had come to think of as "My Panda":

Nathan: < Hello, how are you? Can you believe I've got a bloody cold! In the middle of summer!!! ;)>

Me: < Oh nooo! Poor thing! Look after yourself... I'm ok, I had a fairly busy day. How was yours? >

Nathan: < Oh, flat out and full on!! But that's good.>

Me: <You shouldn't work that hard with your cold X >

Nathan: <No, I'll take it easy tomorrow xx>

Me: < You could also hire a nurse tonight; she'll take great care of

you. >

Nathan: <;) x Oh yes, I need a little nurse lol ;)) where do you hire her from? >

Me: < From a company called Valérie Duval Limited >

Nathan: <Mm-mm, sounds great thanks ;)>

And that was it! My sexy self-invitation was declined! I decided he was far too polite and uptight for me. It was becoming really annoying...

Date No.5

Nathan confirmed our date. I guessed he wasn't sick anymore.

Fast forward to the actual date and he's up to his old tricks again: cold, distant, uncaring and not listening to a thing I said. Damn, I just did not get this guy! I sat there watching him staring at everybody in the room except from me.

I asked him if he was okay and if he was waiting for someone perhaps? I explained that I was very uncomfortable with his attitude and he replied, very calmly - as if I had simply asked him to pass the salt - that some friends of his were coming.

Well, at least Nathan had an excuse for his behaviour this time. A few minutes later his phone rang, and we left to join his friends in another pub with live music playing. Once there, he became a little more relaxed.

As for myself, I was busy talking with all of his friends, but not Nathan. He decided to ignore me all night, and I seethed with anger while I drank. With the wine just making things worse, I became more and more flirty. My ego was wounded and I wanted his attention.

But it didn't seem to work; he just carried on talking with

some pub friends, as if they were far more important than me - his date.

We stayed until the end of the gig and then we went back to his place. By the time we got there, I was so tired that the most I could muster to confront him with was... Well, nothing... I was too weak to argue, too horny to fight and I wasn't even sure that I wanted to.

I asked him to kiss me, Nathan obeyed immediately. I lay down on him, hungry to touch him and.... Blackout! I woke up the next day to the sound of Nathan's television. I began to question him when he interrupted me, gesturing at the TV, "I'm sorry, this is Formula One."

In an effort to avoid losing my temper, I started getting dressed quickly to go home. He noticed what I was doing and looked away from his beloved racing show long enough to ask, "What are you doing?"

"I am going home so YOU can watch your boring stuff". He looked at me, surprised at my sudden change in mood. He apologised for his attitude, but I was still angry, "I want to go, I have things to do. Enjoy!"

As I reached the door, I think I heard him say something like *I'll miss you*. I looked at him once more, my temper and eyes still blazing. Then I left, slamming the door behind me.

Post-date No.5

Frankly, I felt like Nathan was still as much a stranger to me after our fifth date, as he had been after our first. I just did not get him! Despite our many conversations and my constant attempts to understand his likes and dislikes, I could never anticipate his behaviour. Was I just not asking the right questions?

Then there was the matter of these blackouts that I seemed to have while I was with him. Forget the fact that Nathan was still a mystery to me - when I was with him, I did not even recognise myself!

And what if Bianca was right? What if he *had* used a date-rape drug? Even though the thought appalled and terrified me - and I could not bring myself to think that Nathan could be such a predator - I could not dismiss the possibility. When I did allow myself to consider it for a moment, I reasoned that he had no motive to do such a thing (particularly the second time); we were already on a date together and (for my part, at least) were going to have sex anyway. But then, rape is never merely about sex - it is about control and power. It was a very sobering thought.

Date No.6

The early part of the evening was nice. Nathan came over to my place, we ordered a pizza and we enjoyed a bottle of red together. Of course, since he was still saving for those drums of his - I paid for all of it.

The night quickly went from cool to What the hell ?!

After dinner, Nathan started to ask me some very weird and almost stupid questions. Some of these questions made me wonder if he had ever been anywhere in the world but the UK or New Zealand, where he was born. I began to realise that he was far from being the sort of guy I would ever admire intellectually.

The first question that gave me pause was: "Do you speak English with your family?"

Reminder: I am French. Born and educated there and my

family still lives in France. Why in hell would we speak English to each other?

I did not understand the logic. It sounded like he had not given the question much thought before asking it of me.

On the same subject, and as I was explaining my family background, he asked: "So you speak French *and* German?"

"German? Why would we speak German?" I asked curiously, preparing myself for whatever foolishness might be on its way next.

Nathan explained to me pompously, as if I were the one being stupid: "The French are like the Swiss, they speak both French *and* German. Since World War Two".

I think I paused for nearly ten full seconds, not quite sure how to react. I had never heard such nonsense in my life. Try saying something like that to a French World War Two veteran and you can be sure that you will leave the room on your *derrière*!

But, it went from bad to worse or from dumb to dumber? When he tried to analyse a picture of my family that was hanging in my living room. The picture was taken in Paris, on Île aux Cygnes (The Isle of Swans), where there is a mini replica of the Statue of Liberty.

Nathan asked me if it was taken in Paris (no points for that one – Paris is unmistakable and it could not have been taken anywhere else). I nodded affirmatively, bracing myself for more daft questions or observations. He continued, not disappointing me, "The photo must have been taken before the Statue of Liberty was given to the USA, then."

Okay, even some French nationals do not know that we have a mini version of the Statue of Liberty, although it has been

there for almost as long as the one that now stands on Liberty Island in New York. But most people (hopefully) would realise that any photograph taken in Paris that contained the real Statue of Liberty would have to be from pre-1900! I didn't expect him to know the exact date, but a basic grasp of world history would have been reassuring. Especially for somebody who claimed to know so much about everything.

Who the hell was this guy? I started to suspect that Nathan had no culture whatsoever, and this was a big minus for me. I love to discuss politics, culture, art and so many other things about the wonderful world we all live in. But you cannot discuss such things with somebody who hasn't been paying attention to anything beyond his own nose for his whole life. I think I knew that Nathan wasn't the one for me, but I didn't want to make any snap decisions. Maybe I was being too hard on him.

Date No.7

Sunday, late May, I was just relaxing into the peaceful place that Arts Magazine takes me to, when around 10am I received a text invitation from Nathan for a late lunch, followed by a walk along the Thames.

Mmmm... I was unsure. After our last date, I had been planning to break up with him *pronto*. I obviously hadn't done so *pronto* enough.

Remember that I was dating Harper at the same time, and thoughts of him were increasingly invading my heart. But then, I thought. I had nothing planned and was longing for some romance.

I arrived at Butlers Wharf Chop House to meet Nathan a bit later, and quickly realised that this afternoon date was not going to be a romantic one.

Nathan introduced me to his best friend Sam. The latter was quick to tell me about himself and that they had just hired a bass player for their band. I was not even aware that Nathan was in a band, but at least it explained the drums. I was a little disappointed, but glad he had introduced me to his best friend – presumably one of the most important people in his life. I hid my surprise at it not being just the two of us, remained polite and did my best to appear pleased to meet Sam. As we chatted I asked polite questions while Nathan, consistent in his behaviour for once, sat there ignoring us and looking around.

Well, at least I knew it wasn't personal!

We spent the afternoon in the charming restaurant, where I was at least getting to know Sam, when Nathan suddenly announced that it was time to leave for "Cally's leaving dinner". I was like "What now?" and just as I was starting to enjoy myself...

So, Cally and Jérôme, a Franco-Australian couple, were moving permanently to Australia and had organised a farewell party. We were all invited and it was time to go.

Well, the dinner was a fiasco.

The host Jérôme, (from Normandy, France) told me of his "aversion for the *Parisians*". Well, I am Parisian.

I listened patiently and quietly acknowledged his criticisms. Then I (rather bravely, I think) explained that he was making generalisations. The ensuing debate was sometimes heated but always interesting; I like challenges and am not afraid of constructive argument or debate.

When it comes to a subject close to my heart, I tend to excel at making my point. Unfortunately, that annoyed Jérôme like

hell.

Nathan and Sam were nowhere to be seen for at least an hour, leaving me to fend for myself amongst a group of strangers. When they finally re-joined the table, Nathan was horrified by the turn of conversation. He defended me and we made our excuses. He left for home, with a very horny Parisian in tow.

At his place, we made love gently again. But every time I showed a bit of ardour, enthusiasm or passion, Nathan calmed me down to a slower pace. It was infuriatingly sexy, but trying to calm a tsunami with a fire is extremely difficult. He kept bringing me close, but when he came, I was still unsatisfied.

The next morning, I kept fidgeting around in Nathan's bed. I could not sleep well, waking up every half hour, my head too busy for rest. I was angry, tired, but excited all at the same time.

I was tired of this lack of attention - instead of taking me in his arms, Nathan had his pillow! And where was the *Oomph* when we were having sex? Where was the animal passion, eh?

I looked at him sleeping. I still did not understand him.

It seemed I had no time to figure him out anyway, as my phone beeped loudly in my bag. It was my dearest Harper.

Conclusion

It was time to put an end to this story. The weeks spent with Nathan had started to take their toll on me and I was unhappy. We had nothing in common. This relationship would lead nowhere.

I cared for him in a certain way, but I was not *in love* and I knew I never would be.

Nathan was sexy, for sure. But unfortunately, he was just as dumb as he was hot. I know some people struggle to grasp the world around them and there are many with limited culture, which is not necessarily their fault. But there is such a thing as wilful ignorance and that is how I would describe Nathan: wilfully ignorant.

I needed more in a relationship than what ours consisted of: meeting, eating, drinking and fucking. And repeat. Plus, he surely was bipolar – he had two personalities and neither of them was attractive enough for me to stay with him.

So, just one week after standing Harper up (effectively losing him forever), I left a voicemail breaking up with Nathan too. He replied with the following text: *< Okay that's cool. I have your Karl Lagerfeld hat; I need to drop off soon :) >*

He was as unpredictable and unreadable as ever. No reaction – just a cold text complete with stupid smiley. So frustrating. At the same time, what had I expected from him? Did I want him to beg me to take him back?

A few months later during my adventures on Tinder, I came across Nathan again. I wanted to be polite, so I swiped right to say “hello”. I obviously expected little of him by this point, but Nathan started chatting to me as if I were a total stranger.

What a birdbrain! I had time to wonder, once again, if he had perhaps suffered some sort of stroke – how could a person be so stupid? Once I finally managed to make him understand who I was, and that I just wanted to say “hello” – he blocked me. What a shock it must have been for him when he finally realised! Next!

PS: I never saw Nathan, or my beloved Karl Lagerfeld’s hat, again.

Chapter Six – Hot Chat

Background

Meet Martin: super-hot, blonde, six-foot tall, with blue eyes. A man who worked for the media. I liked him from the beginning of my Match.com adventure, and for once so did my dearest friend Bianca. He had a daughter who lived with her mother and was looking for a serious relationship. He also mentioned that he longed for more kids.

Pre-date

After we exchanged a few rather boring emails on Match, we swapped numbers. But for the first time in my dating history, I was confronted with a real communication problem. I struggled to find things to say and he didn't help with dead-end questions, such as: "What's up?" and "How are you?"

It all kind of fizzled out and I didn't hear from him for a while. But then one day, I received an unexpected text message...

Chat No.1

Martin: < *Hey, how are you? X* >

Moi: < *What's up? xxx* >

Martin: < *Im good. Still single? X* >

Moi: < *I've been single for a few days. Ha ha* >

Martin: < *Really. Wow, why did it end? X* >

Moi: < *I'm not good at long distance relationships. What about you?*
Xxx >

Martin: <*where did he live? Been single x* >

Moi: < *He lived in Leeds* >

Moi: < *How come? A good-looking man like you? Any date? I won't believe you if you say no. Xxx* >

Martin: < *No dates. Im waiting for u. Youll look great in ur sexy underwear xxxxxx* >

Moi: < *Why didn't you call then? You're so funny xxx* >

Martin: < *Ill call u a bit later. Wot u doing this eve? X* >

Martin: < *We shud be practicing for children u know x* >

Moi: < *Ha ha... Very funny! I'm in Paris and I'm coming back tomorrow. Xxx* >

Martin: < *Can u text me a pic of ur face again? Luv ur dark eyes x* >

Moi: < *You already have some pics of me, or did you delete them?Xx*
>

Martin: < *New phone dont ave the now x* >

Moi: < *Just sent you an email. xx* >

Martin: < *Ill check my email now* >

Martin: < *V nice xxxx* >

Well, his spelling left a lot to be desired, if I am honest.

Seriously, why can't people make more of an effort when it comes to dating?

I deliberately ignored the lingerie comment and was not particularly impressed by the text that mentioned 'practising for children'. I wasn't sure whether he was joking or not. Again, I felt like I was missing something - maybe I didn't get the joke. Maybe he was a freak? Not again, please!

As promised, he gave me a call later that day. He didn't mention his inappropriate allusions to kids or lingerie. He sounded completely normal on the phone, although we only had a very quick chat. We promised to text each other to make plans for our first date.

Chat No.2

Later that night, I received this text from Martin: <I like u. Lu to hear u talk french to me whilst im pumping u hard and fast xxx>

The spelling was outrageous!! I questioned whether he was truly English, it was that bad. What sort of man writes this way? I almost requested a translation from my friend. And where was this sex thing was coming from? I didn't recall inviting this sort of thing, so I didn't respond and decided to ignore him.

He continued anyway and his spelling didn't get any better:

< come to mine some day, ill like to suck and lick ur breasts whilst fingering ur warm wet pussy until u beg me to fuck u deep hard and fast. Then ill take my cock out quickly and spray my white cum all over ur body. Wud u like that?x >

Moi: < *How long are you going to keep me? Lol. You seem to have lots of things on your mind. X* >

Martin: < *Forever i hope x* >

Martin: < *You'll be pregnant by xmas x* >

Moi: < *You're joking, right?* >

Martin: < *Perhaps x* >

It was suddenly crystal clear in my head: this could never become a serious relationship, but Martin inspired me to something new - he would be my booty call. My sex-friend! This concept was new to me, but I was now inspired to try it.

Martin was very interesting to me: he was the antithesis of the idea that I had of English men. I thought of them as much more reserved, even a little too shy for my liking.

Well, I had dreamed of finding someone more sexual than my former husband, and God gave me Martin. God has a weird sense of humour, eh?

Martin called me two minutes later to ask if I was available for a date with him that Saturday evening. Curiously, once again he made no reference to the texts we had just exchanged. Weird... was it all a bluff? Was he just a fantasist? Was he (to use one of my favourite English phrases) all talk and no trousers?

I needed to find out more for sure, so I accepted his invitation and was still excited to finally have the Friends wit Benefit experience, I had never had. As Saturday drew nearer, I was dreading the worst. What if his lovemaking was as bad as his spelling??

The Date

Date day! My fears had evaporated and now I could not wait. My first NSA (no strings attached) relationship! I was excited

and the anticipation was delectable. Even as I was getting ready I knew I was not going to behave.

I asked myself a lot of questions as I preened and pampered myself: are we going to have a drink and then go straight to bed? Once at his, are we going to jump on each other, and have sex passionately and immediately like two bonobos? And once it's done, would it be rude to go straight home? I could see myself during the intercourse saying whatever I wanted to, without any restraint - shocking or not. Bianca-style... I decided to call her but...

Merde! 6pm already?!? We were meeting at 7pm at Victoria Station. I was not ready at all, so now I was in a hurry. Wanting to have a quick shower and confusing speed with haste, I accidentally wetted my hair...shit! I could not leave with half of my head curly. I decided to wash all of it and go natural. Now I looked squarely like Diana Summer in *State of Independence* video. Except that my hair was being especially unruly and for some reason was un-stylable. I looked like a little poodle.

No, this would not do! I needed an emergency blow-dry and I could not take my hairdryer with me in the cab. I texted Martin to ask if we could meet at 7:30pm instead.

He responded by interrogating me.

Martin: < U going by tube? >

Moi: < Nope, cab. >

I did not appreciate this questioning, why couldn't he just be accommodating?

Martin: < Actually I'm walking to station now so please be ASAP. >

Far from being a gentleman and accommodating my request, he was almost commanding me with this last message. The "be ASAP" part really galled me and I began to sulk. I mean the guy had me wait months for a date and then he complained about having to wait just thirty more minutes! I decided that I preferred to arrive late, rather than on time and not quite ready. *He'll wait, I thought, so be it.*

Martin was waiting for me in front of the WH Smith inside the station. I recognised him instantly, even if he looked a bit older than his photos. Long live Photoshop! Also, while I was wearing very nice clothes for *Monsieur*, he was dressed quite poorly. A grey hooded sweater, dark jeans and brown moccasins. I was not impressed by his naff style.

I kissed him on the cheek *à la French*, as I always do. That's when he requested that I follow him.

He sort of hop-walked along to begin with, but then noticing the way I was looking at him (and unashamedly judging him), he switched his walk to something that made him resemble John Travolta in *Grease*. I wondered which one of those two walks I hated the most.

Martin led me to the Slug & Lettuce where he ordered a bottle of wine. This surprised me because I thought we would just have a drink and make to his place. Is it not how hook-ups work?

But this date took a different turn, we even ordered a second bottle of wine. We couldn't stop chatting! Nothing substantial was really said, but still, we were two happy little chatterboxes.

Martin revealed his lifestyle to me, and...wow. He told me that he goes to bed every night at 10:30pm, does not smoke

and dislikes smokers (ouch!). He never eats between meals, never adds sugar or salt to his food. He cooks every day, doesn't tolerate junk food, hates fat people, eats at least five portions of fruit and/or vegetables per day and drinks at least two litres of water per day.

All very different to my lifestyle...I am one of those people who think that whatever you do e.g. eat right, stay fit, don't smoke, blah blah blah - we all die anyway.

And I do like junk food... And I smoke... I rarely cook... Add sugar to my coffee... Eat between meals...

Well, did I really care? No. I didn't give a damn. I just wanted to fuck him that night.

Then, we talked about anything and everything: weather, politics, France, London, work, his daughter (he showed me the pictures, she is too cute). But to my increasing amazement, Martin made no reference to our sexting. I tried to mention it once, but he interrupted me by saying that he had changed his mind about the sort of relationship he wanted with me. He 'did not want me to think that this was just about sex.'

What the hell?! It was all about sex, wasn't it?

Post-date

What was this guy looking for exactly?? I was so confused! *Okay, okay, get it together, Valérie.* Martin was looking for a serious relationship; it was not just about sex for him. The question for me now was: what did I want? Did I want to commit to him? I struggled a lot with this question and still couldn't be sure, so I decided that I would see him again, this time without expecting anything.

One Week Post-date

I got a text from Martin the following weekend: < What a fucking week, worked 2 much been thinking bout u... >
Oh! The neutrality of his text surprised me for once. I smiled back.

Three Weeks Post-date

It's a good thing I had decided to continue seeing Martin 'without expecting anything', because it was at least another week before I heard from him again, imaginative with his greetings as ever:

Martin: < *How are you?* >

Moi: < *Hello, my preferred ghost :)* >

Martin never responded to my sarcasm, either because he didn't get it or didn't appreciate it.

Oh well, *c'est la vie* - I didn't give a flying toss! By then I was dating Stephen. You'll read, he's no better...

Six Weeks Post-date

Martin and I had another little chat via text (his spelling and grammatical errors just washed over me by this point):

Martin: < *how are u?* >

Moi: < *Fantastic! And you?* >

Martin: < *fancy a shag sat eve?* >

Moi: < *I have nothing planned.* >

Martin: < *Cool, can't wait x* >

Moi: < *me too x* >

Martin: < *I'll cum all over your body* > I had no response to that one.

The following Saturday morning, The Ladies called me in the morning to catch up. I said I would pop by 'before and after meeting my *sex-friend*.'

Bianca was impressed, but Camellia hated the idea: "You're not that kind of person, Valérie and you never will be; you're a Parisian romantic." This was true. But Martin didn't inspire romance in me, he inspired *sex*. Full stop.

Later in the afternoon, while I was still with my friends, Martin advised me that his daughter's mother would only be able to collect her much later in the day. She was coming at 9pm and since he had to be in bed at 10:30pm for his self-inflicted curfew, we couldn't meet that day at all.

I didn't mind. I was dancing all night at the Roof Gardens with my ladies and (honestly) didn't want to leave anymore.

And I had no curfew.

Nine Weeks Post-date

A Tuesday night, I received another text from Martin. Shit! I had forgotten all about that guy in between all my new adventures...

Martin: < *Wot u up to?* >

Moi: < *been chilling. How are you?* >

Martin: *<Im good U free later or tomorrow>*

I was out that night for a date, so I declined.

Moi: *<maybe tomorrow.>*

Martin: *<OK. U wont need any underwear x>*

I think I smiled, but to be honest, I wasn't sure if I wanted to see him. My desire for him had ceased a while ago. I wasn't even interested but I liked to play his game.

Eleven Weeks Post-date

Monday morning and I was on a bus packed with people, all of us on our way to work. I received a text message with a picture attached, which I naively opened:

Martin: *< Imgonna cum over ur tits and massage my cum over ur upper body and face. Then u can lick the cum off my fingersx >*

I blushed straight away, and frantically tried to hide the dick pic that had appeared on my phone's screen. I was mortified and I couldn't have been more uncomfortable. I smiled around at everyone - as if nothing was wrong. But, got off the bus at the next stop. I walked for the rest of the journey completely ignoring Martin's unsolicited texts.

Five Months Post-date

The morning after a very, very late night with The Ladies, I woke up around 11am, still drunk from bad wine from Camellia's local pub. I was surprised to see a message from Martin on my phone - because I had not heard from him since his last X-rated text.

Martin: *< Cant wait to cum over ur face. Im gonna fuck u like a*

dirty slut xxxx >

Then, when he had gotten no answer from me: *< When can i stick my hard cock inside u?>*

Martin: *< Ill fuck ur ass if u want ?>*

He concluded with: *< Imgonna fuck ur mouth with my hard cock until u gag. Then ill explide all over u x >*

I was too drunk to even try to play his game.

Nine Months Post-date

Martin's name on my mobile - again! I was like, *God! Didn't I block that guy yet?!*

Martin: *< we shud start practicing for babies soon X >*

Moi: *< this is really funny >*

Martin: *< Its true. Do u want to X >*

Moi: *< No >*

Martin: *< Can i call u to discuss tomottow ? X >*

Moi: *< Um, not really... >*

Martin: *< Stay single >*

Moi: *< Very LOL >*

After this I blocked him from my phone. I didn't want to hear from him anymore...

Fifteen Months Post-date

Martin left a voicemail on my phone. He said that he was in Knightsbridge and wondered if I was around. I didn't bother responding. The sound of his voice gave me the shivers – and not in a good way. He was really beginning to piss me off; I couldn't bear him anymore.

Eighteen Months Post-date

I received the following message on WhatsApp:

Martin: < *drink this week?* >

Moi: < *who's this?* >

Martin: < *Martin* >

Moi: < *Oh my god Martin, you really, really don't give up, do you?* >

Martin: < *drink this week?* >

Moi: < *send me a text when you're free and I'll see* >

Martin: < *a naughty one?* >

Martin: < *do you wanna fuck me?* >

Moi: < *No* >

Merde! I needed to make sure I had blocked this guy everywhere: Skype, Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp... Everywhere. He was already trying way too hard. I spent the next few minutes going through my phone and blocking him on any apps that I had spoken to him through. Now, he was blocked everywhere and he couldn't contact me at all.

At least that was what I thought...

Twenty Months Post-date

A message through Viber...

Martin: < *Are you in London* >

Moi: < *Who's this?* >

Martin: < *Martin* >

Martin: < *Fancy a drink?* >

Conclusion

Ooh là là...

This time I replied that I was in a serious relationship and I wasn't interested.

I couldn't believe it! This guy had been texting me all the time I had been playing the field, but nothing had ever come from it. We met once, we chatted a few times, we texted *a lot*. We kissed once or twice... but we never had a proper thing together.

He just kept hanging around...I wondered again what was wrong with him. Or was it me??? What was he looking for? At first, I found him fun and sexy and I really wanted to experience the 'Friends with Benefits' thing. But when I thought about it after all the texts and strange behaviour, I felt like I was just a piece of pussy to him. Martin never tried to go beyond the physical; we never connected throughout all those months that we were in touch.

Sacré Martin! Next!

Chapter Seven – Fifty Shades of Lies

Background

Meet Aubrey, Gemini, salt and pepper hair, was very tall (6ft 4in) and slim (78 kilos). He had never been married, had no children and was thirty-nine-year old – a perfect age for me. His profile said that he lived in East Central London.

My one big issue with him from the very start was that in all but two out of the ten pictures on his profile, Aubrey looked like Lionel Jospin, the former Prime Minister of France (please Google him to see why that is bad). This made me wonder if Aubrey was really thirty-nine, he looked a bit older. But well, I was experiencing, wasn't I?

Pre-date

So, at first, what I appreciated about him was his determination and his frankness. After two or three emails and a chat on the phone, we decided to meet. Great bonus - he spoke French. And honestly, if I ignored the Jospin-*esque* aspect of some of his pictures, he seemed to be a very handsome man.

We set our date for two days later.

The Date

6.20pm - I took a cab to Farringdon Station, our meeting point. Aubrey called me on the way to inform me that he was coming by car, proudly stating that it would be a fluorescent green (really?!) convertible BMW. The thought of being in anything

fluorescent, let alone a convertible car, made me want to disappear into the British soil straight away. I instantly hated the idea and thought about cancelling. But did I? No, of course not. Let's go fluorescent!

Seconds later, I saw the flashy car arrived. Aubrey parked and walked towards me.

Wow! Rewind... Let me introduce him again - Meet Aubrey, white hair, (5ft 11in), and not very slim at all (90 kilos at least, to include the weight of his pot belly). And *Merde*, he looks a billion years.

And he looked old, much older than thirty-nine. But as he came closer, I realised that sure, he was older, but his face was still charming.

After a brief, but courteous hug, he led me to his car and opened the door for me. He ensured that I was properly installed in the seat and then respectfully closed the door, like a true gentleman.

Aubrey drove us to Malmaison, a hotel bar just a few blocks away. We descended the hotel stairs to get to the bar downstairs. The place was totally my style: *uber* cool, but with a romantic atmosphere. It was quirky yet classy, a very nice place.

As I looked around however, I began to feel paranoid. It felt like everyone was judging us. Thoughts like, *look at them, the old guy with his bimbo, how disgusting*, flooded my mind as we looked for a seat. I almost felt ashamed for what I saw as no good reason; we were doing nothing wrong.

Thank God, we managed to find a quiet and secluded corner of the bar; I had to admit to myself that I just didn't want to be seen with him.

Aubrey chose a bottle of Veuve Clicquot La Grand Dame, one of the best champagnes in the world. A prestigious selection and I felt very honoured. After clinking our glasses in a toast and tasting the sweet, fine and complex fragrance of the champagne, it dawned on me that since he had ordered a bottle, I would have to spend at least an hour in his company. I had been blinded by superficiality and now I would have to listen to him talk about his life back in the 1930s...

But despite my first impressions, it was a pleasant evening, full of surprises! I learned a little more about Aubrey: he said he loved fashion, art and sculpture. He was a gem dealer and he made his living connecting buyers and sellers internationally. Aubrey explained that he had always lived in central London, hates the suburbs, and never goes out of Zone 1 (snob alert!).

He also told me that his sister was a multimillionaire. In 1996, she received a big redundancy cheque, which her asset manager advised her to invest in a small company, unknown at the time, called *Yahoo!* Smart girl. She sold her shares in 2000, once their value had increased dramatically, making a huge profit. Aubrey regretted not taking the same chance at the time and half-joked that he was very jealous of his super-rich sister.

Later, he walked me to the nearest station and gave me a polite peck on the lips.

Post-date

Would I see Aubrey again? Age is nothing but a number, right? Plus, he was very interesting and cultured. He was a nice company and his dreams and ambitions were similar to mine. So why not?

Pre-date No.2

The day after that first date, Aubrey called me during my lunch. I appreciated the personal touch rather than a text; it was so rare these days. I defo wanted to see him again.

Date No.2

So, we arranged to meet at St James' Park Underground for lunch. When I arrived, he was already there and he kissed me like there was no tomorrow. Wow! Aware of his potential advanced age, I looked around at the same time to see if anyone I knew was watching - my lips being licked and sucked in a very weird, tacky way.

Okay, so I wasn't head over heels for this guy (yet?), especially after that.

Again, Aubrey opened the car door for me, ensuring that I was properly belted into his flashy car before arranging himself behind the wheel like a robot. Once we were away, he said he was taking me to Motcomb Street.

Oh, shit! We were going to my own neighbourhood in daylight! I wasn't happy about this and desperately began searching for my sunglasses so I could not be recognised by any of my friends or acquaintances. And of course, I had forgotten my sunglasses. Alas, I would be fully exposed as the bimbo of Knightsbridge/Chelsea, who spent her time dating old men.

I felt like having a panic attack. Aubrey parked the car and we were making our way toward the Ottolenghi restaurant, when at the sight of us, a woman stopped Aubrey in the street and whispered something to him that I didn't understand, looking

at him with disdain. I was so embarrassed! I remember cursing myself again for forgetting my sunglasses. Aubrey paid absolutely no attention to the woman, and we continued to walk along the street.

I followed him, but I was shocked. And that paranoia started to creep back in too: did that woman think I was too young for him? Maybe she knew something about Aubrey that I didn't know yet, but should know ASAP?

We were welcomed by a rather dubious host at Ottolenghi, one of the rare places in Knightsbridge I had never been before. Once sat, I questioned Aubrey about the gall of that woman – what had she said to him so rudely?

He was adamant that he had not heard what she said, he hadn't been paying attention. *What??* I didn't believe it for a second – it was impossible.

I began to ask myself, *what was he hiding?*

After a few drinks, I almost forgot about the angry woman in the street, or about seeing anyone from my neighbourhood, and began to enjoy our moment together. Subsequently, Aubrey invited me to his apartment. I almost refused, but then curiosity got the better of me. I told myself that I could investigate his place and possibly figure out how old he actually was, and I accepted.

It turned out that Aubrey lived in a very beautiful duplex with a small garden. The apartment was decorated with designer furniture from one of my favourite designers Zaha Hadid and paintings by contemporary artists that I *love*, such as Rashid Johnson. It was a very cosy and charming home, but also very contemporary and stylish. I smiled and wondered again how old he was...

We could not stop chatting and Aubrey was a perfect gentleman all the way. He cooked me dinner, accompanied by an exquisite wine, and decorated the dining table in the most romantic way.

In the background, he played music. We had some Beyoncé, Rihanna, Drake, Miley and Taylor. Contemporary, again. At least I knew we wouldn't be dancing to songs older than my mum.

At one point, after dinner and lots of wine, we kissed and caressed a little, my eyes all the time checking for clues...

Frankly, it was nice.

At around midnight, Aubrey called me a taxi and I went home with a smile on my face. But I was still none the wiser as to what had happened earlier that afternoon between Aubrey and the strange woman in the street.

Post-date No.2

Once home, I could not stop thinking about the encounter. The absolute cheek of that woman! I was angry and I had to know more. So, I decided to start my little investigation with Google. Aubrey was self-employed with a limited company registered to his personal address; Companies House would give me the answers I was looking for.

Once on the Companies House website, I found all the standard mandatory information: company name, address, company number, status, date of incorporation, country of origin, company type, blah, blah, blah... *Merde!* Nothing interesting. Then, just as I was about to look elsewhere, I saw a link at the bottom of the page to: companycheck.co.uk. I clicked on it and the page loaded quickly.

I almost lost consciousness when I read the screen. My heart

pounded faster, my hands began to sweat, and my body was shaking all over:

Aubrey McAllister born on 5 May 1945

Nooooo.... I couldn't believe it! This couldn't be him! That must be his father?!

I checked, then double-checked...checked once more. Then I searched and found his father, found an article about him with his biography. Aubrey was seventy year-old. He had lied to me. He has more than twice my age! It was horrifying - he was older than my dad!!

I wanted to puke... I felt the instant urge for a shower to get rid of every trace of him. I felt betrayed, abused. I decided right then never to see him again.

When I told my story to my friends, Camellia immediately asked to see his photo. She looked at it over and over, saying things like, "*Seventy?? No way, not possible!*"

Bianca surmised bluntly, "Darling, you need to change your contact lenses."

My friends' opinions failing me for once, I practically had to run a survey to check my own sanity. I had to ask friends, family and colleagues - even strangers - to give an age to Aubrey's pictures. Nine out of ten people aged him at forty-five or below. Nobody even suggested that he was sixty, let alone seventy and that made me feel a little better. At least I wasn't the only person he could fool.

I decided to lower my age preference even further for a while and didn't bother replying to Aubrey's texts. Next! Oh là là!

Chapter Eight – Fat and Furious

Background

Meet Gary - a gentleman of thirty, he had some of the most charming pictures on Match.com and my favourite was one of him taken in Venice Beach. Physically, he was exactly my type. Dark, 6ft 2in with fantastic deep green eyes to die for. All this, enhanced by a beautiful Californian tan and a heart-melting smile.

Pre-date

We chatted a little online, during which Gary raised the standard of online dating to another level. His messages were often hilarious and his emails could be wonderfully romantic. Ladies, he was gifted.

I often wondered why he was still single and I even asked him once. He explained:

“Whilst I am willing to have a long-term relationship with a true partner in crime, the women I have dated lately have been somewhat superficial. Or in some cases, they have been too much of a ‘ladette’. I am searching for a deep and substantial relationship where we can be friends and lovers, and share our deepest hopes and fears. I like to be in a committed relationship before having sex, it makes the experience even more magical.”

This was so romantic! I felt like I was being showered with love already. It made me realise how much I missed being romanced *à la parisienne*.

After three weeks of romantic emails, a few cute virtual bunches of flowers and smart or funny GIFs, I was getting impatient. I had an urgent *need* to meet him and decided to arrange a call to get to the next level. I couldn't wait for him to take the lead, I wanted a date!

We had that call, and it lasted two hours! It was one of the most amazing phone dates I have ever had, just as great as Harper's. But this time, there were no long-distance complications. Gary had no baggage and he was local - a Londoner. I was totally smitten by everything about him, except for his voice. I was expecting that he would have a deep and sensual voice, but he sounded a little like he was being hit in the testicles, crying out loud in the highest pitch he could possibly produce. It was the first time I had dated a man with a voice, which was higher than mine - bless him! This was just a detail after all!

After what felt like a billion calls, we finally arranged to meet in person. Being such a gentleman, Gary wanted to accommodate me by coming to my neighbourhood, so we decided to meet in my local pub in Knightsbridge, The Tattersalls Tavern, which was close enough for me to walk there. We chose Saturday lunchtime.

I was ecstatic; for the first time in my London dating history, I was meeting someone who was exactly what I had always longed for, my ideal in almost every way. Apart from his physical appearance and traditional values (which pleased me hugely), Gary had also shown himself to be romantic, intelligent and a great conversationalist. I just hoped that he wasn't too good to be true...

The Date

Saturday took so long to arrive!

On the morning of my first date with Gary, I tried on at least ten different dresses looking for the perfect one to wear. I ended up wearing a short pink dress by my designer friend Sam. The dress was very fitted but it had a high neck, so I wasn't showing any cleavage. I didn't want to be overly sexy on our first date.

A little after 12.30pm, I pushed open the Tattersall's front door, looking around as I closed it behind me. It was dead, curiously quiet, at this time of day, empty apart from a big guy propping up the bar. I sat down at a table and asked for a glass of wine. I waited for a few minutes, quite unhappy that Gary was late. Plus, the big guy at corner of the bar had turned around to stare at me and I could see that he had nasty brown teeth. I tried to ignore his stares and look elsewhere, but he was making me very uncomfortable. I was just about to call Gary to hurry him up, when my phone rang.

A huge sense of relief as I saw his name on the display. I accepted the call with a great warm smile that could probably be heard in my voice, "Hello, Gary?"

When he replied, I heard his voice echo, leading me to one conclusion - he was here already. My heart sank as the guy who had been staring at me started to wave. *No, no, no, no, no!* This couldn't be him, please!? My hopes were utterly dashed when the big guy proudly (and loudly) called over to me, "Val, it's me! Gary!"

I picked up my glass of wine and reluctantly walked over to him, desperately thinking of my next move. I couldn't help but mention, "You don't look at all like your pictures." I could not hide the disappointment that I felt.

I must have done a better job that I thought, because Gary didn't seem to notice. He snickered, "Tell me about it. I don't even recognise myself! I've put on a few pounds since I first

started speaking to you. Can you imagine, in just 5 weeks!? I should be in the Guinness Book of World Records!"

I didn't find it funny... In fact, I was disgusted. Not so much by his physique, but more by the dirty Chelsea FC t-shirt he was wearing, with what I sincerely hoped was a yogurt stain down the front. I wanted to vomit.

Okay, I admit it - I was being *un petit peu* shallow. Okay, very shallow. But it didn't change the way I felt; I would never find him attractive and didn't see the point in pretending for even a few minutes.

Gary offered to buy me another drink and I explained as politely as I could, "Sorry my dear, but this isn't going to work."

He yelled, furious: "You're like all the others. You're so superficial! We had a connection and now you're ignoring it just because I'm a bit overweight."

"Gary, I am more upset because you lied to me." I spoke courteously and quietly as I continued, "I'd rather us just be friends."

I left quickly, horrified by the ordeal and with Gary and most of the pub's staff staring at me. I was going to get a reputation at this rate. Never again would I plan a first date at one of my locals.

Once again, I felt betrayed and I found myself questioning the whole online dating experience. Whilst it had seemed fun at first - the possibility of dozens of handsome, intelligent single men just waiting to romance me - it was now becoming more and more disappointing, with each date being worse than the last. The online world seemed to be a place for some of the worst men on the planet.

Where are the real gentlemen? I wondered miserably. What was I doing wrong?

Post-date

Of course, I wasn't willing to see Gary again. Not only was he a liar, but he was also a rather disgusting one who couldn't even dress for a date properly.

A few days later, however, he apologised to me via text, and we started speaking again. It was fun, friendly, light-hearted and honest, because I knew exactly to whom I was speaking to. It wasn't a secret anymore. But after a while, Gary started to call me a little bit too much. I grew annoyed with it after a while, so I stopped taking his calls.

Around three weeks later, during one of my chillaxing weekends where I was busy baking a pineapple cake, my eyes were drawn to something outside my front window. I recognised a familiar t-shirt through the glass. Intrigued, I walked over to the window to peer out. I started to get a bad feeling, but couldn't put my finger on the reason...then it clicked - it was a Chelsea FC t-shirt. *Oh no!!!* Gary was here, he had found my home address. *Shit!!*

Two seconds later, he buzzed at my door. There was no way that I was letting him in. I beat back panic as one clear thought raced through my head - *how does he know where I live??* Thank God for intercoms! I could make as much noise as I wanted without him knowing that I was at home.

Gary buzzed again, waiting for a long time for an answer. I didn't think he was dangerous or capable of anything that would harm me, but he seriously started to scare me at this point.

Plus, Gary was still wearing that same t-shirt and I could see, even from my hiding spot, that the same stain was still there! Eurgh! I had to get rid of him for good.

Dear God, please help me with this stalker!

The next day, I called Gary for the first time in nearly a month. Obviously, I didn't mention his little visit. I had pretended not to be home and I had no intention of admitting the truth as to why I had not answered. I would not play the part of prey. Besides, he had had no qualms about lying to me.

The call didn't go as planned. I had barely said "Hello" when he rushed into a passionate speech about how he kept thinking about me and my "sexy dress" (and I had tried my very best *not* to be sexualised). He said that he was in love with me and that we couldn't just be friends.

That was all I could listen to. I interrupted him quite harshly, "I'm really sorry, Gary. But I could never be your girlfriend; I'm not sexually attracted to you and I probably never will be." I became quite angry as I continued, "And one thing I really hate in a relationship, Gary, is lies. I divorced my husband because of his lies, do you remember I told you that? I thought I made it very clear during our long phone conversations - I hate lies and it's a deal-breaker for me."

It was all coming out now that I had the chance to confront him. "The photos on your profile page weren't even yours! I have goggled them. So, forgive me, Gary - but we cannot even be friends at this point. I wish you all the happiness in the world but I can't do this. Au revoir!"

Two Months Post-date

It was about 11pm and I was going to bed exhausted after a long day at work, when I received a call from a withheld number. I accepted the call, the voice on the end of the line was feminine with a strong Indian accent: "Who am I talking to?" she demanded rudely.

I didn't recognise her voice and thought she must have called

the wrong number. "Excuse me, you've just called my phone and you're asking for my name!? I should be the one asking you this question. Who are *you*?"

When she spoke again, I could sense her rage, even over the phone: "I am the wife of a guy you're fucking."

Shocked, I took a moment to reply, "Excuse me. I'm afraid I don't do married men." I worried briefly that she might be talking about Billy (more about that later), but wasn't going to say anything about that to her - I had no idea who I was talking to.

Then, she suddenly started sobbing: "Gary Davis is my husband!!! I saw your picture on his laptop and you are way too beautiful to fuck him for free..." Another few quick sobs then she quickly added, her voice full of venom, "Are you a prostitute?"

"Gary is married?!" I asked gobsmacked.

"Yes, he is, Bitch!" she snarled at me. "And he has three children." Her tone switched from deadly to pleading. She begged me tearfully, "Please, please, *please* tell me that you used a condom! I don't want to catch AIDS."

I had never felt so insulted in my life! Apparently, I had fucked a married, giant lying pig of a man, and was also a prostitute who had AIDS.

This was all too much to process, and this woman was seriously starting to annoy the hell out of me. "You're right!" I declared proudly, "I am *waaaaay* too beautiful to have fucked your husband. In fact..." I added politely, determined to keep my composure despite the insults, "...it never happened. Your husband lied to me, I met him on a..."

She interrupted me, her voice now filled with genuine fear: "You used a condom, right? Tell me, please, please...Oh no, I have to go now...I can hear his car."

I stayed on the phone, not quite believing what I was hearing. The last thing she said to me before hanging up was: "Please don't tell him I called you," she begged. "He will beat the shit out of me."

I was furious – Gary was an even bigger liar than I had dared to imagine. This ugly man (both inside and out) had clung to me for ages by pretending that he was an entirely different person. So many lies and tricks just because he wanted to fuck me.

Now I was also frightened for this woman who was unfortunate enough to be married to him; he was a brute as well as a lying cheat.

The only thing I was grateful for was the fact that his wife hadn't confronted me in my local pub to expose me. I would have fled London back to Paris immediately, with a one-way ticket and just the clothes on my back. I even would have left my collection of shoes behind, and everybody knows how much I love them.

Four Months Post-date

I received another call from a withheld number one Sunday morning, just before a catch-up with The Ladies. And guess who was calling? Well it was Gary, of course! I was filled with rage at the sound of his voice and I launched into a furious tirade – using his own wife's words against him. He denied he was even married and suggested that it had been the wife of one of the many other men in my life! *Le salaud* - bastard!

It was only when I called him by his family name that he shut his mouth full of lies, then rudely hung up on me.

Next please!

PS: I never heard back from Gary's wife but I still think about her sometimes. Her petrified voice echoed in my mind for a while. I felt useless, and to be completely honest, I was split between my anger at the whole situation and my compassion for her. I often try to reassure myself about it by telling myself that she was probably lying. But the terror in her voice...I mean, how can a relationship survive that sort of thing? Or even start? If what she said was true, why did she ever let him treat her like that? I found myself wondering about things I never had before. When did such a relationship begin to be dangerous? When do you raise the alarm? The first insult? The first guilt-trip? The first slap?

I sincerely hope that she has left Gary and she and her children are safe somewhere. Abuse in a relationship – whether physical or verbal – should never be tolerated. And nobody deserves such a life.

Chapter Nine – The Rabbit

Background

After so many disastrous dates through Match.com, I finally decided to follow Camellia's advice and try the website she had suggested back at the start of my adventures. According to her, every year more than three hundred couples met and married each other thanks to eHarmony.com. Not that I wanted to get married again any time soon, but I did want a sound and long-lasting relationship with a nice guy.

For those of you who don't know, eHarmony is a website that uses a scientific approach to matching singles. It matches people based on features of compatibility such as values, psychological traits and personal preferences. This was a tiny bit scary for me, because if I were matched with a psycho, I would have to seriously review my own mental health!

As I signed up, I was determined not to be as superficial as before, particularly not to judge suitors by their pictures. I had learned that I needed to take everything that I saw or read with a big pinch of salt anyway – bios and photos could be easily manipulated, or they could be outright lies.

My first match was Billy - forty year-old (*he claims*, I thought to myself), 5ft 10in (*which probably means 5ft 9in or maybe even 5ft 8in if he is a super liar*), the CEO of his own music production company (*yeah, right*), he had children and wasn't sure if he wanted to have any more (*how could I have been matched with him??*)

But he said that he was a romantic and longed for a long-term

passionate relationship. Voilà!

Pre – date

I spoke with him over the phone and he sounded very nice, but I still didn't know what to expect from our date. All I knew was what he had put on his eHarmony profile: he was forty, he worked in the music industry (j'adore!) and he lived in Chiswick, which was quite close to my neighbourhood.

At least they were all good points.

It was almost a blind date, because Billy's profile pictures were all blurred. I had practically no idea what I was getting myself into. But weirdly, I was cool with that. Remember? No shallow attitude anymore.

The Date

Billy told me that he hated making ladies wait, so he said he would call me around 8pm to confirm an exact time for later that day. Apparently, he had a very important meeting and he wasn't sure how long it would last. When he called me at 8pm, it was to say that we would be meeting in Earl's Court at 9pm.

We both arrived smack-bang on time, with big polite smiles on our faces. We respectfully kissed each other on both cheeks (*à la Française*), but at first sight, I was not impressed at all. I didn't know how I had missed this one big detail - he was blonde. I couldn't figure out what had happened to cause it, but he had a rash on his face. Bless him! Maybe it is vanity on my part, but if I had developed a skin condition such as his before a big date, I would have postponed and treated that shit! But, I reminded myself, I was a new woman now - no judging on appearances and no more shallowness! So, I busied myself by focusing on his nicer features: Billy was slim, with nice hands and he had beautiful bright blue eyes. We went into one of the pubs that I used to go to with Adrian - The Prince of Teck - to grab a drink.

I had to admit that based on our interests and preferences, eHarmony matched us well. I felt that we were so compatible on that level, that it was uncanny. But I wasn't so sure about his character, and I really didn't like his appearance. I couldn't help judging him based on looks a little, it was still important that I found my partner attractive.

Billy told me that this was the first time that he had been happy with a match from eHarmony, because the other girls he had met were either unattractive or desperate. I think this was supposed to make me feel special, but all it did was show me that he was even shallower than me.

Despite my misgivings, the date went fantastically well. I laughed so much at one point, I thought I might collapse! He also assuaged my worries about some parts of his profile that I hadn't been so sure about. Billy explained that there was a mistake on it (or I had read it wrong) - he had no children but wanted to at some point (phew!). He told me that he loved traveling, he played cricket, he hated beer (unusual for a British man), but he loved football. In fact, he claimed that he participated enormously in many sporting events (*we will surely get on well*, I thought at that).

In the end, it was a cool evening, *very* cool.

Billy kissed me politely again, but this time on the lips, and I went home with a big smile on my face. He was so thoughtful that he texted me to ask if I got home okay. I liked this kind of attention. Bonus points for Billy!

Post-date

Billy was one of those guys I needed to see again to better appreciate his physical appearance. He was not my type at all, but I really enjoyed his company. He was funny, smart and

seemed to be genuinely looking for a relationship. He might be exactly what I needed.

I decided to see him again, hungry to know more about him.

Date No.2

As before, we didn't set a time in advance for our date – he said he would contact me. So 8:30pm, he calls me (he was apparently just leaving the office) and twenty minutes later, I was heading to Earl's Court again, for my second date with Billy.

We met in a local pub, and before I knew it, we were chatting away again - talking about anything and everything. We even discussed wedding stuff! It didn't scare me as much as I thought it would; it was nice that he was interested in marrying me. And according to Billy – I had never had a *real* wedding anyway. He joked that a Las Vegas wedding didn't count. I learned that he could dance, which is so sexy. I love a man who can dance. He could speak a bit of French (his accent was wonderful, it turned me on), which he did while reiterating that he wanted a proper relationship with me. All of this was very promising...

The rest of the date was splendid. I discovered so much about him, I really liked him as a person and I thought that I could very possibly fall in love with him. *Well-done, eHarmony*, I thought.

Midnight - the pub had to close, so we both headed to the tube station. We kissed goodbye with long, real French kisses. It was exquisite...I had never felt so aroused. I could feel his energy all through my body, and his penis hard against my leg. By the time we parted ways, I was dizzy and shaking. Wow, he was going to be a great lover.

Sexual attraction had begun and now I couldn't wait to have sex with him.

Post - date No.2

Billy called me later that night to say that he was smitten too. He said that he wanted to see more of me, that I was beautiful, sexy and funny. He was addicted, and he couldn't stop thinking about me.

I didn't tell him, but that night I felt the same way. I had been fantasising about being in his arms, kissing him, the smell of him... Everything about him made me shiver. I remember thinking that this could be the beginning of a great love story.

The following day, he called me again and asked if I was free that same night. I very much wanted to see him again to have more of those delicious kisses, so I accepted. Billy threw me off a bit when he asked for my personal address; I generally hate it when people invite themselves to mine. But I wanted to test him. I know it was naughty of me, but I wanted to see if he was enough of a gentleman to make this next date at mine really special.

After all, he had claimed he was a romantic, but I hadn't seen any proper romance from him so far.

Date No.3

8pm, I buzzed Billy in to my apartment. He literally jumped on me, kissing me for at least half an hour. But for some reason, the more he kissed me, the more his kisses lost their fire. From there, things happened very fast. The next thing I knew, he had his penis in me. He screwed me as if I was a Japanese sex doll - the sex was rough, mechanical and boring. 10pm, missionary, in and out, in and out, in and out. Done. We had a few repeats at 11:30pm. Well, I desperately wanted to

enjoy myself too: midnight, 2am, 3am... Still, no chemistry like there had been in our first kisses. The passion and the energy were gone. We had ruined it.

To add more misery to my night, he stayed until 9am that morning. He probably would have stayed even longer, had I not kicked him out! I didn't just ask him to leave my apartment, as far as I was concerned, I had kicked him out of my life.

Billy sent me a few messages to meet again, but I gently declined all invites. When he wasn't getting anywhere with simple invites, he apologised that he had "scared me with his love and affection." He thought he knew me so well! I just ignored those texts.

I wasn't interested in him anymore. I was out!

Six Months Later...

Billy tried to connect with me again. He sent me text messages, trying to understand what had happened. But did I really need to explain myself? Should I have told him that he fucked the relationship by fucking me too fast? Maybe I should have said that if I had wanted to be banged by a rampant rabbit that I would have stuck with my dildo.

No, I just ignored him.

Eight Months Later...

Ignoring him didn't work; Billy insisted that I see him to give him a clear explanation. I could have predicted that it would be a waste of time. This meeting became a dialogue between two deaf people.

I let Billy begin: "I was so heartbroken when you decided to cut ties," he said. "I didn't understand and I still don't."

I explained as politely as I could. "Well, I think we went a little bit too fast. And we should have shared more real experiences together before..."

"Yes, I know..." he interrupted me, "I scared you with my words of love and my desire to have children. I can imagine that might have frightened you."

I tried to correct him, "Not really, it's more that..."

Again, he stopped me before I could finish. "I didn't mean to scare you, but I fell in love and may have stepped on the accelerator a little too fast."

Shit, Billy kept talking about love! How could I let him know that the main reason for me ending things was because he was a bad shag? I tried anyway, "No, it's really not that, I..."

He broke in again, pleading with me, "Have we not spent wonderful moments together??"

Aargh! Billy just would not stop – it was as if he was deliberately stopping me from talking, afraid of what I actually had to say. "I loved kissing you and having sex with you. It was just *mind-blowing* that night...so sensual and passionate."

Over the past months, I had been worried that my attitude about Billy had been all wrong. Maybe he wasn't so bad? But this conversation proved to me that I didn't have an attitude problem, he clearly had a perception problem. How had he not noticed that I had been bored that night? We had a very different definition of "mind-blowing" that was for sure.

I decided not to mention anything in the end; Billy seemed desperate to cling to his own rose-tinted memory of that night

and he probably wouldn't understand anyway. I left and decided to avoid any contact with him once again.

A Few Months After That...

I received a shy "hello" from Billy in the form of a text, which I thoroughly ignored. I guessed he was still single. His text made me smile as I remembered him as the unbridled randy rabbit.

Billy could make the right woman's dreams come true – if those dreams involved being roughly pumped away at like a Japanese sex doll... Next!

Chapter Ten - The Faulty Robot

Background

Meet Joseph, 5ft 7in, forty-year-old, and he worked in the entertainment industry. Most of his profile pictures were of him posing with various VIPs like Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, Beyoncé, and Drake. This made me a little unsure of him right away. Basically, I thought he was trying too hard. But he was quite good-looking, and after a few emails between us, I decided to give him a chance.

After so many bad experiences, I wanted to know more before we met. I needed to know what he sounded like, and most importantly, if he was as pretentious as his photos made him appear. Pretentious people are the worst. In my humble opinion (lol), it is one of the worst personality traits in human nature.

Pre-date

I called Joseph, and to my surprise, he sounded friendly, genuine and very funny. He didn't mention anything about his celebrity friends and this reassured me about him being not bigheaded.

He suggested that we meet in my area, but after the recent dramatic episode with Gary, I decided we should meet a few miles away from mine and decided on South Kensington.

The Date

I arrived right on time to find Joseph already waiting for me.

He presented me with an enormous rose bouquet, which took me completely by surprise. Everyone was staring at us, smiling, as if he was proposing in the street. Ordinarily, this extremely romantic gesture (it was very French) would have delighted me. But Joseph was practically a stranger to me at this point, and I was slightly embarrassed to be carrying a huge rose bouquet in the middle of South Ken.

We decided to have dinner together and rather than searching for ages for somewhere, we jumped into possibly the most commercial chain restaurant in that area, Carluccio's.

I was already upset about one thing - Joseph was practically bald. I certainly wasn't going to say anything, but I am not particularly fond of bald men. I know, I know - I was supposed to be turning over a new leaf and be less superficial, but up until then it was maybe my one non-negotiable preference. I liked my men with a full head of hair, so sue me!

I tried not to think about it too much. I figured that I was already there and maybe Joseph would impress me so much that I would forget about it.

There were some good points too - Joseph looked slimmer and younger than he had in his profile pictures. I also found his face more handsome in person, which balanced things out a bit. Joseph explained that he was a journalist working for an old-fashioned music magazine, which meant he had the opportunity to interview celebrities such as Rihanna, Beyoncé and even Michael Jackson in the past. I was genuinely impressed and asked loads of questions.

Joseph told me that Rihanna was always hanging around with her fortune teller/psychic, and that Nicki Minaj wore padded panties to make her ass look bigger, until just a few weeks before when she had finally had it surgically enhanced. He explained that she hadn't had enough fat in her body to do so

before. I was totally absorbed by these behind-the-scenes gossips.

More about Joseph: he lived in Essex, had a dog, collected expensive cars and was (obviously) fond of Beyoncé and Rihanna. Minus point – he was allergic to alcohol (I didn't even know this was possible). I hate drinking alone; I always feel guilty, especially if I get drunk.

We had a very good night, but nothing exciting. In fact, I found him quite boring. Joseph wasn't as funny as I first thought, and was a bit too serious for me. But I was willing to give him a second chance and maybe get to know more about him. I guessed that he could have been a bit stressed for the first date.

Post-date

It was a good guess! Indeed, Joseph called after I got home to make sure I had made it safely. He admitted that he had been “blown away by my beauty” and that was why he was a bit shy during our date. This made me smile.

He asked me out again and said that we should go to the cinema for our next date. After my bad cinema experience with Adrian, I wasn't sure that it was the best activity for the early stages of dating. But Joseph was not Adrian, I reminded myself. Maybe the cinema wasn't to blame for that experience, maybe Adrian was.

Date No.2

We met at the Curzon Cinema in Chelsea, which was local to me. But I didn't mind this time – it was preferable to traveling all the way to Essex, which seemed like the other side of the world. In fact, if you go by the reality TV shows *Made in Chelsea* and *TOWIE (The Only Way is Essex)*, they are on a different planet.

This time, Joseph brought me some chocolates for a gift. I was flattered, and chocolates are much less conspicuous than a huge bunch of roses, but I don't like chocolate. Of course, I didn't mention this; I just politely accepted the gift. We barely had time to talk, as our movie was about to start.

Just as I had felt during my cinema date with Adrian, I was uncomfortable all through the movie. The plot annoyed me with its predictability and its cheesy characters. I was preoccupied with thoughts of cinema-date etiquette, such as: *can I speak? Should I say something at this bit? Should I keep on eating this popcorn when the rustling seems to resonate so loudly in the theatre?*

Subsequently, I couldn't wait for the movie to end. Joseph on the other hand, was really into it, laughing out loud to the cheesy jokes that had been told a million times since the eighties.

I thanked God when the movie ended and we decided to go for a drink at The Ivy. Once we sat down, he immediately started to praise how good the movie was. I studied him as he rambled on, lost in his own words. I was lost in my own thoughts, *he's clearly not my type of guy if he enjoyed that movie*, I mused.

Then, to make things worse, he started talking about his celebrity buddies again. It wasn't lost on me that it was the same stories as the week before, about the interviews with Rihanna, Beyoncé and Michael Jackson. The same gossip about Nicki Minaj. Joseph mentioned his dog and his expensive car collection again, then he apologised for not being able to drink with me because he was allergic.

I started wondering if he even recalled having a first date with me. Or had he been in a coma since the last time I had met

him? Did he think that so much time had passed that I needed reminding?

I had to stop this, my ears were bleeding. I broke in by asking him what he did with his life when not hanging out with all these celebs.

I almost instantly regretted it.

He began a forty-five-minute soliloquy (that I tried to stop many times), which went a bit like this:

"On Mondays, I wake up at 6.45am usually very grumpy because I hate Mondays... Then I drink a coffee, have a cereal bar and brush my teeth before having a glass of orange juice. I like the combination of the toothpaste and orange flavours in my mouth. 7.30am, I have a very hot shower for fifteen minutes...ish." He barely paused for breath as he continued with his daily itinerary: "Then I put some ageing cream on my face because, you know, I need to look young forever... Then, just after my shower I go to my bedroom to get dressed, because I don't have an en-suite bathroom. Around 8am, I get in the car to go to work. Where I live, there's a bit of traffic in the mornings, but I get to the office at 8.45am...ish. Becky and Edward are always in the kitchen waiting for me to make the coffee for them, as I am the *best* coffee maker in the office. I start working at about 9am -ish." I think I tried to interrupt him here, I didn't succeed. "...At lunch, I try not to eat too much as I put on weight very easily. So, I walk for forty-five-minutes and usually only eat half of my lunch. I leave work at 6pm...ish. I get to the car and it usually takes me about an hour to get home, because for some reason, there is more traffic in the evening, I have never understood why...Then I eat one of the dinners that I would have prepared the previous Sunday and watch two or three movies on YouTube or Netflix. At 11pm, I switch everything off and I go to sleep."

I wished that I could switch *him* off. But he seemed determined to go through every day of the week – what a treat! I wanted the ground to swallow me up, I was so very bored.

Yet, somewhere around his itinerary for Wednesday, I decided to kiss him. I don't know exactly why I did it, but I know that I wanted him to shut up! Joseph hugged me tightly after and went very quiet. It was very awkward for a long few moments...

From what he had told me, I understood that Joseph had one good friend, a local pub that he went to every Wednesday and Thursday night and he owned a house on a different planet (I didn't get the name of the town, but Essex was enough for me). He had been single for eight years following a very harsh break-up. Frankly, he led an uneventful life that I did not wish to share. I decided to leave.

He wanted to drive me home, but I declined the offer and hailed a cab instead. After I refused his offer, without even saying goodbye, Joseph probably ran as fast as Usain Bolt to his car. He was gone in seconds.

Wow, what a weirdo!

Ladies and gentlemen, I dated a robot with only two buttons: the first button would tell you of an exciting professional life where he mixed with the best and brightest. The second button would relay a list of daily mundanities to you until your mind rotted and your ears fell off.

At the end of the day, once pushed and listened to thirty-plus times, even the first button would become boring.

I had heard enough - next please!

Chapter Eleven - Romancing the Stoned

This was fastest date organised in my dating history! Matched at 8:34am; email exchange at 10:38am; chat over the phone at lunch time; date sorted for the following day. I loved it! I already liked the guy: enterprising, directional, energetic and full of sensitivities. Mario was Italian. It was about time to enjoy some Latin blood with some passion and exoticness in my dating life! I was so eager to meet him.

I was not supposed to think about his physical traits but I have to describe him for you, *n'est-ce pas*? So here we go! Mario had the typical Italian look; dark, long wavy hair, brown eyes, slim and elegant. He was an industrial and manufacturing engineering technician. I wasn't sure what that meant but did I care?

So, I left home at the time of the date in chaos. Hair trouble! Plus, Mario confirmed our date too close to our dating time. Why do these guys never confirm dates?

The date

Mario was waiting for me at the Camellia's Tea House, an elegant tearoom known for its selection of rather quirky teas. I'd never been there and I was eager to enjoy this quintessentially English experience.

So, I arrived at the table and we exchanged a kiss. I apologised a billion times for being late; he didn't seem to care, he was just timidly smiling at me. Yet, the atmosphere was really strange; some kind of electricity pervaded our date; a very unpleasant feeling. I wasn't sure what caused this. Maybe he

didn't like the look of me? Or was he annoyed because of my lateness? It was really awkward.

Mario was not the charming guy full of joy and energy I had spoken to on the phone. He spoke in a voice so low, it was like trying to listen to a bee buzzing with thousands of elephants trumpeting. Just annoying! Anyhow, I was not interested in his comparison of the weather between London, Paris, Amsterdam and Bari, a discussion that he held for about twenty minutes. Really?!

In addition to a heavy atmosphere and boring conversation, the service was super slow. When our tea finally arrived, Mario began to loosen up. At some point, he gave a wide full teeth smile, something he should have avoided because his smile had no lustre; he had a cute lucky gap smile ruined by brown stains on his front teeth. This was a non-kissable ensemble. Sorry, but bye; teeth and hair are non-negotiable traits. I couldn't wait to leave.

Mario was verbalising his experiences like he was writing an article for The Times. On top of that, his Italian accent became more and more distinctive and increasingly annoying. Weirdly, I realised that he wasn't even moving, no hand talking, no head approval, no body language. Only his mouth was moving. This was pretty scary to look at as he little by little looked like the Chucky doll to me.

The date was lacking romance, flirting and banter! I felt like Mario was giving me a dull professional presentation. Out of it, I managed to remember a few things about him. I learned that he had been living in London for a year and before that he had lived in Holland for seven years. His longest love story lasted three months with a Dutch lady who disappeared overnight.

Mario was the typical "nice guy" – naïve, convenient, soft with

no real interests and passions. He seemed so nice that I was sure he could piss Evian water and poo dishwasher tablets. It wasn't a monologue. Well, I tried to tease and to flirt but Mario was as cold as stone. He asked me questions but kept cutting me off and giving his own accounts on the same situation. In fact, he could have asked these questions to himself and that would have saved me time and saliva.

The worst part of that date was when Mario started taking about his job. In fact, he told me that he developed methods, facilities and production systems. That is, all I can say, as I didn't want to know more about it, yet he was proud and adamant in explaining his position. I listened to him speaking Chinese for ten minutes; I had no patience. I drank my tea as you drink a shot of vodka, burning my tongue, and I pretended I had other arrangements after our date, which wasn't totally false. I was going to join the ladies at Zuma even if they didn't expect me. What a date-tastrophe! But it wasn't completely over. He came to wait for my cab with me, which again annoyed me; I really wanted to be away from him. Then, when my cab arrived, he asked me what I was doing next weekend. I pretended a trip to France. I tried to quickly sneak into the taxi but Mario had time to give me a kiss on the lips. I did not understand! I closed the door of the cab and in seconds I was gone towards Knightsbridge. Thank you, God!

Post date

Mario texted me saying he had really enjoyed our time and that it would be great if we could meet before my trip to France. I replied: < Hi Mario, though you seem to be a very lovely guy, I do not think there was chemistry between us. Sorry. > He never answered. Next!

Chapter Twelve - The Mumbler

Wow, I started accumulating matches on eHarmony, but it was a little jungle, with a variety of men. (1) The Ghost. A man you chat with for weeks, you start to like and he disappears all of a sudden. I assume they are either dead or in a coma. (2) The Penpal. He writes to you for weeks and when you ask him out, he blocks you. (3) The Pushover. He is toooooo nice, a typical nice man, and wants you to manipulate him. He's desperate for a date; he sends you loads of passionate emails, as if you were the only one in the world for him. You find this cute until you discover that he does this to billions of ladies and doesn't have a life. (4) The Ladies' Man. He's a chain-dater; he dates you on a Sunday for a coffee, in fact, he books a table for the whole day and has back-to-back dates, finally sleeping with the last date (hypothetically the hottest chick). Cheaper than a prostitute! (5) The Corporate. He doesn't have time for you, at least that's what he wants you to think. He plans his dates three weeks in advance. You're excited and when the date arrives, he cancels. (6) The Adventurous. He simply sleeps with everyone. I mean really everyone, everything and nothing. Ideal date for STDs seekers. (7) The Pathological Liar. A week ago, he mentioned his amazing pilot job for Virgin Atlantic, but today he's a successful and trendy architect, and when you meet him he's nothing. Scammer to avoid! (8) The Funny One. At least he thinks he is. The words "fun" and "funny" are mentioned hundreds of times on his profile. In fact, he doesn't take life seriously (mentioned as well), I mean really, really not seriously! He makes silly and goofy jokes including one involving the death of your grandmother three weeks ago. Clearly not funny. (9) The Free Spirits. They are not in a hurry to date, and will do so next year or maybe the following one. (10) The Stalker. He looks at

your profile religiously every day with or without emailing you. Sometimes, when you email him, he never replies but keeps on stalking your profile.

Welcome to my world. You've been warned!

Oh! I forgot The Professional Profile (the normal?). He reads your profile from A to Z and sends you a smashing first email as powerful as an L'Oréal advertisement. They are usually funny, intelligent, and carefully choose their dates. And Gábor was one of them.

Gábor was a cute Hungarian of 36 years of age who had been living in London for seven years. He was a doctor in a private hospital near Greenwich. We shared the same interests for sporting events, travel and geopolitics. I was delighted to know that he had passions and always made himself busy over the weekends.

Gábor had dark hair, almond eyes, and was slim and athletic. I had never been out with a Hungarian before; I loved that London had given me the opportunity to date internationally and to discover new cultures through my dating experiences.

Since we had exchanged numbers, Gábor had been very caring, sending me regular texts. Nothing too intrusive, just the right words at the right time.

After a week of this exchange, we decided to meet. We opted for a dinner date at a French restaurant called Le Garrick in Covent Garden. He basically wanted to honour my country and me. I'd been to that restaurant before; in fact it was one of my ex-husband's favourites. I'd never had the courage to go back since, but I was more than willing to build new memories there.

The date

Whilst I tried my best to be on time, I was ten minutes late. I annoyingly took the tube, as I could not find a cab. Out of the tube station and on my way to the restaurant, I called him.

Misfortune! Catastrophe! I did not understand a single word of what he was saying! Was it English? I had my ear glued to my phone, to the point that half of my makeup stained the screen, and a finger stuck on the other ear trying to catch his words. I probably asked him five times where he was waiting. Embarrassed that I could not understand, I decided to head to the restaurant hoping Gábor was there and easy to locate. I must admit that at this point, I began to sweat out of stress. What if I couldn't understand any words he said that night? Why did I skip that pre-date phone call that I usually have with the others?

I arrived at the Garrick where I recognised Gábor straight away. He was such a handsome man. His pictures didn't do him justice. Upon my arrival, I had a glass of champagne waiting for me. I was really flattered. After a warm welcome, he did not hesitate to mention my lateness and added irately, "Two minutes more and I was gone. You're lucky." Fair enough! He was in his own right! I apologised and by way of apologies, I offered to pay for the whole meal. He refused gentlemanly. I was also relieved, as I could understand all of his words. So what happened over the phone? I didn't know.

After a few minutes, the tension cooled down and Gábor started smiling. What a charming smile he had! After two sips of champagne, we were both ready to mingle.

Mingle? Not really. I had to keep asking him to repeat his questions. At some points, I answered his questions by guessing what he meant. Bad idea! And more than often, I was completely wrong in my estimations.

Gábor questioned with a Hollywood smile, "Then mmm mmm mmm Paris?" Not again! Was it a joke? I looked at him disbelievingly. He repeated twice tiresomely and I decided to guess his words, "Yes, I was born in Paris and I have been in London for almost four years."

He insisted, "Mmm mmm mmm go to Paris last mmm?"

I was blushing purple, "Oh, that was two weeks ago." That was just the beginning. That was when I started drinking fast; hoping that the Champagne then Côte de Provence would help me to understand him clearly. Gábor mumbled, "Mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm London?"

I responded hesitantly, "Yes, I love London and its diversity."

He replied, "No, I meant mmmm mmmm mmmm friends?"

I had to ask him to rephrase. Friends? London? I had no clue what he meant. I confessed politely, "I beg your pardon. I can't understand."

Gábor retold, "Mmmm mmmm mmmm friends? Paris?"

What the hell?! Should I ask him to repeat again? I decided not to. I opted to go for a reply on Paris and another on my friends, so I speculated again, "I prefer Paris for its beauty, its culture and of course my friends over there that I really miss." He looked at me incredulously. I felt like the most stupid woman in the world.

Then, later in the night it happened again. (God, this dinner couldn't have been any longer!)

Gábor demanded, "Mmmm mmmm mmmm mmmm?"

I began to be very angry at him and myself, and couldn't help but revealing, "Gábor, I don't understand you I'm afraid."

He didn't seem to care or maybe he didn't understand, he just added, "Mmmm mmmm mmmm?"

This was the worst of the worst; I had no clue what to reply here. And I reiterated, "I am sorry I don't understand Gábor."

I could tell he was annoyed but Gábor didn't give up, "Mmmm English mmmm mmmm mmmm mmmm?" I was getting there but I probably needed five additional sorries. Impossible. I was caught. What could he possibly be asking? If I like English men? If I dated English men? I had to answer quickly as he was staring. I decided to go with, "I like English food, I think people..."

He interrupted me, "You mmmm mmmm business school mmmm clown school," he cackled.

Putain de merde! I thought. I was tired of guessing. At every word I tried to read his lips, a skill that I did not have. I had never been that attentive to someone's elocution in my life. I was having a horribly busy night converting gibberish into English and I couldn't take it anymore. In fact, I started a nervous monologue about my culture, life and my passions. I was sweating like a pig (does a pig sweat?) and believe me; I rarely sweat speaking 200 words per minute! I did not let him talk for the rest of the night for fear of not understanding. There were some really uncomfortable moments and awkward silences but I did not care.

Just before the end of the night, Gábor picked up a phone call and started speaking in Englarian again. English? Hungarian? I was not sure. He hung up and quipped that he had to go because his 29-year-old cousin had died in her sleep. That was what I understood, maybe he meant something else, but I was

relieved that he had more inspiration than me to cut our dinner short.

Bill paid, he solemnly said to me, "Thank you for this evening, you were a great talker. I think you and I could be good friends." This guy was really multitalented; he could mumble, lie and piss me off at the same time. I knew that the remark was cynical. I gave him a polite smile and disappeared into the busy streets of Covent Garden. I did not see Gábor again – the Hungarian accent was definitely not for me. Next!

Chapter Thirteen – Le Woodpecker

The Ghosts, the Penpals, the Pushovers, the Ladies' men, the Corporates, the Adventurous, the Pathological liars, the Funny ones, the Free spirits and the Stalkers. I was getting used to them all and could almost identify all of them after one email or ten. Up until now, I had myself been interchanging between the Ghost and the Corporate. However, for this particular guy, I was the Stalker.

I didn't know why, but I was mesmerised by his pictures; he represented my masculine ideal: bright eyes, a beautiful tuft of wavy hair, pale skin and an athletic body.

Every day I religiously admired his pictures and re-read his profile. But, in my defence, he was doing the same and he started it. I liked this guy's profile.

Well, meet Oliver Dion (he prefers Olive). We had been chatting for a week or two and I loved his swank accent; he had this way of talking on the phone, like a modern Shakespeare, with a deep sexy voice that made me drool.

Olive was 36 year-old; he was the owner of a recruitment agency in London with the main branch located two blocks away from my office. He lived in Kingston, a chic town in the southwester of Greater London, a chic town and cool enough to exile a weekend. Olive had just invested in a new flat apartment there he was currently redecorating (this was one of his main projects). We shared the same passions: the theatre, the opera, the intimate concerts, politics, travel. He always had good banter and told great jokes and our conversations on the phone were so stimulating. I could not wait to meet him in

person; he intrigued me.

Pre-date

After our first three calls, Olive and I communicated a lot through text. Every time I received a text from him, I would rush to my phone with a huge smile, like a dog being fed after a whole day of starvation. I was desperate for his attention. I always wanted more and the only reason our first date was delayed was because was The Corporate hotty. He would go on holiday for a week, and set off again on his next trip away from the hustle and bustle of the city. And when he was staying a few days in London, I was the one away. This circus probably lasted two months.

And finally, on my return to London, knowing Olive was in town, I sent him the following text message: <Hello, I'm back home. How was your weekend? Wondered if you fancied that 'overdue' rendezvous? :) xx >

Olive: < That's quite spooky actually honey, I was literally just thinking about that this morning. What are you up to on Saturday? Xx >

Moi: <:) Saturday should be ok. Xx >

Olive: < Ah, hang on... I just realised I'm not even in London this weekend. (Sorry, was clearly too excited at seeing you). What about next week? Xx >

Moi: <Next week is fine but can't do Saturday. X >

Olive: <Any time is good baby. A Friday nighter is always nice xx>

Shit! I was supposed to meet the ladies that night, but I soooo wanted to see Olive. I was prepared to skip this catch-up and so I replied back <Ok, great! Friday should work for me xx>, I

was sure the ladies wouldn't mind me cancelling.

Olive: <Excellent! Can't wait to meet you at last. This was very much what I was thinking about this morning... that I must see you for drinks xx >

Moi: <That's great! That's a long way off, lol. I'm not used to being that patient, but I'm looking forward to it too ;) > His texts were flirty, using words like 'pretty', 'beautiful', 'honey' or 'baby'. These words were not only caring qualifiers, but also the sort of things a Player might use. I started wondering if Olive was not a Ladies' Man.

Those two weeks of waiting were an ordeal; I kept thinking about him. It took all my willpower not to text him too often. And to calm my patience, I was stalking his profile from time to time. I needed to copy screen it!

The Date Day arrived, but I hadn't heard from him. I didn't chase him; I was disappointed, but at least I had a good evening catching up with the ladies.

On my way back to Chelsea, I received a text from Olive: <Hello pretty, how are you? When are we finally going to get round to having that drink? ;) X>

My mind, my feelings, and my self-esteem had been strongly altered by the few bottles of wine I had consumed with the ladies. I replied, <Hey you! I'm super fine, thanks for asking. How have you been? Oh, just let me know when you're free to meet. Friday seems ok for me at the moment ;) >

Olive texted back: <I am presently on a boat in the middle of the Cotswolds, but I'm back on Saturday and I'll give you a call to hatch plans. Will be nice to hear your voice :) xx >

Moi: <Lucky you! Enjoy ;) Please do call me. Have a lovely

time in the Cotswolds! >

Olive: <I will, it's pretty special up here. Who knows, maybe I'll have to bring you up here some time ;) xx >

Moi: <Ha ha, you never know ;). Heard great things about the place, worth a trip! X >

Olive: < Possibly even more fun with a yummy lady. I'm with mates on this occasion, so it's been fairly boozy and fairly silly. Maybe one for a 6th or 7th date :) xx >

I couldn't believe it; Olive was away again. What a lifestyle! If I were brave enough, I would quit my job and do the same. Having my own perfume brand was a dream I had and would afford me such habits.

Monday evening, Olive was back in London. He didn't call but I received the following text: < Hello lovely, I'm back in planet work and wondering if you fancy a date this Friday? :) xx >

Back to my normal self and angry that he didn't postpone or cancel last Friday, I must confess that I almost declined the invite. <Hate broken engagements. Don't want to see you anymore. Bye! >

I deleted the text as I thought that was childish and I simply answered an hour and a half later, <Hey, welcome back! This Friday sounds just great for me. >

Olive texted back: <God babe, really tired today. I got an attack of 'second-day-back' syndrome, and just completely crashed about half-three and it all went downhill from there. So, what do you fancy doing? What bit of town are you in? xx>

Moi: < I'm having a crazy week too! I work in Holborn and

live SW. You? Drinks? X>

Olive: <Ah ha, SW; this is most useful. I'm in Kingston. We could go up to Wimbledon village or something. Drinks sound cool :) xx.

Moi: < Splendid! Wimbledon works for me. 8pm? Or is that too late? ;) x>

Olive: < No no, that's fine. Gives us both a chance to get home first and get changed. Awesome, can't wait to finally meet you :) xx >

Olive again, five seconds later: <I think I'm going to rather fancy you young lady ;) xx>

Me, shyly: < ;) xx>

Olive: <I have a feeling I'm going to want to kiss you xx>

Moi: <What makes you think that? Xx>

Olive: <I just think you're very hot baby. Just getting texts from you makes me smile xx >

If he only knew how much I fancied him. I decided not to communicate that feeling and only replied, <Then, I'm sure we're going to like each other ;) xx>

Friday

At 2pm on Friday I was so excited to see Olive, I was sick: headache, stomach-ache, nervous poo; my body was in turmoil. I was unable to concentrate! I could only produce poisonous or toilet fragrances. Well, did you know that I was a nose, most commonly known as a perfumer, for a big French cosmetics company? The only qualifier I used until now was

“divorcee”, but I actually have a job. I am a perfumer with a passion with fine and natural fragrances. And, I am in charge of creating the next number 5 de Chanel. I was far from this. Cats’ pee smelt better than my fragrances.

Then, in the middle of the afternoon, in the midst of creating a relatively good fragrance, Olive called. I did not dare to reply like an idiot; I blushed all-alone like a two-year-old peeing on herself, hoping Olive would leave a message on my voicemail.

Bummer! He didn’t. So I decided to call him. I left a stupid voicemail and regretted it immediately! Why did I do this to myself?

And 15 minutes after my message, Olive texted, <Please don't be cross, but I've been press-ganged into a client drinks. They have been very forceful on the matter. Would you be upset if we rearranged to a night next week? You can pick whatever night you like. :) xx>

I was *très très* upset and replied, <Hi, Olive, I am not cross, but I won't see you next week or ever, I'm afraid x>

Frankly, I did not expect a response from him. I was at my desk pretending to work, but I had only one desire: go home and scream!

Three months later

During the three months following the missed date, I noticed that Olive had become a Stalker-Slash-Corporate online-dater. Presumably he was still busy but he was religiously stalking my profile on eHarmony. On my part, I had given up this habit from the day I said bye. He upset me and the Adrian-victim part of me didn't want to repeat past mistakes.

I sent him an email through the site. "Thanks for visiting my

profile ten times in three days. Appreciated, flattered and honoured. Maybe it's also time to dare to apologise for our missed rendezvous and have the bravery to reschedule one."

Olive answered almost immediately. "I'm really happy to receive an email from you. I am sorry I cancelled last time. I was really upset you didn't want to see me again. You were my greatest regret, and indeed, I would like to see you. What about tomorrow? 7pm? I swear you won't regret it."

I was happy to hear back from him and my heart accepted his invitation, but my brain tried to convince me to decline the invite. Despite this, I decided to ignore my gut feelings.

So we planned our date the following day in a wine bar called Baranis in Chancery Lane. He better honoured this date this time around! If he doesn't, I would go to his office and pour a nice glass of red wine on his head.

Date No.1

Strangely, I was not as nervous as before our supposed first date. I was zen. Olive almost begged to see me and I wasn't feeling as much pressure now. At least, that was how it felt to me.

I was strutting towards the Baranis and on my way; Olive sent me a text message asking what sort of wine I wanted. I knew he was there and I was pleased. I requested a red, from Bordeaux preferably. He replied, "Great choice!" I was thrilled; we were on the same wavelength.

I entered the Baranis with a confident walk. As promised, Olive had booked us one of the private alcove spaces. He was not exactly like his pictures, but he was still hot and totally my style. He was very elegantly dressed and I was immediately attracted. The bar was crowded and thunderous, and the

conversation was too frequently prompted by phrases such as 'say that again', 'sorry' and 'excuse me', but overall it was a great evening.

At first, I was mega annoyed, as it seemed that Olive found it hard to make eye contact, until I realised my breasts just hypnotised him. I decided to wear my scarf to hide my cleavage. Well done! Olive was with me then.

Olive was very well cultured, well-read, well-travelled and shared many of the same interests as me. He was funny, in a 'smart funny' way, and I loved it. I also learned that his parents were divorced, he was an only child and grew up in Cheshire. Olive was not very accustomed to the French accent, so I had to repeat a few words for him to understand. But this all added to the joy, laughter, and humour of the evening. The date was sensual, flirty and funny; I really enjoyed it and didn't regret giving him a second chance.

At the end, Olive grabbed a cab for me and gave me a small peck on the lips.

Post-date No.1

Olive conquered me. I really liked him and I thoroughly enjoyed our evening. Presumably, he was also attracted to me; he texted later that night as proof of it. He said he adored our night and really wanted to see me again. But for that, our patience would be tested at its highest level.

Indeed, we had started the busiest and most festive month of the year: December. So, in between my Christmas party, my friends' Christmas parties, corporate Christmas parties and me being in France for two weeks over Christmas, it took us six weeks to organise Date Number Two. However, we had a few calls to keep in touch and texted each other almost every day. It remained flirty, romantic, and fun.

Then, we finally hatched our plans to meet on the first Saturday of January. This time, Olive promised me a candlelit dinner. Very romantic. I couldn't wait to discover more about him and I was looking forward to being back in London.

A few days later, just as I stepped off the Eurostar, I received a cute text message from Olive: <Welcome back pretty! I can't wait to see you this coming Saturday and find out more about you.>

Wow, I felt like I was going to like this guy. Olive was so attentive, which I loved, and was always texting at the right time. But my joy was ruined by another text message: <Can I get one from you too? > Along with an unsolicited dick picture! What the hell? I deleted it immediately and responded, <Sorry, I don't move that fast. You will have to wait for such a sexy pic of me. >

How did Olive switch from lovely and romantic to a cocky and cringe-worthy 14-year-old-wanna-be-playboy-star? I felt visually assaulted, yet I had to admit that his penis was absolutely stunning.

But, I was disappointed and started to question our second date. Olive behaved so well most of the time that my heart was already hooked. I decided to go forward, ignoring the red flags sent by my brain trying to rationalise the mess, I was probably getting myself into. Even the last-minute change of plan did not bother me: instead of going to the restaurant, we would stay at mine and have an intimate romantic dinner. That was what I thought...

Date No.2

The night before our second date, Olive and I were both mega horny and were sexting almost all night. The alcohol I had drunk with the ladies didn't help. I was out of my mind and really impressed yet annoyed by the most good-looking cock I have ever seen in a picture. So, we agreed that I would be wearing very sexy lingerie upon our dinner date under a classy chic dress.

But, I changed my mind. I welcomed him half-naked in a beautiful Agent Provocateur red corset with stretchy lace that gave me the ultimate hourglass shape, combined with suspenders and black stockings.

Olive was gobsmacked. He jumped on me and started kissing me, making a weird croaking sound. I was unable to share the passion; not only was the sound an ear-sore, but the kisses were bad. They were tongue-free, which was as bad as too much tongue. As such, Olive was pecking at my lips, neck, cheeks, eyes, nose and nostrils like a woodpecker. The whole lot wasn't pleasurable at all; it was ridiculous and it hurt.

How could I get away? I offered to order food, pretending I was hungry. Olive and I went for something light: sushi. We had a very nice catch-up while waiting for our food but I wasn't quite listening. Still shocked, only croaking sounds were coming out of his mouth now. I wondered why Olive kissed that way. How could I change it? How could I tell him to shut up politely without killing the passion? It wasn't sexy at all. In fact, it was a total turn-off for me.

By the time the food and wine arrived, I was famished. Our dinner was prompted by banter, similar experiences, and our views on online dating.

A couple of hours later, my mind extremely altered by the wine, that was not an excuse, I started to striptease to Lana Del Rey's Suicidal Songs. What was I thinking?

Olive and I ended up in my bedroom, pecking passionately, the sad music mixed with the croaking sounds of Olive. He started going down on me, still croaking. It was bad. I wanted to direct him, moving my body so he could reach my hot spot, but I couldn't concentrate. Eventually I stopped and started thinking of my shopping list.

Just before falling into a deep unresponsive coma, I interrupted him and started going down on him. That was just as bad as his penis went down. I didn't understand - I usually excel at that! I persevered. Olive stopped me and pecked me again. I lost it, but at least his penis went hard again. So he grabbed a condom and started penetrating me. It started well as I felt his hard cock in me, but this lasted 30 seconds. It went dead again, this time for good.

We dressed awkwardly and silently. We then kissed goodbye and I went straight to bed thinking that I was going to pump the brakes on this possible budding union, as I was not tempted to hit the gas anymore. What an unsex-cessful disaster again!

Post-date No.2

That Sunday morning was bad. I had a massive headache and remembered only the bad parts of this catastrophic in-house date. I checked my mobile and I hadn't received any text from Olive.

Disappointed, but not surprised, I didn't text him either. Well, not until 9pm when I sent a shy, <Hope you got home okay. Xxx>

After a week, I was very upset that he hadn't got in touch with me. I sent Olive a text along similar lines: <Hi Olive, I am really sorry our second date went this way. I guess we were

both expecting a lot from it, and the whole sex thing was a bit rushed, pressured, and therefore bad. I guess we both agree on this. I just wanted you to know that you're a very nice guy and it's surely not your fault or mine. I would have appreciated talking about it openly instead of just disappearing. But it's fine, I understand your politeness. I wish you all the best and hope you find what you're looking for xxx>

I never heard back from him until....

Pre-date No.3 (8 months after date No. 2)

Eight months later, I was completely over Olive. I thought of him from time to time, as I couldn't deny that he once was my ideal. But I also recalled him as the most disappointing date of my dating history. Such a long wait and such a let-down. Olive was really handsome but to my biggest displeasure, the sex was just too bad.

So, when I received a message from him, a few months later, I was surprised and curious. Receiving a text from him had weirdly the same impact on me; I was thrilled and excited, yet I wasn't in a rush to reply. In actual fact, this time, Olive had to chase me for me to get a response.

We exchanged a few casual and polite texts, then Olive pretended he wasn't at his best on our last date and he wanted to catch up again. He invited himself to mine. I declined his self-invitation. I didn't want him to know my new address (*yes, I will be moving out in the next chapters*). Instead, I invited myself to his and he accepted.

I wasn't the woman Olive met a few months ago anymore; I had changed. London, my experiences, my break, had all changed me. That night on my way to Kingston, I had no expectations – I just needed sex. Second time lucky? The first

time can be nerve-racking and the alcohol hadn't helped. So I wanted to give him another sex-chance. Yet, I did not want a serious relationship with him, I just wanted his amazing penis to satisfy me at last.

Date No.3

I hate taking the train but I didn't have a choice. No cab was available and I quickly realised that if I had waited for one, I would have been mega-late.

I was super excited, the horny kind of excitement. I had just shut down my Tinder account and knew that was the end of the fun. Olive had called at the right time and now I was about to have an erotic night of sex.

When Olive got out of his car to greet me, I was shocked. He had lost so much weight I barely recognised him. He could swim in his clothes, which made him look like a naff, and he had gotten rid of his sexy full volume brushed-up hair, settling for a very short Caesar haircut, which gave him an entirely different look that I did not like at all. But that was okay; I was here for his penis. We pecked, sat in his BMW SE Touring (I really wondered why he had such a big car) and headed to his place.

Kingston was beautiful. Olive lived near the Bushy Royal Parks, full of nature with a fantastic view over the River Thames. I was curious to see his newly decorated place.

We parked and entered a beautiful Victorian building with a very chic interior. However, when I entered his apartment, I was shocked by its small size (come on, we were out of London now!), and I quickly felt claustrophobic. Not only was the apartment small, but the size was emphasised by the over-decorated, and over-equipped living room. In fact, Olive's living room looked like a cellar where he stored a variety of

items in various styles and forms. There was no space to move around and I almost had to jump over the sofa to sit on it.

A strange smell reigned in the whole apartment. Olive showed me around – I wasn't really willing but he insisted. The kitchen was disgusting with a few bins overflowing. The bathroom was fairly clean yet a few dirty and empty shampoos were decorating the space powdered by at least a month of dust. His bedroom remained the cleanest room in the whole flat (thank goodness). Yet, the posters of vaginas hanging on his wall took me aback. They were not artistic. They were disgusting, very explicit and a variety of them were exposed black, yellow, pink, white. The only thing that came out of my mouth was, "Sexy". I didn't dare asking if he took those pictures. I wasn't willing to be his next model.

I needed a few glasses of wine to forget that I was about to have sex in the museum of horrors.

Olive cooked for me. To be honest, I don't remember what he cooked, but I wasn't sick the next day. I think he used clean cutlery. So, we dined, chatted and laughed, and after that we rushed into his room.

How did I forget about the croaky pecks? The sound was unbearable! And all those pussies staring at me. In the end, it was the same story; I couldn't concentrate. I know I didn't need to concentrate, but the croaks took over my desire. It was the same circus; Olive went down on me, it was mega bad. I stopped him, went down on him; he was oh-my-goodness big! That was me! He put a condom on and we went on for 15 minutes. Passionate albeit boring sex. I don't know how to explain. The act was passionate, yet the pleasure was non-existent. Olive came, I didn't. But the night was long – we had a few rounds left.

Well, that was what I thought, because Olive offered to cuddle

in front of a movie, which I found cute. After laying on the sofa for 30 minutes I went into a deep coma. Around 3am, feeling mega-horny, I tried to wake him up – impossible! I was about to book a cab to get home and I realised that my phone was out of battery! Shit! I had to wait and I fell back to sleep.

I woke up around 8am to the smell of fresh coffee. Olive had prepared breakfast for us. I smiled, asked for more sex, as I was still unsatisfied, but he politely declined, as he had to go fishing with his dad that morning and was already late. As horny as I was, I hadn't realised he was already wearing his fishing gear. Well, we had breakfast very quietly, Olive took me to the station, and I was ready for the walk of shame to mine. Bad, bad, bad.

Conclusion

Ostensibly I had expected nothing from that date. But I had still been disenchanted again. The last date just confirmed the second. Olive and I were not sexually compatible. Olive sent me more texts for months, accompanied by unsolicited pictures, and he also asked me out to start everything from scratch in the prospect to start a real relationship. I ignored and declined. Today, I label him as the croaking woodpecker. What a strange animal! Next!

Chapter Fourteen – Casse-toi, pauv' con !

Thirty-one-year-old! There I was, celebrating my birthday with my family. I was in Paris with my parents and my five sisters. I also realised that almost a year has passed since I divorced; I could not believe it!

After I had religiously blown out my 31 candles, my sisters and I decided to go clubbing. Deciding where to go descended into a fight that lasted more than an hour, so I decided to be both the Big Sister and the Birthday Girl to cut short the row and go to Le Cab in Palais Royal (sadly closed now.)

Well, Le Cab was a nicely designed spot with a trendy lounge area and a small dance floor *à la parisienne*. A nice mix of hipsters, fashionista, and foreigners were parading and dancing. After easily consuming four bottles of Champ, my sisters and I were all rocking the dance floor.

A few minutes later, a dark and handsome, six-foot-three French man approached me. Meet François, realtor, 34, French, living in Neuilly Sur Seine, a rather chic suburb that was an upscale of Paris. François was totally my type: tall (almost too tall for that matter), green eyes, curly hair and a cyclist man stature. Yummy!

Even though I was not in dating mode, I spent a bit of time chatting with him. My sisters were all smiling and giggling behind him. I cut the chat short, we exchanged numbers and we decided to meet the next evening for a drink.

Date No.1

Wow, I had never been that late in my life. It should have been in the Guinness World Record book. At 8pm, I was still driving in circles trying to find a space to park in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. Why did I drive there? My date had been planned for 6pm. Of course, François was aware of my distress; I had been on the phone with him since I had realised the numerous works in process between Fontainebleau, a suburb in the south of Paris where my parents lived, and the 20th arrondissement of Paris. Plus, I had to drive very carefully as it seemed that my brain was still in England, left side of the road? Right side of the road? I couldn't tell sometimes...

Until I took a roundabout upside-down before the astonished eyes of other drivers who stopped driving and started honking at my driving. Thank God, I didn't kill anyone.

At 8:13pm, I finally arrived at Mama Shelter, and I didn't regret being super dressed-up. The customers of the bar were all chic, beautiful, and eccentric. I loved it. I realised that I had missed these bars *à la française* that London lacked dramatically.

Although, François and I had anticipated just a drink, we decided to dine there. The evening was fun; I learned more about François. His family was from Bordeaux, in fact, his parents still lived there. He had two sisters who were both married with kids. While François had great relationships with his two sisters, it seemed that he was a failure for his parents. I didn't want to dig into this as I thought there was no space for that sort of talk on a first date, but I couldn't help but wonder why would you say such a thing on your first date. Surely, saying that your parents thought you were a failure was not attractive.

Later in the night, I noticed François could not stop looking

nastily at a person on my right.

"Are you ok?" I asked.

"No, I am not really. This guy keeps on looking at you and it is starting to annoy me," he commented.

"You should be proud..." I began to say as a joke to avoid any drama, but François broke in. "I think it is just disrespectful," he answered with a voice full of loathing.

"It's okay, it's not like he was chatting me up in front of you," I insisted, turning my head toward this guy.

And suddenly I heard a big: "Valeriiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeee! I thought it was you!"

"Oh my god Alex! How are you?" I said with relief. Thank God, we would avoid a fight; I knew Alex.

Alex was my university lover. We "dated" for a few months until he was forced by his family to marry his ex-girlfriend who was seven months pregnant. Alex was the nephew of one of the most influential French ministers. We were still very close friends until my husband got too jealous of him. Upon my graduation, we parted ways, despite the fact that we were still in love. I introduced him to François, we had a quick catch-up, exchanged numbers, and I was back into my date.

What a coincidence! I had completely buried this man somewhere in my heart. François questioned our former relationship. I didn't want to say much and just stated that we dated a while ago. François mentioned that he didn't like that sort of guy showing off his €10,000 watch. I could not care less of his comment but cut his matter short by continuing our conversation on the differences between French and English cultures.

François and I still managed to have a fabulous evening. I realised how much I missed the French culture and lifestyle, the bars, the jokes, their facial expressions, the passion, the way they talked and simply the way they seduced you.

There was no confusion on the date. I knew François liked me. And when he kissed me at the end of the night – oh my! It was a real French kiss: deep, passionate and sweet.

François asked if I wanted to sleep at his place pretexting that I was too drunk to drive. He was right; I was drunk. I gently declined and I decided to sleep at my flat in the 4th *arrondissement* that was just 15 minutes away. I checked online to make sure I didn't have any guests booked via the agency. Thank God, it wasn't the case; I wasn't ready to drive back to Fontainebleau drunk.

When I got into my building, I realised that I hadn't been there for ages. In fact, it's been more than a year and that last time was with my ex-husband. The thought of it made me want to puke. When I got into my apartment, it was even worse, the memory of us choosing the furniture and all the compromises I had made in the decoration made me sick. I spent part of the night, sick, in my bathroom. When I felt better, I went back to my parent's where my sisters were waiting and begging for gossip.

We all questioned how this relationship could work with me being in the London and him in Paris. I had no intention of living back to Paris; my career was at its peak in London and I had new friends I adored. Most of my old friends from uni were all having international and careers.

François was a great guy; handsome in his way, intelligent, and ambitious with a lot of banter and great conversation. My night had been great and I liked him. He looked honest and profoundly passionate. He seemed to be open to the idea of a

long-distance relationship. Well, they had never worked out for me, but we were talking about Paris where I often go to see my family. Would it be possible?

Date No.2

We were at Gare du Nord, two hours before my return to London. We were having a coffee and a *crêpe Suzette flambée* at Terminus Nord. After an hour of laughs, conversation and having shared our love and personal experiences, I could not help but ask François what he expected from this "relationship". Why was he interested in me living more than 200 miles from his home?

"I like you a lot," he told me. "I knew we would get on as soon as I saw you arriving at Le Cab. And I also feel that we will live a great relationship. I do not want the distance to be a hindrance and I'm ready to try to make this work and I do not work on Fridays so I could come visit you on weekends. And you know what? You could be my guide in London next weekend; I have never been there. Do not worry, I will book a hotel; I do not want to invade your private space."

I liked his answer and I accepted his self-invitation. I even asked him to sleep at mine upon his last night in London, assuming everything went well. Was that a mistake? I was going to find out soon.

A Frenchman in London

Friday noon, François arrived early in London and checked in at the Capital Hotel close to mine. He joined me in Holborn and we went for a quick lunch at Prêt à Manger.

For those who don't know, Prêt à Manger is a British (not French as the name may suggest) fast food chain, which provides fresh sandwiches and salads.

So, François had been there for just a few hours but he already loved the London vibe. He immediately fell in love with the Big Smoke. We discussed everything and nothing: his journey, the Paris he had started to hate more and more, and that he would surely consider living in a foreign country. I was smiling because that was the feeling I wanted him to have. I wanted to introduce him to London at its best: sunny, cheerful, tolerant, stable and inspiring. So far, François was smitten.

In the evening, we decided to have a stroll in the centre: Green Park for its amazing impressive architecture, Hyde Park for a romantic walk, Piccadilly for its internationally known big advertisement screens, Covent Garden for the amazing cute café and restaurants, and Soho for its night scene. We stopped to talk to tourists and some Londoners. François discovered a living, vibrant, and welcoming London. He told me, "I feel that all dreams are possible here. I've exchanged more business cards in one night than in a year in Paris." François and I had a great evening; we had drinks at the W and ate at Asia de Cuba, which had become one of my favourite restaurants.

At midnight François felt tired from his trip, so we decided to call it a night. In the taxi, we were kissing passionately. Wow! French kisses! How had I even been able to date without them? He kissed me without restraint, his tongue deliciously tasting mine. I was excited, but I decided to be wise and let him go back to his hotel. Sex could wait; it was way too early.

Saturday

I joined François at his hotel for a hearty breakfast. He told me he wanted to live in London and was trying to find a job. I found his decision a bit too quick but I was happy for him, was offering to help him find a place to live (as I didn't want him to stick at mine), and write a CV in English. François intended to work as a waiter during the first few months and take English classes. Then he would find a job in

communication, the industry he had always wanted to work in.

Later that morning, François and I went to the British Museum where we shared our passion for culture. It was nice to speak with someone as impassioned as me about history and art.

In the afternoon, we went to the other side of London: the South Bank for its the amazing view of London from Waterloo Bridge.

We decided to have lunch at the South Bank Centre, which is famous for its multi-venue arts centre stopping at London Eye, London Bridge and Big Ben.

For dinner, we opted for the OXO tower, which is one of the most iconic towers of London and the home of a couple of designers' studios that were open to the public. I picked to go there for (again) the amazing and romantic views of the river and city.

At OXO, we dined outdoor which was the perfect place to watch the London skyline transition from day to night. Right next to us, was sitting a lovely French couple that joined our conversation about life in London. They had lived in London for nearly ten years and conveyed their brilliant careers and how they were planning their future in France. In fact, they were spending their last week in London because the husband had accepted a position as a Chief Executive Officer for an international company in Paris. I loved their story and admired their careers and lifestyles.

However, François was awfully quiet. I did not understand why, but when the couple left, he began his diatribe. "Assholes!" he started. I was astonished. He continued, "Bluff and smoke! Just fucking spoiled children who grew up in 8th arrondissement with a silver spoon, went to a prestigious

business schools that cost ass's skin yet teach the same things as all other schools and now he's babbling about becoming a CEO in France. Of course, he will! France is a fucking elitist country; they only employ people from expensive business schools. Easy! That's why I hate France now. So disappointing! I can't wait to fuck off!"

I listened to his rant for ten minutes. I did not like this François. Plus, I had come from the same school, so I really felt targeted. I did not want to get into a debate that would ruin the night.

The dinner over, François and I decided to go dancing. I think it was a good thing to forget what I had just heard and not to listen him to anymore.

We went to the Box: commercial, fun, and affordable with a diverse selection of music. Perfect for tourists! François loved it; we danced all night and I liked that "François": joyous, sexy, and friendly. I couldn't wait to taste the carnal pleasure of his body.

In the early hours of the morning, we sang in the crowded streets of Piccadilly, desperately looking for a taxi. After 30 minutes of waiting, we managed to get an Addison Lee, and before the driver's irritated eyes we deliciously kissed. This time his cold hands had gone under my top; my nipples responded immediately. I was boiling. I wanted him that night and not another.

There was only one stop that night and we made love. And I wanted more, more and more. I loved his penis; I was addicted. I loved the thrill François brought at every penetration. It was intense, passionate and sensual. Each of his movements made me shudder; I had multiple mini orgasms. François was playing sensually with my body. I was electric.

Upon awakening, François had bought fruits for our late

breakfast. He had delayed his checkout and told me that he would remain until Tuesday night. I asked him, "And your job?"

"Do not worry, I'm a self-employed realtor; I do whatever I want. Plus, I had no appointments scheduled," he reassured. But I reminded him that I was working and not self-employed. He retorted that he would go shopping for his family and wait quietly at mine, cooking dinner for both of us. I smiled. Done deal!

Sunday

In the afternoon, we stayed in my area and went to the Kensington Gardens and the Saatchi Museum in Chelsea hosting a private exhibition. That night we dined, local again, at Gaucho, and I hastened him home, pretexting that I had an early morning. But in fact, I wanted him; I thought of that night of love and his penis all day. That was all I had in mind. I am not even sure I listened to anything he said on that day. And that's what happened; we made love almost all night and the only reason we stopped was that my conscience reminded me of the hard day ahead of me at the office.

Monday

At work, I could hardly concentrate. I kept thinking of François and his penis again. I was eager to get home to see him.

In fact, this gave me the courage to lie to my boss that I was not feeling well and it was better that I go. He believed me easily, as this busy weekend hadn't made me look any prettier. I needed some beauty sleep.

On my way, François told me that he was waiting at the Paxtons Head, a local pub of mine. I thought we were staying

at mine? Grrr... I was a bit annoyed, but I thought that wine-altered sex would not be too bad tonight. François was seating in the back of the pub. I kissed him, feeling euphoric to see him, but I could not wait to be in my apartment, in his arms, riding his penis again. But this joy was short-lived.

"I did not know you were loaded," he howled.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked him calmly, surprised by his behaviour. What was he on about?

"Yes, you are! I saw that you have properties in Paris! Not one, not two, but three! How is that possible? You're just turned 31! And two of them are located in the centre of Paris, while most young people are struggling to get just one!" he stated, his voice full of jealousy.

"How do you know that? And it's none of your business anyway!" I responded.

"I went through your papers and..." he tried to explain.

I interrupted him, anger enveloping all of my body. "You had a look at my stuff? My papers? How could you? I trusted you when I left you at mine and gave you my keys!" I yelled back.

"Yes, and so what? I'm your man!" he retorted.

"You're not my man; I hardly know you. Are you crazy or something? How do you allow yourself as a guest to dig into my business? You're not my husband! Nor my boyfriend! Give me my keys back immediately!" I argued.

But again, François interrupted me, "You also went to one of these prestigious schools? Of course, you were successful in Paris! You have no merit for your career. You are like those buffoons we met! You're one of those spoiled rotten children! I

am a real estate agent, and I don't even own a flat! What's your secret? Did you sleep with someone? Lie? Cheat? Steal?" he questioned.

"My keys, now!" I commanded. I couldn't believe my ears. The surrounding tables were watching us dumbfounded, they couldn't (thankfully) understand a word of what we were arguing about in French, but they seemed pretty intrigued, I could tell. I had to leave.

"No! Stupid, spoiled bitch! We need to talk now!" François barked back to me, spraying his spit on my face.

"You are going to give my keys back immediately, or I am going to call the police. I don't want to talk with you," I warned.

"You gave them to me, you remember? Now, you don't want to speak with me? Why? Have you realised I am too poor to be with you?"

"They are not yours and I didn't give them to you. I am not kidding, I am calling the police now and will shout thief at you!"

"Oh, my God! The spoiled girl wants her keys! I can see your fucking spoiled side now. I bet you always get what you want, when you want. You're just a poor dumb spoiled bitch," he jested, handing me my keys.

I didn't even reply to his insults. I just ran toward the exit, swearing I'd never come to this pub again in my life.

I did not believe what had happened. It only took one day in my place for this guy to dig into my businesses. I ran towards home very upset, and soon realised that François was running after me. I reached my building, but he was just behind me. I didn't open the door. Instead I turned around and said;

"And now what? What do you want?"

"You owe me money, spoiled bitch," he choked, breathing heavily.

"Excuse me? I don't think so! For what? I am going home now. I don't want you at mine," I replied.

"You remember the OXO's dinner I forked out for; you're fucking rich you should have paid for it. It's like loose change for you," he scolded.

"I'll give you your money, do not worry," I lied. There was no way I was about to give a penny to this guy.

"I need to take my suitcase, bitch. Now you want to steal my stuff to make money out of it?"

My God, this guy was nonsense. I just responded; "I will bring it to you myself. You're not coming up to mine."

"No, I want to take it myself."

"It is out of question. You're not invited anymore. If something is missing just let me know, I'll give it back to you. If you follow me now, I will be calling the police. You better wait here. I am not joking."

François relented and stayed in front of my building. I went up the stairs, all shaking and furious. In my apartment I realised that, indeed, my things were not in place. François had excavated everywhere, even the smallest corners. I was on fire. Nobody had enraged me that much for a long time, and he had to be French! The icing on the cake of the evening was when I realised that he had started to shout, and I could hear him despite my windows being closed. "Give me my suitcase

back, you dumb bitch! Or I will call the police! You have no right to keep it!"

Oh no, this was a nightmare. François was ridiculing me in front of my whole neighbourhood.

I went ballistic, took all of his stuff hastily, put it all in his suitcase, without even closing it and threw it through the window. "*Here it is! Casse-toi, pauv' con !!*" I yelled.

After that, I never saw François again. Next!

Chapter Fifteen – The Devil Wears Primark

I think it took me about a month to recover from the François experience. Wow! I never thought I'd be able to throw a suitcase out of a window in Knightsbridge. I was hoping that none of my neighbours had seen me or heard our fight. I was very discreet for a while afterwards and would ensure that nobody was in the building when I was leaving or entering my flat.

This lasted until I forgot about François when I met James during one of my nights out with the ladies. James was at a Jimmy Choo private tea party in Chelsea. He came along with his sister Charlotte who approached me first, complimenting my jacket. After chatting about shoes, beauty and makeup, James abruptly interrupted our rather girly conversation. We switched very easily to the latest hot plays to see in town. After a few hours of sharing life experiences, Bianca interrupted what seemed to be an impromptu date *à trois* to remind me that it was time to shop.

James and I exchanged numbers and I disappeared into a crowd full of shoe-fanatics begging for additional discounts. I was soooo in!

Saturday morning, upon the completion of my monthly beauty treat at the Bulgari hotel, I received a text from James: < Hey beauty, I wonder if you are free this weekend. I'm in London and would love to see you.> I then understood that he wasn't living here. Obviously, I didn't like this, but I still recalled the lovely night we spent together. I also postponed my response; I had still a facial to enjoy.

A couple of hours later, laying on my sofa at home, I had a speed text session with James. I declined his invite for the night but was happy to have a drink Sunday afternoon. He accepted.

So, meet James, 40, 5'10, stocky, brown eyes, short hair and a smile to die for. He lived in Southampton and was staying at his sister's in London for the weekend. We decided to meet at Putney Bridge in a pub called Duke's Head.

James was waiting for me at the bar and welcomed me with a warm hug. It was nice to see that smile again though I wasn't quite sure about the funny smell coming off of him. Where was it coming from?

After ordering our drinks and making a few silly jokes about shoes, we started talking about each other. Unfortunately, I had to take my Journey by Amouage-perfumed scarf to cover my nose from the unbearable smell, which, in fact, seemed to be coming out of his mouth. I tried very hard to concentrate on what James was saying. I understood that he was an environmental consultant. He lived on a boat in Southampton, loved sailing, had a younger sister (that I had met) and was passionate about reality TV (Hick!) pretending it was a full demonstration of how human nature is. Debatable...

I also realised that even though we had a great night at Jimmy Choo, we didn't have much in common. Plus, the more James was talking, the more his breath was getting close to a dog poo smell. I really wanted to puke and even my scarf couldn't help any more at this stage. It was the ultimate deal breaker! Why now? I didn't remember this at the Choo's event. What could he have possibly eaten to get that smell?

Well, the date got even worse when he asked: "How much did you buy your scarf?" Well, that was a funny question. I only

responded, "What sort of question is this?"

"I am just asking. I am sure that you paid more than £200 for it. I can't understand why people put so much money on a simple scarf. Not only scarves, but also bags, shoes, shirts, suits and anything! They are all the same at the end of the day. Nobody notices if it's from Prada or from Tesco.

Plus, it's quite warm in this pub, so I don't understand your need to show off your Hermes scarf."

I simply frowned, "Huh? What is this all about?"

He barked back at me, "What? You don't think I'm right?"

"Well, I think you're wrong. But it's your point of view. Plus, I am not showing off my scarf, I think I am getting a cold," I lied.

"Seriously? You think I am wrong? A scarf like this costs £3 at Primark. Same texture and it keeps you as warm." He added, "Your Burberry coat; nonsense! I bought my mum the same style, again at Primark! And it's better looking than yours."

"I think I am going home as I am getting very sick," I pleaded, trying not to collapse at the smell, which seemed to be getting stronger.

"I am sure, my darling, sick of the truth." He added, "Where do you think I bought this? Touch the fabric and tell me."

I couldn't believe I was having this conversation with someone I met at a Jimmy Choo's event; it just didn't make sense. Well, his knit cardigan was stiff to the touch and the threads were loose. I could tell it was new, but it was full of micro-bobbles and the buttonholes were all flimsy. I just said, "Well, it's not Prada."

"Come on! You're such a liar! How can you tell? What about my shirt?"

The feel was different. Very soft; I could easily wash my face with it without risking a breakout. It had neat and sleek facing; the stitching of buttons was impeccable. This was a branded shirt! I just declared, "Branded?" hoping it wasn't a trap.

"No way! You're a good guesser, miss," James replied, with a voice full of hate.

"I am afraid I can just feel it. Sorry, I have to go. I am really getting a cold," I protested.

"You can't feel anything, my darling. You are just a good guesser," James stated.

"I don't feel well; I think I sh..." was the only response I could give because, now, I was really getting sick; my stomach was intoxicated by his smell and was begging for the toilet.

But he interrupted, confiding, "This was a present from my mum from Dior. This is the only branded piece I have and I don't aim to have any more. This very stylish jacket: Primark, shoes: Primark, Gloves: charity, my hat: Primark. I am worth £100 in clothes but I am worth a billion pounds of love." I think I lost my tongue when he said that.

"And look at you; your coat: £1000 from Burberry, if not more, your bag: £500, a designer dress... maybe £300, your Jimmy Choos: £300. And then what? What do you have in your heart? What do you do for the people? How does it make you feel to know that I am worth 1/3 of you in clothes? Prouder? Superior?" he complained.

Wow... what the hell was going on with these people? Two in a row! François and now him, was it Numbskull-Only Month?

I got up to put my coat on.

But he didn't seem to care much and added, "The thing is, now you make me feel very uncomfortable, and I am pressured to look the part every time because of women like you."

"James, you are putting pressure on yourself. I've never asked anyone to dress like me or buy the same brands as me. Everybody's different and I appreciate this difference. I think you're just insecure. I am leav..." but he broke in, "Why do you feel the need to dress like this? Why do people like you feel the need to travel business or first class? If the flight crashed, you'd die anyway! At the end of the day, you're just a lonely woman sleeping alone at night. It doesn't change anything about you! I am sick of people like you! You evil fashion-victims!" he squeaked.

I had my coat on, ready to leave. "James, I have heard enough for tonight. I am not feeling well and you're not helping. Have a good night," I affirmed.

He grabbed my arm gently and said, his voice full of assurance, "Well, at least you're not wearing clothes with a big and obnoxious logo on, so I can date you."

I smiled and jested, "I am afraid, I am not going to date you, James. This was our first and last date. In fact, I am going to leave now and on my way home I will buy a £300 logo t-shirt from Gucci and sleep with it. Thanks for the lecture, very much appreciated." That was how I left that date, leaving a £20 note on the bar and cackling on my way out.

Of course, I never bought that t-shirt (yuck!), but I was so happy to tell him that I would. Next!

Chapter Sixteen – A Chavtastic Experience

After James and François, I quickly realised that I didn't need to meet men online to stumble upon crazy creatures. With both, I'd experienced the worst I could possibly get. Well, no; Gary was still by far the worst experience ever. So after a tiny break, I decided to check my matches on eHarmony. One of them was Wayne.

Pre-Date

According to his profile, Wayne was a very successful businessman who travelled around the world. Whilst his profile was exceptionally well written, I was put off by his spelling errors and the horrible grammar on his emails. Plus, Wayne was constantly writing after 3am. Well, he travelled a lot, so I assumed that he was just in another country.

After we had exchanged a few emails, we decided to organise a date in the East End. Wayne lived in Dagenham, a small town in Essex, so it only made sense to meet halfway in Shoreditch at The Dragon Bar.

Date No.1

I arrived right on time and Wayne welcomed me with a warm hug and what I understood as an "*Aw rate?*" I didn't reply and just smiled politely.

The Dragon bar was an unpretentious venue with an eclectic mix of music. Very Shoreditch! Very hip! And Wayne seemed to be in his element, wearing a three-piece suit which looked slightly too tight for his body.

So, meet Wayne, a dark 36-year-old gentleman with beautiful sparkling brown eyes. Built like a rugby player, he was perfumed like he had dropped his whole bottle of Armani on his suit but I couldn't help but think that it was better than James' bad breath.

I quickly noticed his thick pair of gold earrings and his right hand was covered with gold diamond rings. Wow, the man was wearing more jewellery than me, and I was not a drop impressed. In fact, it was a turn-off.

Plus, for the first 30 minutes I struggled to understand him. I was looking at him, my mouth Sahara-dry, wondering if he was really speaking English or if I missed something in the language evolution. After a strenuous time translating Waynenglish into proper English, my brain realised that his grammar mistakes on emails were also vocals. Wayne was saying, "he don't" instead of "he doesn't"; "you was" instead of "you were", and so on. But, my French brain eventually got his way of speaking: "Innit" was "isn't it" and "me" instead of "my".

Wayne kept on calling me 'babes' which had the tendency to annoy the heck out of me, especially when I realised that he called everybody around us the same.

I understood that Wayne had a couple of businesses but the most fruitful one was the purchase and resale of luxury cars. Yet, he owned a discreet Mercedes, as he didn't like to show any exterior signs of wealth. I couldn't help but say, "Well, you have a whole lot of diamond gold rings." He tried to reply, but answered a text on his phone instead. Exasperating!

Well, despite his phone glued on his right wrist, Wayne and I still had a few laughs and a bit of banter about everything and nothing. It was a fun night but I quickly realised that I hadn't learned anything about him. When I wanted to ask more

personal questions, Wayne checked his big diamond watch that almost burned my eyes and told me that he had to go. All this was so abrupt and frustrating as I had just started to understand him. Plus, I didn't know anything about him, which I suppose made him an intriguing guy, as I wanted to know more.

Post-date No.1

I didn't really know what to think of Wayne. We spoke about life but didn't get to know each other. All I knew, was that he had a funny accent, was full of banter and jokes, and made me laugh out loud when I could understand him. Plus, mega bonus, Wayne knew how to dress. The jewellery, well we could get rid of that later. So I decided to accept his invite for a second date, which would take place at a greyhound-racing track. I had never been to one and I couldn't wait to experience.

Date No.2

This time, we decided to meet in Dagenham. I assumed the racing was there, so I was happy to travel to get away from the hustle and bustle of London. Well, I didn't know I was going to such a depressing town. At the destination, I was so surprised by the different atmosphere that surrounded the town. The people looked so morose too. The weather didn't help either – it was pouring and people were appearing and disappearing in the big smoke released by the rain. It was dark, gloomy, and vicious.

Whilst I was waiting for Wayne at Dagenham Heathway station, I realised that in this part of town, Adidas hooded tracksuits were back in fashion, I might have looked old-fashioned by the look of the ladies passing by me. They almost made me feel uncomfortable, until I heard Wayne shouting my name. I was relieved, until I realised that he had come to pick

me up in a flashy red Mercedes Coupé. Matters got worse when I got into the car and realised that he was not as elegant as our first date. What the hell had happened since our last meeting?! Wayne was wearing a Burberry baseball cap, a Lacoste sportswear ensemble which consisted of a green sequined hoodie and cropped trousers of the same style which showed his white socks, probably washed with bleaching gel, and the famous old-fashioned Adidas Stan Smiths. The whole look was an eyesore, like a vampire it should have never have seen the light of day. I was in pain; there was no way I was going to my first greyhound-racing track with a clown. I was quickly reassured. Wayne hadn't managed to get tickets, so he asked me if we could just get some food instead as he had a busy afternoon and would have to leave early. I wasn't disappointed but I lied, "Oh, that is a shame. Next time."

So, we went to a restaurant without a name; there was no sign whatsoever at the entrance. All I knew was that they were serving Turkish cuisine. Wayne ordered a variety of dishes so we could try everything. And, all through the date, friends of his would pass by and recognise him through the window just to come into the restaurant to say hello, shake hands or have a quick Waynenglish conversation.

Finally alone, Wayne handed a small box to me. "Here's my first gift to you, Frenchie." Well, this was a first and very different from the traditional rose bouquet. I opened the box, not sure what to expect. As soon as I realised what the gift was, I knew I had to decline. Wayne had given me the latest Oyster Rolex. I was shocked by the gift and managed to quaver, "I can't accept this, I am afraid. I barely know you, Wayne."

"Please take it. Don't feel like you need to marry me," he smiled.

"Sorry Wayne I can't. But you can keep it for me. If our

relationship evolves in a few months' time, I'd be more than happy to have it, but I can't accept this present now," I whispered, hampered by the indiscreet looks at our table.

I handed the watch back. Wayne seemed disappointed at first, but he quickly went back to his usual banter and jokes. Over a silent moment, I couldn't help but wonder, what sort of business could make him buy a simple date a £10,000 watch? Or was it fake?

"You seem to be very successful in your businesses, what else do you do except from selling luxury cars? I want to have my own business so you might inspire me," I enquired.

"You really want to know babes?" Wayne muttered.

"Yes, I want to buy myself an Oyster," I joked.

"Really babes?" he questioned, astonished.

"Yes, please," I insisted, bothered by the "babes" again.

He started, "You could be my queen, you know. And everybody would respect you in Essex. You're a good classy girl, you are worth more than the billions of bitches I've fucked." I just acquiesced on this one, not sure whether to take it as a compliment or not. But as soon as he said that, I knew that I wouldn't see him again.

"I am a Charlie wholesale dealer," he confessed.

"Charlie?" I repeated, not sure of what he was talking about.

"Yes, but I don't sell small quantities like some losers," he boasted. "In fact, the all England works for me."

I wasn't sure what Wayne meant by Charlie, but for some

reason I decided not to ask more questions. The tone he employed and the way he lowered his voice made me think that it wasn't legal.

Again, Wayne checked his watch and had to go. He left me alone in the middle of nowhere. How was I going to get home from here? Pissed, I called an Uber.

Post-date No.2

Ok, I learned that Charlie stood for cocaine. Sorry, I am French... Wayne was a successful (?) drug dealer who had not been in prison yet, I believe. I was shocked by the discovery; this dating experience had shown me the worst of London (and Paris) and I was expecting much better to come.

I decided not to see Wayne again. When he sent me a text saying: < Sorry babes, I have to go to South America. Let's catch up on my return. > I didn't bother replying.

But one day...

I was having dinner with Camellia at Quaglino's when she realised that someone was staring at me insistently. When I dared to look in his direction, Wayne was smiling at me, accompanied by a beautiful lady. I was glad he had forgotten about me and I smiled at him and his guest.

Later that night, Wayne texted me, apologising that he hadn't been in touch and couldn't say a proper hello at Quaglino's. I quickly replied: < It's ok, I know you were seeing other women. I am seeing other men too. It's not like we're married or engaged. We just had two dates. >

Obviously in these circumstances, I didn't want to tell him yet that I wasn't interested in seeing more of him. I quickly realised that I should have when Wayne texted me back: < It

was my sister, you stupid bitch! Fucking French whore! I was about to buy you a car! I should have listened to my friend when he said that French women are unfaithful and ...> I didn't read the whole text. I deleted it and blocked Wayne. What a chavtastic experience! Next!

Chapter Seventeen - The Cad and The Lady

Another one of my eHarmony matches was Marco, a tall, dark, funny Italian man. He travelled the world and worked for various fashion brands. Upon our email exchanges, he seemed very cultivated, literate and ambitious.

So, meet Marco, 5'11, slim figure, black wavy hair and a goatee beard. I really appreciated that he called me to arrange the date and we had a fun and enthusiastic call. I was really excited to date a stylish Italian.

The date

We met at Oxford Circus station. I don't understand why people like to meet at stations? Why not head directly to a pub or bar? I wouldn't mind waiting. Sometimes, I wonder if it's not a lack of confidence; the fear of standing at a table alone. Well, I haven't done it so far because I am always late or right on time, but I surely wouldn't mind. Anyhow, Marco was waiting for me next to the Nike store. I immediately recognised him. He looked the same yet with additional lines on the forehead. He shook my hand, but I had already aimed to kiss his cheek in my French way, which made our salutation quite awkward.

Marco asked me to follow him without saying a single word or without any sign of happiness or satisfaction to see each other for real.

I followed Marco, and all through our trip to this far-located pub he was looking at himself in every mirror or window possible, always readjusting something on him: his jacket, his

hat, his glasses.

We arrived at O'Neill's, which is an Irish pub located on Wardour Street. Marco opened the door but probably forgot that I was with him as the thick glass collided with my head, making me see stars for a second and feel rather dazed. I shouted out (very) loud in French out of pain, "Aieeeeeeeee." The crowd looked at him in disgust and a few men came to me, but Marco quickly stepped back apologising and ashamed. "I am so sorry my love. But no drama needed, you'll survive baby," he said unemotionally.

I was still checking that I hadn't lost an eye, when Marco sat at a table and asked what I wanted to drink. "What about a plaster and a painkiller," I joked.

Marco looked at me unfazed. I requested a glass of Merlot. A few minutes later, he came back with a beer. I wasn't sure what had happened or if my Merlot was coming, so I didn't say anything for a few seconds until he asked, "Are you going to let me drink alone?" I then understood that I had to order it myself.

Heading towards the counter, all I had in my mind was, "Should I stay or should I go now?" While waiting for my drink: "Should I stay or should I go now?" Whilst heading back towards our table: "Should I stay or should I go now?"

But I decided to stay. Why would he be here with me if he weren't interested? What sort of guy acts like that? I wanted to found out.

As soon as I arrived, Marco started babbling about his life, his marvellous flat in Chelsea, his beautiful sister, and his fantastic car. I wondered if he wasn't about to compliment how beautiful his poo was.

Marco bragged about how his designs had been likened to

Alexander McQueen and that he successfully graduated from St Martins College and that all other fashion schools in London were shit and produced losers. Considering how the date was so far, I would have thought he was coming from Asshole Boot Camp. Well, everybody has a right to be big-headed, but some like Marco were just exaggerating and an earsore for me.

When I finally decided that I had had enough and was about to tell him, his phone rang and obviously being rude as he was, he picked up without apologising. I was putting my coat on.

"Sorry Vanessa, give me one minute," he finally begged and apologised.

"My name's Valérie thanks. I have to go." I replied firmly.

Marco hung up and thanked me for the great evening he had. Well, we were not at the same date, but maybe he just liked listening to himself. I smiled. We kissed goodbye politely. Needless to say, I didn't see Marco again. Especially when I got home and realised I had the biggest bump in my life on my forehead. It was so painful!

Marco dared to text me a few days later, but I didn't bother replying. I knew from that day that I would never marry a man without manners. Next!

Chapter Eighteen - My Heart's a Whore

I don't think a man had ever waited so long to see me. And I don't think I had ever met such a determined and persistent man. Meet William, 36-year-old. I knew no more than that.

His profile was empty and I had no idea what he looked like, which was probably the reason I didn't bother replying back straightaway. Still upset by Gary's episode for a long time, I was not willing to go on a blind date.

So William was chasing me for at least ten months. After exchanging a few emails that I found very entertaining, I asked for a picture that he refused to provide. Reason: he was a successful high-profile businessman and didn't want to be recognised. At first I declined all of his dates, saying that I was busy, which was true, but I didn't bother offering alternatives.

And then, one day, William sent an email: "Give me your availability."

I had no choice now but to tell the truth. I could either say, "Sorry, I am superficial, and I won't see you," or I could just go and have either a nice surprise and have fun, or a bad surprise and hopefully still have fun.

Pre-date No.1 with William

We initially planned a date on Wednesday evening at Gaucho Chelsea. Unfortunately, I had to cancel, and it wasn't intentional. My shower broke (lame excuse, yet real) and I had to call a plumber urgently. We rescheduled for the following evening.

I didn't know whom I was meeting, so there was no pressure, I felt completely carefree. I wasn't expecting anything from this trip but some fun and laughter.

Date No.1 with William

William texted me a few times before our date: < Are we still on for 7pm? >

An hour later: < Hello Missy, busy man here! Could you confirm please? >

I was so busy at work that I only read William 's texts, when I grabbed the cab. I just replied: < Yes that is fine. > He replied with a smiley: < Ok, I am leaving the office now. >

I wondered if he really needed me to re-confirm. We had only set the date yesterday. Oh, my! I realised that I was changing. It was something I used to complain about when I started dating in this country! Well, I was officially Frenglish!

I arrived at Gaucho right on time. It was so quiet I could hear the flies flying. Three men were sitting at a table in the back, probably talking business. William wasn't there.

I sat in a discreet corner, so if William were ugly, I wouldn't be seen by anyone with him. I know I was back to my shallow-self. I ordered a glass of wine. After ten minutes of waiting, I started getting nervous. I had already finished my drink. Then my nervousness transformed into hangry-ness. So, 15 minutes later, I packed up and left the table, upset by the wait. When I reached the exit, a man stopped me.

"Valérie?"

"William?" I replied, not sure who I was talking to.

"Yes, William, nice to meet you."

"You're late!" I said.

He didn't reply and instead just gave me a cheeky smile that made me melt like burnt snow. Wow! Those eyes and that smile. So stunning!

Meet William, 5'10 and slim, with a wonderful smile and brown-green almond eyes. This man was gorgeous except he was bald, not what I usually looked for, but I liked his style.

We were blocking the door and people passing by were starting to grumble. I walked without further words back towards the table I had been sitting at. They hadn't undressed it. William was following me and I could see him on the shiny walls of Gaucho, checking out my derriere with a smile on his face.

I was glad I had come, forgetting all about his lateness. We started our date talking about me. William wanted to know everything; I couldn't ask him questions back as it seemed he didn't want to say much. Well, Mr High-Profile Businessman, I'd never seen your face anywhere. But, what do I know?

I felt as though I was giving him a monologue about my life, but from time-to-time, William interrupted me with some comments and jokes. Even though, I wasn't learning anything about him, some kind of energy was pulling me toward him. He wasn't quite my type, but I was drawn to him. It was carnal, passionate, and illogical.

Every time William smiled at me, my body reacted as if he were licking me all over. And when he kissed me at the end of the date, I felt my heart falling. It was powerful. This guy already had so much power over me, it was scary. It was probably the reason why I decided to play by the dating rules.

I would see other guys until I had a ring on my finger or got into a relationship, so I wouldn't be disappointed if I lost him and I wouldn't expect anything from anyone unless love hit me.

And in this instance, I had a date with Richard and at least I knew what he looked like this time.

Pre-date No.1 with Richard

Meet Richard, a 30-year-old, dark hair, dark eyes, slim, shy, ambitious, 6-foot tall. My turn off: his age. I didn't really date people of my age. I found them immature, often inconsistent and chiefly bad in bed. But when I spoke with Richard over the phone he seemed sound, hard-headed and mature for his age. He had a furniture company operating all over Europe, and I liked the wise way he spoke to me, so I thought I would make an exception.

Despite having William on my mind and hoping for another round of fiery and magical kisses with him very soon, I went on a date with Richard.

Date No.1 with Richard

We set up the date on a Tuesday at Muriel's Kitchen in South Kensington. Muriel's Kitchen is a Quintessentially British bistro serving the best pancakes of South West London.

I knew the place very well; I loved having my brunches there. Richard was waiting for me. This guy was even better looking than his pictures; he was so totally my type. He was also kind of shy. This guy was hot and he didn't seem to know. So sexy!

This time, Richard didn't know anything about me, but I knew a lot about him. I animated the date, asking questions, making jokes and genuinely wanted to know more about him. Richard

was so shy that he tended to stutter and mumble, which wasn't a good combination for my French ears. Still, he was better than the Mumbler, and I could understand him.

By the end of the date, I had learned that Richard grew up in Chichester; he was a furniture designer and had his own brand.

Upon my departure, Richard asked me if I wanted to see him again, mentioning that he really enjoyed my company and he would love to know more about me. He also admitted that he had been very nervous by the thought of meeting me and even more so during the date, but he felt like we could be amazing partners. Well, I accepted the invitation to see him again and I couldn't wait to get to know a more comfortable Richard. When I got into the cab, he approached me so close that I thought he was about to kiss me, but then he suddenly drew back and didn't even peck me on the cheek. Weird! I sooo wanted to compare his kisses with William's.

Date No.2 with William

Aphrodite Taverna, a restaurant serving authentic Cypriot cuisine, in Notting Hill. Despite its humble staff and its weird copper pots on the wall, Aphrodite Taverna was frequented by locals and celebrities and was always busy. This was where I was meeting William that night.

When I reached the restaurant, William was waiting for me. Upon my arrival at the table, he took me by the neck and gave me one of his powerful kisses. My body shivered again. This time we had a romantic dinner date in a discreet corner with candles and music. William was wearing a suit with three buttons off; I could see his fit and toned torso, which put me in a very horny state. Torsos are my soft spots – I couldn't stop staring at it and guessing how the rest of his body must look. I really liked this guy – at least I was sexually attracted.

During this date, I learned slightly more about William as he started to open up about his past. I learned that he had two sisters and one brother. He had grown up in Scotland in a little town where his parents had a farm. His parents divorced when he was 13 and he curiously didn't want to talk more about them.

However, William was very open to speaking about his brother and sisters with whom he had a very deep and close relationship.

All through the dinner, William was very affectionate. He was touching my face, caressing my arms and giving me kisses. He didn't stop telling me that I was beautiful and for once this wasn't followed by the lame and boring line: "You know it; every man must say the same."

The way William looked at me, the sensual tone in his voice, his delicate touches. William was just melting me away. This feeling was so bizarre as I barely knew him. This date was magical again; I wanted him to take me to his place nearby, but it didn't happen. He just hailed a taxi for me and kissed me. The date was over, and I went home daydreaming of his body and our next date.

All the feelings I had during this date perplexed me as to whether or not I should see Richard again. The feelings I had for William were incomparable. I wasn't married to him, or engaged; I was just dating. So, I decided to continue playing the dating game. Bianca's style!

Date No.2 with Richard

This game was about to be hard to play. Especially when Richard said that we were having a surprise date all organised by him. I felt guilty; he was making so much effort to please

me and I was seeing another man. I was also hoping that we were not going anywhere near William's place. But why was I nervous? Why feeling blame-worthy? Was it not the way this game was played? Well, I supposed I was thinking too "French". William and Richard knew this game better than me, they were British. So, I didn't think they would see any problem with me seeing someone else. But why was it hard to convince myself? And what if I saw William with another date? Well, I would be clearly upset. I needed to understand that it was the nature of the game and I needed to play it to its fullest. And, if I was to see William with another woman, at least I had lovely Richard.

Richard took me to a musical. As soon as he mentioned the word "musical", I knew I was about to hate the date. Again, I wouldn't be able to be myself and would have to shut my mouth during the whole show.

But when I learned that we were seeing Thriller, I was slightly more enthusiastic. At least I would be listening to great old Michael Jackson's songs.

So, we entered the Lyric Theatre, ordered two glasses of wine and sat in a box very close to the stage. This time, Richard was much more pleasant and selfless, taking my hands to the box, kissing my neck and asking questions about me.

The show was amazing; everybody was singing along. Richard was really chatty and we had a few laughs during the show. I liked this date, but the feeling my heart was filled with was nothing in comparison with what William provoked in me. However, I didn't think about him the whole night and entirely enjoyed myself with Richard.

On my way home, Richard kissed me. My heart didn't jump out of my body; my legs didn't shiver – it was a plain kiss. I smiled goodbye and I was gone.

It was a cute date; I really enjoyed it. Richard was becoming more and more interesting and interested. I didn't have anything bad to say about him; he was a good-looking and nice guy. I was feeling good with him and I was willing to give him a chance.

Date No.3 with William

This time, William invited me to his place in Notting Hill. He was travelling the following day and wanted to have a chilled and relaxed evening with me. I was over-excited by the idea, as I really wanted him. And I was also very curious to see what his place looked like.

Upon my arrival, William gave me a billion kisses all over my face and neck like he hadn't seen me for ages. I thought it was cute of him and really liked his welcome, but at the same time, his attitude confused me. Do you do that on a third date? He showed way too much attention to not care about me. Was he falling in love? Were we more than just dating? Now, I decided to skip this internal questioning for the moment. I wanted this man immediately.

William was living on the ground floor of a Victorian building and had the luck to have a big terrace nicely designed with flowers and plants, which were blossoming beautifully that spring.

His interiors were stunning. Although I am more of a painting person, he collected modern art sculptures. I suspected he commissioned the arts but could recognise sculptures from Tara Donovan, or Niki de Saint Phalle. They were very well placed, and he had excellent taste. I was really impressed.

William opened a bottle of champagne for us and we started chatting about our week. At some point, I told him about the

Thriller Musical and he curiously asked whom I had gone with? I think I blushed realising that I had been there with Richard.

"A friend," I said.

"Which friend?" he questioned.

"Bianca." I lied.

As soon as I had lied to him, I realised that this double dating wasn't for me. If it was normal, why didn't I tell the truth? Surely because I knew he'd probably be upset and I was also uncomfortable with the truth. I had a quick think and almost wanted to rectify my answer. I wished I could rewind this instant, so that at least he would have told me that it wasn't okay and we would have spoken about our "starting" a relationship.

After a brief tour in of his flat, William suddenly stared at me giving me one of his sexy lecherous looks. He took my face between his hands and started kissing me passionately, touching my breast and kissing my neck sensually. I felt my body wanting him more and more; he carried me as easily as a feather and laid me down on his very comfy sofa. William started kissing my legs with so much passion, I thought he wanted to eat them, going slowly toward my stomach. This was extraordinarily exciting. In a minute, he had gotten rid of my dress and I was in lingerie in the middle of the sitting room. I unbuttoned his shirt and his trousers. Oh my! He was hard, and when I put my hand in his boxers, I became suddenly mute. Not possible! I needed to see this with my own eyes! I rapidly got rid of his boxers and I couldn't help but shout: "Oh my God! You're huge!" I had never seen such a big penis in my life. I wondered if I could handle it. I started stressing out; I needed a whole bottle of champagne to relax. But William was great, he knew exactly how to handle the

whole situation and after he got rid of my lingerie, I had one of the best orgasms of my life. I wanted more, but first, we needed to eat.

William cooked for me. He made a delicious lasagne and a cheesecake in the shape of a heart. It was a delicious dinner and his attention made me melt. The cake was cute. I didn't realise at the time that he might have wanted to prove his raising feelings of love for me.

After dinner, I went back home conquered, wondering how I would get rid of Richard.

Date No.3 with Richard

I don't even know why I accepted this date. I was still enraptured by the loving evening I had had with William. But when so-mega-handsome Richard came all dressed up with his unbuttoned shirt, my heart beat like a jungle drum. Plus, Richard gave such a knee-weakening smile; I immediately shoved William out of my mind.

He caressed my face and kissed me tenderly; at that moment I had William and his sexy kisses in my mind, but when he took my hand romantically and said to me, "You're going to love this date," I was immediately back to admiring his handsomeness and kindness.

We went to the Ritz to have an afternoon tea. A woman suddenly joined our table and Richard was introducing me to his sister Leah. Oh my! What was I getting myself into? Leah was a gorgeous girl, a female version of Richard. She was 22 and didn't hide the fact that she was euphoric her brother finally had a girlfriend. I was terrorised when she used the word "girlfriend". When did that happen? We hadn't even had sex – only William could claim to be my boyfriend at this stage, not Richard. I really needed to talk about that relationship thing with both of them to understand where I

was standing.

While the date-à-trois went marvellously well, I was now concerned. I had had sex with William and Richard had introduced me to his sister. I didn't know how I was going to get out of that mess. Weren't we supposed to talk about the different stages of a relationship together before involving the family's members? I didn't know what to do. Bianca would be my best advice on this.

Date No.4 with William

Bianca and Camellia were not helping on the matter. Camellia, as a perfect Italian, just stated: "You're a cheater! You will get caught at some point, you know this! You need to talk to William and tell him your feelings for him and *Ciao* Richard. Full stop, *my chérie*"

Bianca interrupted: "Complete nonsense! You are a young and a happy single divorcee. It will simply help you to reserve all the emotional and intimate involvement with the right man at the right time. Believe me; you'll thank me later for this piece of advice! Embrace your single life my dear!"

I was still as confused as before. Both of their judgements made sense, but Camellia's resonated more in me.

I needed to talk to both men and clarify the relationship situation. But first, I was having a brunch with William. Yes, I know... I decided that "The Talk" would wait.

I was in a good mood that morning; the sun was shining through my window and the temperature had reached 20 degrees after a long and gloomy winter. I was wearing a brand new red Donna Karan casual dress with a small Celine leather clutch bag.

I was dressed up and in a cab on my way to Soho all joyful. I couldn't wait to see William and to get some of his passionate kisses again.

I got into Hix and headed towards William's table. Oh, my! He had brought someone with him. God! Were they all going to introduce me to their siblings? Alas, I wish it had been the case because this stranger was Richard. I was flabbergasted and confused by the concerned looks on their faces. I froze, shadowed by shame and enveloped by guilt.

Richard started, "Here's our angel in disguise."

I just grinned nervously.

"Do you want to explain?" added William.

Richard interrupted abruptly with a voice surprisingly full of confidence. "It's me or him Valérie, you know that. Tell him that you want to be with me."

"What did he do or say to make you stay with him? He's so not your type," countered William.

I stood still and silent.

"Why him?" Richard questioned. "Come on, speak up please!" he commanded.

"I don't think so..." I just managed to mumble. I had no desire to embroil myself in the lengthy nonsense explanation about my dating understanding. So, I just walked away.

How did they find out? I will never know. All I knew is that they fell into my game and I fell into my own game!

Both kept on texting me for a while, asking first for an

explanation, then sending forgiving texts, and finally, I decided to block them and forget about this predicament. I didn't want to choose. I didn't want to start a relationship on this basis.

After this datastrophe, I decided to keep on dating *à la French*. No double dates, no drama – why bother trying to play a game I couldn't understand? I like to win, and the only way I could win at that game was to create my own rules. Next!

Chapter Nineteen - I'm fucked up!

I have been now single and legally divorced for one year and four months. I woke up very early that sunny Saturday of May around 6am.

For some reasons, I checked my ring finger. My ring wasn't there and I knew it. I stopped showering, and after getting dressed, I went to my jewellery box and rediscovered it. I remembered how much I had hated it at first and then learned to like it over time. Pierre had always had appalling taste.

I decided to dig into my jewellery box and found my two engagement rings that reminded me of how I had broken up our first engagement and cancelled our first wedding. The sight of these three rings together almost made me sick. They were all awful. I concluded that it was time to get rid of these rings and just put them in my pocket.

At 7am, I decided to cancel my coffee date as a significant laziness invaded me. It wasn't a one-off attitude for me – I had cancelled around 15 dates over the last couple of weeks. Conversely, I was still spending hours emailing, yet I didn't want to meet any of these gentlemen. As a matter of fact, I was investing too much time online and spending zero time on dates. I also had some useless video calls with potential lovers in the United States and Greenland. Complete nonsense!

At this point, I had signed up for all existing dating sites and for some of them, I had communicated with all potential lovers. Through my research, I had discovered a few online dating sites of the scariest kind: www.theuglybugball.com for ugly. Seriously, who would sign up for this? And, of course, I

didn't sign up. I had had my fill of ugliness with Gary at all levels.

Then there was <http://www.superharmony.com> for mega beautiful people. Of course, I signed up, just to realise that nobody in London considered themselves as mega-beautiful.

There was <http://www.womenbehindbars.com> for women in prison. Well everybody deserves love I suppose.

The website <http://www.stdmatch.net> was for people with STDs, including AIDS, which made me puke. Though I did sign up to check that none of my potential or former dates were there. No results... Thanks God!

And <http://www.maritalaffair.co.uk> was aimed at men and women in a relationship willing to cheat on their partners. Mmm...

All these websites didn't help to increase my motivation, which was fast dwindling. And while I was at first interested by a date, I always had a reason not to see the man. I was apparently experiencing a dating burnout.

I was frustrated with trying to find the right person, going through all these annoying first dates that went absolutely nowhere. Even worse were my near-misses like Billy; everything was great until he decided to fuck me like a robot. Or douchebags like Adrian, François, James or Wayne, who seemed great at first glance, but proved to be assholes in disguise. The long-parade assholes and game-players were just plain toxic individuals for my soul. Some of them were only alive because it was illegal to kill.

I had a literal wake-up call the night before, when I received a call from my first love. Contrary to my former husband, we were still friends, and we shared our recent experiences and

remembered our past. After the call, I suddenly realised how bad my experiences were and how much had changed since the old days. I was slapped by the truth: I became weak, desperate, and almost needy, trying too hard to please and accepting everything from some of my dates.

I didn't know who I was anymore. I had completely lost my identity in this dating jungle. Plus, 16 months of singlehood, I had never taken time for myself. I wasn't even sure I was properly healed from my divorce.

I had to face the truth; I wasn't fixed. I was in fact, completely fucked up! I went on dates not knowing who I was. I needed to rediscover and understand my new self; I had been fighting an internal war without solid weapons. Now, shaken and mishandled by London, I was ready to be my real self.

When I had a good man, I ran away or fucked the relationship up. When I had a bad guy, I felt safe, because deep inside me I knew he wouldn't ask for a commitment. I hurt and burned myself, yet I was very quick to forget about all of them without looking back.

My *Normal French* self would have held Adrian accountable for what he promised and would have spotted that his attitude toward broken promises was a pattern and not a one-off.

My *Normal French* self would have spotted that Olive had no respect or genuine interest for me, pushing sex too soon.

My *Normal French* self would have cut ties immediately with rude and way-too-horny Martin.

That weekend, I wanted to review my priorities, contemplate my experiences, think and strategize my new life. I decided that my only goal was to move forward and consider London as my battlefield and a place to re-discover myself. But before

that, I needed a proper date with Paris. I was ready for fun, laughter and nothing else. I was about to go back to my normal Moi.

So, that morning, I took the Eurostar to my home city. Paris: the Man of my life

I arrived in Paris around lunchtime. I decided to get a cab to my place; we passed by the Canal St Martin, which raised amazing memories of my student years. I recalled lunching down the Canal with my classmates Christina and Virginie. We were inseparable at the time, but I lost touch with them when I married Pierre. They hated him and the feeling was mutual. Passing by the canal made me smile; it reminded me how competitive I was at college; how I had wanted to conquer the world and that marriage wasn't my priority at the time. I wanted my life so big, and I did everything I could to work for the companies I wanted to and to get the jobs I wanted. I was determined to be successful whatever the implications may be; I forgot to be that girl.

Then we passed by my first student flat, and the sight of it almost made me cry. All those parties I hosted there. I used to love organising soirées and having friends around at mine. Why had I never done this in London? Why was I not using my social skills anymore? I wondered where that part of me had gone.

I asked the driver to drop me at Place des Vosges, five minutes away from home. I decided to have a tour of the galleries I used to go to. Nothing had changed and I was pleased to catch up with some of my neighbourhood acquaintances. Most of them had heard about my divorce with Pierre and the fight we had, but they all admitted that they knew that our marriage wouldn't last. "You were so different!" I was told a couple of times. This made me smile; I was just happy and relieved that Pierre didn't have them all on his side.

I decided to eat at La Place Royale. I had a fantastic time talking with the waiter, Jean, who used to serve Pierre and I; it was good to remember Pierre too. It was Jean 's last day at the restaurant as he was opening his own café, and he invited me for the opening. Jean was euphoric to see a familiar face he could have a laugh with. This encounter again filled me with joy; I was reconnecting with *Moi*.

Later, I headed towards my flat. When I reached it, I took an enormous plastic bag and started throwing a lot of things.

I spent the whole weekend redecorating, walking around galleries and museums, eating in new restaurants, and shopping in new boutiques. I had my rings melted and made myself a new necklace with the Omega sign for infinite passion, infinite friends, infinite love and infinite joy.

I appreciated life to its fullest. No dating websites, no phone calls and no emails. I was free and alive. I felt ready to adjust to my current life, enjoying it with my lover London. Sorry Paris: I am cheating on you. I left Paris; happy I had made the trip.

London: best Lover ever

I was back in London Monday afternoon. The weather was welcoming: a lovely sunshine was invading the city.

When I got home, I decided to delete all of my online profiles.

I would create a new one in due course, but for the moment I wanted to embrace my single life. I made myself a list of things to do alone.

Over the next couple of weeks, I did a few things I'd never done before.

I read much more than usual. Instead of ordering food online, I took the time to cook for myself. I went to the movies alone a few times, went to a variety of workshops and went to see a few plays by myself where I met some amazing new friends.

I also had a solo dinner at 38 Mayfair. It was dreadful but so much fun. I ended up speaking with the table next to mine – a charming Italian couple, visiting London. We talked about life, politics and music. It was a fantastic night.

I treated myself; I was going to Bulgari Spa more than usual. I was free to spend all my money for my imaginary birthdays. I spoiled myself with beautiful makeup, clothes and shoes. I went all out!

I had a trip with the ladies to Iceland; we went to the blue lagoon, experienced hot springs and the fine local restaurants. It was resourceful to reconnect without talking about sex, men and relationships. We were all “us”: successful women, living in a big city and living life to its fullest.

I realised that I had unresolved past issues with Pierre. We hadn't had a proper closure. Our divorce was a mess; we hadn't spoken to each other since we had had that last fight. Pierre had sent very hateful and insulting texts to me until the divorce day. I hated that he hated me. So, in order to move forward in my life, I decided to call him. Pierre didn't pick up. So I sent him an emotional email explaining that I didn't understand why he hated me so much right now, even though for more than six years we had been lovers, best friends and formed a fantastic team together. Where did all that go? Pierre finally replied as he knew so well, "I tried to kill myself after our divorce. Does that help you understand why I hate you?"

I knew Pierre. I knew exactly the words he needed to hear to calm him down. I wrote back: "I am sorry to hear that. But believe me, even though I didn't try to kill myself, this divorce

has been as painful for me as it has been for you.”

Pierre only replied that he couldn't be my friend presently. He needed to recover before talking back to me, and he would get in touch when he felt the strength to do so. I was happy we were not frenemies or lovenemies anymore.

It was so easy to pretend that I didn't care, but in fact, it was killing me: I missed Pierre. Not the love, nor the sex, but his friendship and his companionship. He knew exactly who I was; I used to tell him everything. He knew me from A to Z; I had no secrets with him. That was the most important thing I was missing: our unchallengeable and unbreakable complicity. Would I ever find this again?

I also realised that the dating experience made me sad, hopeless, frustrated and sometimes angry. But never, oh never, had it settled in my mind that all men were assholes. It was just I: an eternal optimistic. I may fall at times, but I will always get up and look forward to a brighter day.

Then, I was keeping myself busy and had created a new social life. I made new friends and was invited to a few events. More importantly, I booked some tickets for my first trip alone. I chose to go to Milan. This trip was to be the first of a few.

I re-discovered myself and re-learnt what I liked and disliked in a man. I loathed a lack of criticalness, small talk and gossips. I liked intelligent, cultured individuals; I liked to talk about intellect, the meaning of life, music that made people feel alive and different, books that inspired people, memories, childhood, people's passions, insecurities and fears. I liked people with depth who spoke with emotional consciousness and with a twisted and wicked mind on top of it. I knew what I liked, and I knew what I was searching for.

At some point during all these amazing experiences, I stopped fighting my inner demons. We are on the same side now. And,

I decided that it was time to try something new with dating.

While my friend Camellia decided to sign up with a proper dating agency, I decided to try Tinder. I wasn't looking for a relationship quite yet, but I was ready to mingle. I would experiment and go on dates with men that were different. And why not have some casual hook-ups? I wanted to have as much fun as I liked while I wasn't attached to anyone. Those couple of weeks really pepped me up! It had been better than going to therapy. On to the next chapter of my life! Next!

PART 2 – THE REAL *MOI*

Chapter Twenty – Confused Dot Com

Well, Tinder was already trendy by the time I joined. Everybody was talking about it. Some found love and others considered it to be the paradise of hook-ups. I didn't care; I just wanted to have fun and date differently, so I decided to lose my Tinder virginity.

First of all, if you have an old Nokia from 1998, you're not allowed to join. It is an application for people smart enough to have a smartphone, which geo-localises potential dates near you. You're stalking your neighbourhood for new dates. As you match with them, you can communicate romantically or make indecent proposals to them. Your choice!

Unlike other dating websites where you can list what you're looking for, Tinder does not have this option. Instead, the app is ambiguous by nature; you've been warned!

I have to confess that I had reservations at the beginning. The app being linked to Facebook, I worried about the confidentiality of my information and the access and visibility of all of my photos. When I learnt that none of the information from my Facebook account would be disclosed without my consent, I relaxed and officially declared myself as a Tinderella.

The App downloaded, I set up my short profile. Let me quickly tell you the concept: to be able to talk to a potential date you like, there must be a mutual physical attraction. You must both swipe right, which means that you like each other. You'd swipe left if you didn't like what you saw.

I started flicking over the profiles, just to explore. And I realised

that there were diverse and varied men on offer: 10% were seeking for friends (that was what they said); 30% were searching for an authentic relationship (again, that was just what they said); 30% were searching for hook-ups (the only honest ones); and 30% did not fill in their profiles. I think those were the ones who would be happy to jump on everything: women, men, dogs or chickens.

So I potentially had a 30% chance of telling my children that I met their father on Tinder, a hook-up app. We got matched because he was hot: 21st-century digital romance!

I became rapidly addicted to the swiping; I was going very fast and had a hard time stopping. "I like you, swipe right!" "Ah no, you to the left!" "Oh you, you... ah yeahhhh, you're super-hot, you! Come on, straight to the right!"

Within minutes my phone was buzzing with messages from men wanting to chat with me right now. Wow, endless matches! The message "It's a match! You and Thingummy-Bob like each other!" was continuously displayed. At that time, my ego was super-boosted, Wow! I had no need to envy Kim Kardashian! I was so hot that everybody wanted me! Hiya, I have a busy agenda! So shallow, so simple, so addictive.

Well, Tinder was also a horror museum in itself, showing the deepest and most primitive side of the human being. All kinds of pictures were displayed, and with my past online experience, I could tell what these men were all about.

Half naked decapitated pictures of guys meant: their faces were not worth showing.

Guys at porn museums with big dicks next to them meant: in search of their sexuality.

Guys naked in bathtubs meant: hygiene left little to be desired –

a bath is so exceptional it needed photographing.

A picture with many hot girls meant: they are so stupid that none of their own single friends wants to date them.

Guys with children meant: they don't want any more children or they consider themselves marriage material if they are not their own.

Guys showing off Ferraris and Porsches meant: big cars, small dicks. Your choice, ladies!

Guys who use the word "Fuck" more than three times on their profile meant: chavs who dressed like Dr Dre in the 90s.

Guys with blurry pictures meant: a desperate tentative attempt to hide their ugliness.

Guys covered from head to toe in tattoos and piercings meant: poorly paid job or unemployed with depression.

Guys with black and white photos meant: post-war pictures. They are more than one hundred and fifty year-old.

A single very hot picture profile meant: scam.

Penis pics meant: mega horny, hasn't had sex since high school or never had sex at all.

Scanned photos meant: they are 90-year-old perverts.

Selfies-only profiles meant: no friends, men in need of a life.

It was amusing! Now, I was a dating expert (big L.O.L.).

To test the app, I decided to swipe right on everyone and this was when all hell broke loose. I was stopped on the 100th swipe

- that was the limit per day. I received messages, messages, too many messages: 10 Chris', 10 Mikes, 20 Pauls, 20 Toms, all confusing. Wow, my brain was on fire and my fingers were sore. How did you maintain 50 simultaneous conversations with total strangers who were all asking questions like, "So, what you up to tonight?"

Easy: you copy and paste the reply, and you only pay attention and greater care to original greetings like Eddie's.

Eddie

Obviously, on Tinder, there is no pre-date. Eddie approached me saying, "You are too pretty to be on Tinder. But what's going on beneath the facade? I'd like to get to know you better. Available for a drink next week?" It was an average line, but the best of a bad bunch so far. So we arranged a date following Thursday.

I was about to meet Eddie of Scandinavia; a blond, good-looking green-eyed Viking.

Well, on my way to my first Tinder date, I wondered what to expect. The whole Tinder system was a new concept in itself. I did not even have Eddie's phone number. We communicated via Tinder. That was a good way to save contact space on the phone and avoid having 50 Michaels listed. It felt like I was going on a blind date though. Zero information, but physical traits in mind. I had a lot to say to him, but at the same time, I had nothing to say to him. It was a strange sensation. I abandoned my train of thought just to realise how late it was. It was already 19:45 and I was still in Leicester Square station. Not good! Why did I take the tube? Oh yes, rush hour and I would have been mega-late by cab. I was supposed to be at Chalk Farm in 15 minutes! Was it feasible? I had seven stations to go. At the same time, I had the right to be delayed on this occasion; I was going 10 miles away from my home (Tinder told me!), and he

had just to walk a few meters from his office to reach our place of rendezvous.

I didn't consider this rendezvous as a formal date but more like an experiment. I couldn't wait to understand the Tinderboy. Who were these men behind Tinder? And what did they want? What did they expect? How did they manage the whole Tinder experience?

Fuck, I couldn't believe it; I was going to be 15 minutes late. Grrr... I hoped Eddie would wait for me. Potentially, he could be upset, leave, and block me on Tinder. It would be so easy to do.

Four stops, 19:52! I wondered if he had a lot of dates and if it was easy for men to get a date.

Mornington Crescent, 19:55, another two stops, I was hoping I wouldn't exceed 15 minutes late.

Well, I think the tube driver had a nap as we stayed a couple of minutes at Camden Town station. 15 minutes late... Grrrrrr! Oh no! 17 minutes! Chalk Farm had lifts to reach the exit.

I arrived at Chalk Farm, and for some reason my mobile wouldn't connect to Tinder. WTF?! I was then stressed out because I couldn't see him. Eddie of Scandinavia might have already left. I did not know what to do - I persisted in connecting, but O2 decided to annoy me! My stress lasted 10 minutes until a good-looking man approached me and I recognised Eddie straight away. Phew! Super reassuring! I was delighted to meet my date. Very cute, even if his smile was marred by an imperfect dentition. He was very well dressed until I noticed his shoes. They looked like pharmaceutical shoes.

So, after two glasses of wine I was already knocked out. I was all smiling and talking. On the other end, Eddie was quite

boring, but the alcohol helped to make his mind-numbing life interesting. I could tell that his Tinder experience was the highlight of his life.

I learned that Eddie was a Danish architect; he made it sound terribly dull. With his monotonous tone, he described how he had arrived in London out of love and how he broke up with his partner after a couple of months in the big smoke.

After our third drinks, Eddie and I had a walk towards Primrose Hill, where I'd never been. We walked up the hill and I discovered a fantastic view over London. It was incredible and so romantic. A shame I was with Eddie.

All in all, I can say that I had a pleasant evening. Eddie was a good man. At the end of our encounter, we kissed awkwardly on the cheek and I left to grab a cab.

Upon my return to the apartment, I discovered a Tinder message from Eddie; he told me that he had enjoyed an incredible evening. He couldn't wait to receive all the pictures of the launch of my perfume. I replied with a quick, "Yes, cool. Will update you." Then he answered immediately, "I will keep in touch." What? No! It's *Moi* who should have written this! It's *Moi* who's not interested. Eddie was handsome but not sexy, talkative but boring, cultured but not smart. What ambivalence!

Well, I never heard back from Eddie of Denmark and I didn't care. Tinder was cool; good for the ego. There were so many fishes. So many handsome studs. Endless possibilities. And when the matches arrived, you were delighted, and you forgot that there are probably other guys who ignored you. Then you chat, you set "dates", and the adventure becomes real. I had so many adventures yet to come. Next!

Chapter Twenty-one - The Beauty and the Beast

One of the most interesting profiles I looked at was Philippe's. He raised my interest mainly because he emailed in French. And I had never dated a Frenchman residing in London. Meaning: I was happy to arrange a date with him and share our London experiences. Plus, the textual chemistry between us was friendly, and I guessed we could have a good and fun time.

So, meet Philippe: dark hair, dark eyes and athletic. He liked travelling, fine dining, get-aways in the country, and he was looking for new friends.

We decided to meet for a coffee at Yalla Yalla on Winsley Street. In my cab, I scrolled through pictures on Tinder and had a second look at Philippe's profile – I was hoping he was who he said he was.

I noticed that Philippe was active only two minutes ago. Um? Maybe he was doing the same and checking out my pictures? Or, more likely, he was just scrolling through the app for more matches organising his dating week like I was too.

Philippe was waiting for me outside the restaurant. I have to say that I didn't recognise him. He vaguely resembled the photos I'd just looked at. The difference wasn't as shocking as fat and furious Gary, but he went from a 7/10 to a 5/10. Plus, the way he was dressed, he looked like a naff to me, making me think that he was clearly not from Paris. He was trying too hard to be trendy and, apparently, he had recently discovered Photoshop.

Philippe was quite short; I had medium heels and I was as tall as him. He was not medium-built but borderline fat. He smelled

like he had just jumped in a pool full of Harrods's perfumes. I concluded his pictures were at least a year old. I reckoned he was nervous as he kept on gesticulating making me look at him like I was watching a powerful tennis match.

Philippe wasn't French, but Belgian. No offence, but his French accent was horrible. Understandable yet detestable. The more he spoke, the more I wanted to laugh, but in a good way.

While Philippe was babbling about his life, I noticed a strain of dry blood on his left ear. I had a closer look and realised that he might have cut himself whilst shaving as he had an open wound and I could see his flesh. I couldn't stop looking at it in disgust. I decided to look elsewhere, feeling sick, but on the other side of his face, I could see fresh scratches all over his cheeks. What the hell had happened to him? I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying anymore. I looked at the table and started to drink my hot coffee as fast as possible. I looked at his hands that were moving everywhere and they looked like he had been gardening that morning and had forgotten to wash them.

That was it - I had to go. Philippe, thank God, finished his coffee before me, so I asked, "Should we ask for the bill?"

He asked, "You don't want anything else?"

"I am fine," I said with determination.

The cherry (*oh! Is it icing?*) on the cake was when Philippe, sitting in front of me, stood up obliging me to look at his crotch. That was when I discovered his unzipped trousers with his bold penis saluting me. Everybody has a right to be careless, but Philippe was over the top, just exaggerating! I thought I was going to faint. I couldn't bear the show I had in front of me.

This time I had to tell him, "Philippe, your pen..." I could not pronounce the words; I just pointed my finger at his trousers.

He blushed and zipped his pants as if he'd just urinated. I was flabbergasted that he wasn't enveloped by shame. We just walked away.

Ready to go to never see him again, I just shook his hand to say goodbye; I didn't want to kiss him and see his shaving cut.

So, I decided to walk towards Green Park, thinking that Philippe was heading towards the tube station. This was a bad guess because, unfortunately, Philippe was walking in the same direction and decided to tag along with me for a little while.

We walked for a few minutes, and that's when I understood that Philippe was living in a Buddhist temple near London Bridge. It was, to his point of view, the most affordable way to live in central London. I am quoting: "Churches and temples are very cheap to rent. It's small, and you have to live with other people, but the rents are way below the market prices."

Philippe had lived all over the world with no particular purpose. He had had plenty of wacky business ideas and occupied a variety of positions. By then, he was a physiotherapist on Harley Street.

Then, amidst an awkward silence, Philippe decided to fart out loud. "*Putain, c'est pas possible, Quel con!*" I thought. I couldn't stand him anymore, and he barely apologised.

"Oh, I'm getting sick!" he said with his funny accent. He was driving me batty; I decided to escape and grabbed the first cab I could stop. I sank into it, closed the door just after me without a goodbye. I never saw Philippe Le Belge again. Next!

Chapter Twenty-two – A Date in Milan

There I was, very excited to fly alone with one purpose: having fun. I'd chosen Milan – I thought it would be a good start. I spoke the language, I liked Italian fashion so I could shop, and there was enough to do and see for a weekend.

I must confess that I had mixed feelings before my departure. I was very excited at the start and the closer I was getting to the trip, the more anxious I was. I was afraid of the loneliness; not having anyone to talk to. Or the way others would look at me. And what if I was kidnapped raped or killed by the Italian mafia? Or what if I did not find my way to get from one place to another? What if I got lost on the Italian metro? What if my driver didn't show at the airport in Milan? How would I get to the hotel? Or if he couldn't find my hotel? What if the hotel did not have my reservation?

My brain was bubbling. I almost cancelled my trip but managed to overcome my anguish. I had to, and wanted to, take up the challenge. To give it up would be a failure for me. All my life I had met challenges and won them, why was I so afraid of a simple trip to a city whose language I spoke? Plus, I had been to Australia alone for one year. I went to China alone for six months and didn't speak Chinese. Three days in Milan would be perfect to begin with. So just after lunch on Friday, I headed towards Heathrow for Milan Linate Airport.

On the plane, I was trying to guess the men and women travelling alone. I thought maybe I could make friends and share some experiences with them in Milan.

Unfortunately, the business class area was not called 'Business'

for nothing. I was surrounded by businessmen and women all working on their laptops or reading the Financial Times. Boring! Obviously, none of them were coming for fun. So, I plunged back into my Vogue magazine, relaxed. I was ready to face Milan and my fears.

At 4pm, I landed in Milan. I got off the plane and at the exit; my driver was waiting for me with a sign with my name. So far, I was very happy to have made the journey without a hitch.

The driver picked up my suitcase, and we got into his car heading towards the Straf Hotel in the centre of Milan.

At 4:45pm, I checked in at the hotel without any problems. Straf was a very trendy hotel. I really liked the modern interior with its contemporary arts and its location was just 50 yards from the Duomo Cathedral.

During my journey from the airport, I saw a few amazing places I wanted to see. I already knew I wouldn't get bored. I was really looking forward to walking around Milan.

But in my room, it was another story. I lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling trying to calm a rising and throbbing anxiety. In truth, I was still terrified of being unable to enjoy this trip. I realised that I was really going to have no one to share my pleasures with. Worse, locked in my room, there would be no one to give me the courage to go out.

I was really out of my comfort zone, and it was stronger than me. I did not want to get out of bed. Then, after a few hours of watching the art deco ceiling, a primary need grabbed me: hunger. I didn't want my family and friends to find me dead from starvation. I decided to eat at the hotel, not really ready to face the city. Taking the elevator, I was addressed by a young woman admiring my Hermes watch. We started a friendly chat; she worked at the hotel and asked me about my trip. I explained

why I was in Milan. She admired my courage and gave me some recommendations on things to see, clubs and restaurants. I felt encouraged, but I still wanted to eat and stay at the hotel. This was as far as I was willing to go. Upon entering the restaurant, I decided to ask for a discreet table; I did not want to be seen alone at a table in the middle of the restaurant. I was seated at a table in a corner near a very cute middle-aged couple. Great! Exactly what I needed... not!

I ordered my early dinner almost immediately, not wanting to stay too long in the restaurant. After my delicious smoked salmon, the couple began to talk to me. Meet Emily and Joseph: Americans, both 38, and flying back to the USA the following morning. They told me about their amazing adventures in and out of Milan, which I really enjoyed listening to. We had a good laugh and talked all evening about politics, economics, art and books. Thanks to that very nice couple, I spent a very pleasant first evening in Milan. From that time forth, I had the courage to leave the hotel and decided to go out and have fun. I decided to dress up and go out to dance. I needed to free all my fears and dancing was a good remedy.

I decided to go to Byblos. I can tell you that I made more than 1000 steps in my bedroom before leaving the hotel. It was when the reception called me to advise on the arrival of my taxi that I had to move my buttocks. I was all dressed up with my red Versace dress and my Dior *pochette*.

When my taxi arrived at Byblos, I was really intimidated by the people queuing to get in and the chic atmosphere. Damn! I had been expecting a small neighbourhood club, and I was not sure it was a good club for me to begin with. It was way too big.

Still, I walked timidly towards the long queue when a security guard stopped me abruptly. He, then, grabbed me warmly by the shoulder and made me jump the queue. I did not understand what was going on. Inside, a woman accompanied

me to the bar inside, and I wondered if they had mistaken me for someone else. I didn't say anything, loving the way I was being treated.

At the bar, I didn't even have time to order my drink before a man came to talk to me. Wow, *sacré* Italians! He offered me a glass of Prosecco, and we started chatting.

Meet Andrea: a very fun, 36-year-old, athletic, dark hair, dark eyes and very well-dressed gentleman. I thought, he was a designer or a tailor, but Andrea worked at Gucci as a manager of their flagship store in Milan. Therefore, it was only fair to talk about fashion, Vogue, and Italian brands. Andrea invited me to visit him the next day for a discount. I had never had such a big smile on my face since my first Christmas on Earth. I started to really like this trip.

Then I heard Mylo's song, Doctor Pressure, and all hell broke loose. I was on the dance floor and did not leave it until closing at 5am. That night, I made so many friends and had so much fun. I added the whole club on Facebook, ok well; I am French so I may be exaggerating a bit.

Around 6:30am, I collapsed in my hotel room with a pleasant and relieved smile.

Saturday

I forced myself to wake up around 10am. I showered and decided to go to the Duomo. The weather was fantastic, I was all-joyful, I felt uninhibited, and I wanted to discover the city. I had a coffee outside in a café overlooking the Duomo Cathedral.

Then, I decided to walk into the city, a sandwich in my hand, and went to see all the sights, including: Duomo, Brera, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Basilica di Sant'Ambrogio, San Babila, the Columns of San Lorenzo and so much more...

I decided to go to Gucci before heading home and planning another night out and dinner. I took the metro to Napoleone station where all the luxury boutiques were. When I reached Gucci on Via Monte Napoleone, Andrea was talking to a client. The store was amazing, and they had a few Limited Edition items, only findable in Milan. I wanted to buy everything but where would I put it all? I didn't have any space in my suitcase. Plus, I didn't want to get a 15-year loan just for clothes and accessories! Mmm, well, maybe I should?

Andrea came over to me, giving me a big hug. We had a laugh about the night before, and he asked me what I wanted to have. I picked a pair of jeans and some flats. As soon as Andrea advised that I would be paying 50% less than the actual price, I felt the sudden urge to add a dress and a pair of heels. Oh, my God! What was I doing?

Andrea gave me his phone number for us to meet later in the night for a gig in town. I couldn't wait. I walked out of Gucci with a big smile and decided to walk back towards my hotel.

And indeed, I got lost! I was in the middle of nowhere when it started pouring like hell. No cabs! No buses! And no station. I was mega wet, and my Gucci shopping bag was almost falling apart. Out of those big drops of rain, I managed to see a cab and ran toward it. Thank God!

Upon my arrival at the hotel, a group of men were occupying the entrance. They were very loud. I paid the cab and headed towards them; they all stared at me like they had just seen the Cicciolina (*the most famous Italian porn star of the planet*). They made me feel shy, and I got into the hotel, blushing purple.

Why did they look at me that way? Well, I probably looked miserable with my makeup falling apart! I ran into the lift and in its mirror, I realised that not only I was wet, but my white lace bra was showing through my white t-shirt with my nipples

saying hello to the world. I pushed the close button erratically, hearing people coming my way. But three other men managed to get in. I tried to hide my nipples with my sodden Gucci bag.

The men started talking to me, asking me if I wanted to join them that night. They said that they were waiting for a taxi and could wait for me. I declined the offer; it was out of the question for me to get into a cab with six strange men. But I asked where they were heading and offered to join them later in the night. They were going to the Armani Night Club. Interesting... I thought I could have a drink or two with them and join Andrea later. I promised to join them after my dinner in the city. Before that, I had to take a shower and dress up.

I decided to eat at Maio Restaurant to have an evening view of the Duomo. This time I had nobody to disturb me; I was having dinner with me, myself and I. I was admiring the Duomo and thinking about life. I was triumphant I had made the trip, I didn't feel alone at all; I felt free and alive. I didn't have any pressure or schedule to respect.

I had a lavish dinner and headed towards the Armani Night Club, all smiling and happy to live that experience. When I entered the Armani Night Club, it was very dark, and I realised that I couldn't remember the faces of the guys at the hotel. *Merde!* I decided to have a tour around and go if I couldn't remember and locate any of them. But I didn't need to. As soon as I ordered my drink, they arrived. So meet Simone and his two friends Leonardo and Alessandro from Venice. Simone was very tall, big-mouthed and very good-looking. The proper Italian look. His friend Leonardo was blond, dark eye, and very, very slim. So thin, I felt like I was heavier than him. And Alessandro was beautiful. I hadn't noticed him in the lift, but this guy was very cute. Dark long wavy hair, green almond eyes and an amazing torso shown by a V-neck t-shirt. While Simone was talking to me, I couldn't stop admiring him. He smiled timidly. I interrupted, "And you guys? How are you enjoying

Milano so far?"

These men had all come in town for a stag-do, and it was their first time in Milan like me. I joined their VIP table, but soon after that, Alessandro and I got a small table and started talking. I understood that Alessandro was a professional rugby player. He was playing for the Squadra Azzurra and was originally from Southern Italy, now living in Venice.

We chatted and danced until midnight. Alessandro was a pleasure to look at. He was so handsome and didn't know it, which made him ultra-cute. We left the club before the others and Alessandro came to my room for a while – we chatted, we kissed, we caressed, and he politely left the room around 2am. We planned our date for the next day. I had an impromptu date in Milan and I suddenly realised that I completely forgot about Andrea de Gucci.

Sunday

Alessandro knocked on my door around 9am. I wasn't really ready, but I welcomed him. He was so sweet; he ordered breakfast through the room service, and brought a bouquet of roses. We had breakfast together and hit the town around 11am.

It was a beautiful day; Alessandro and I decided to go to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna hand-in-hand like an old couple. Later, we headed toward the Sforza Castle, sandwiches in hand. The date was cute, and so was Alessandro. He completely enthralled me. His accent, the way he touched me and his kisses. He mentioned his family and his seven sisters and brothers. He was the youngest of them all and had 15 nieces and nephews. It was so impressive. He related his story about how he started rugby and how his dad tried to force him to get into football.

After the Castello Sforzesco, we sat in the Sempione Park and we French-kissed for hours and hours, touching each other's

bodies like nobody could see us. We were indefatigable. I was twitter-padded; Alessandro was so handsome, and his body was so toned and defined. All my senses were challenged; it was so good to experience a pure romance. Alessandro gave me his phone number – I accepted, knowing that I would probably never call him. He left reluctantly as his flight was later on that day. We had an emotional goodbye hug, and I stayed in the park for a while just floating and I headed toward my hotel before having my last dinner in Milan.

For my last night, I decided to treat myself, and asked the hotel to book a table for one at Cracco. When I arrived at Cracco with my newest Gucci dress and shoes, I was treated like a Queen from the arrival; the personalised welcome, the service, the attention to detail. I was served some amuse-bouche, which I found really delicious. I went for the tagliolini with white truffle, and I absolutely loved the creamy sauce. All the food was well-presented, attentively served and tasted amazing! I was really happy, especially when I had the opportunity and the luck to be greeted by Carlo Cracco. I spoke with him for a few minutes and it made my night.

What a trip!

I liked these moments alone, when I wasn't speaking and I didn't have to listen to others. I could dream, think, and look at people's behaviour. I loved it. These moments were mine and I enjoyed them to their fullest.

I learned to fend for myself, without my PA or my Lifestyle Manager. Milan resurrected me; I felt like I had reinvented myself; rewritten my life for a few days. Introspection was necessary; in spite of the fears, the insecurities and the doubts, I managed the entire situation on my own and outside a professional context or my daily routine. It was definitively worth the experience.

This trip was an incontestable success for me, and I could go back to London, light-hearted, proud of myself and wishing for some more soon. Where should I go next?

Chapter Twenty-three – Easy Breezy Silly (EBS)

When I came back to London, I felt like I still had an Italian vibe in me; I was joyful, energetic, full of life, and confident.

Well, in truth, the Italian vibe also had a name: Michele.

I met Michele virtually on Tinder. He had a full written profile, very rare on Tinder. He described himself as a charming gentleman with a very positive attitude towards life. Exactly the sort of feelings I had upon my return.

Therefore, I accepted a date with Michele for the following week.

Date No.1

We decided to meet at Piccadilly Station. I arrived right on time. Michele recognised me and welcomed me with a warm hug and a big smile. I was impressed; he was far better-looking in person.

So, meet Michele: Italian, dark, 5'10, and very well dressed. He had this light Italian accent that gave him a certain attitude and enhanced the whole look of him. He was very charming.

We went for a drink at the very commercial Jewel Piccadilly. We sat at a table and Michele ordered our drinks. So Jewel Piccadilly is located in one of the most lucrative areas of London: Piccadilly Circus. It's a cocktail bar 95% packed with tourists. This proportion reaches 99.5% in summer time. Yet, Jewel Piccadilly is fun and serves delicious cocktails at reasonable prices.

Well, back to my date, Michele was very chatty and full of energy. He was like a kid, amazed by all the wonders of the world, and he was full of gratitude for all the experiences he had had.

Michele moved to London six years before and was working for a big marketing company. That was all I managed to get from him.

After a few drinks and with both of our brains altered by champagne and wine, Michele started a series of selfies: the wine and me, the champagne and me, the wine, the champagne, the champagne and me, the wine and him, the champagne and him, the champagne and him, the champagne and us. I'd never had so many pictures taken in such a short time. After our photo session, Michele took my hands and we hit the dance floor in one of Jewel's rooms. Michele was clinging to me all night and we danced until Jewel closed.

Post-date No.1

Back home, I didn't even have time to think about our date. I collapsed on my bed, with my clothes on, and a big smile on my face. That was enough for the day.

In the morning, I had a massive hangover. And I had 75 WhatsApp messages from Michele, which included 74 pictures and one text. Michele had really enjoyed our night and wanted to see me again. Apart from the selfie session, I was excited by the fun, his personality and his positive attitude. I, therefore, accepted the second date.

Date No.2

Michele invited me for lunch in a Chinese Restaurant called Pearl Liang near Paddington. He greeted me with a hug. It was

cute and warm. He asked how my week was and related the marketing issues he was facing at work. I really wanted to learn more about him as a person and asked about his family and friends. I understood that he was the only child and all of his best friends were in Leica, Southern Italy. We spent all of our lunch looking at billions of pictures on his phone relating his summer holidays in Naples, Miami, Nairobi or his ski trips to Finland, Austria, France, and Italy. All his life was in pictures, and I assumed it was his way to document it.

Though again, I learned nothing substantial about him, so I questioned, "What makes you shiver? What makes you angry? You can't have this smile all the time?"

Michele just replied, "I am always happy; life is too short to bother. I always find something positive out of a bad experience."

"What sort of bad experiences have you had?" I demanded.

"Well, I don't keep them in mind. I don't store this sort of garbage in my brain. So, I won't be able to tell you," he responded with a big smile on his face. I was suspicious. Michele definitely had something to hide. Everything seemed too faked to be true. He couldn't be that perfect. In fact, for me, he was imperfect to be so perfect. Something was wrong. I was longing to find out.

"So, why you don't have a girlfriend then? You seem so perfect," I insisted.

"Well Valérie, I am very easy. I am happy to be alive. I'm grateful I have a job. And the more I like my life, the more I bring joy and love in it. That is all!" he boasted, still wearing that annoying broad smile.

Dessert served, Michele realised that the waitress had brought a

different dessert from what he had asked for. There it was, for the first time, I saw a bit of annoyance in his all-teeth-smile.

"Damn, is it that hard to remember that I picked the same dessert as yours? She can't even do this shitty job properly!" he grinned nervously and left the table to bring his plate back to the waitress. Now, I was starting to know more about the real Michele. This character was rather interesting, and I wasn't sure I'd like him.

When he came back, Michele giggled stupidly, "You won't believe it! I couldn't recognise who served us." He added, laughing out loud, "God made every person different, but I think he went lazy on China. They all look alike!" He couldn't stop laughing and snorting at his own joke. I was just staring at him and I didn't even give him a smile. That joke was mega lame, and it nearly felt like he had prepared the joke his entire life for the sole purpose to make a date laugh. Well, not me.

Dessert sorted and eaten, we hugged and parted ways silently. It was awkward. I left the date feeling more mixed about Michele than ever. Who was that guy? What was he hiding?

Post-date No.2

I realised that I still didn't know much about Michele and his jokes left little to be desired. And that smile he was wearing all the time, like he had spent all his childhood summers in Big Smile Boot Camps – I truly thought this was just an armour to hide real painful feelings and experiences that I was willing to find out. That was the only reason why I accepted another date to one of my favourite museums in town, the Tate Modern.

Date No.3

I met Michele at the Tate Café. He was all joyful and again welcomed me with a big smile and finally dared to kiss me.

I sat and ordered a latte when Michele started a selfie session. He photographed: his coffee, my latte being served, both coffee and latte, myself and the latte, himself and the coffee, both of us and my latte, both of us and his coffee, both of us with both drinks, both of us, and both of us kissing. After ten minutes, I was already sick of posing.

After my selfie shoot, Michele and I walked toward the museum, and out of the blue Michele started laughing out loud, like there was no tomorrow. At first, I looked at him with a smile. At some point, Michele couldn't stop giggling to the point he was choking. I inquired, slightly annoyed, "What's so funny?" Michele was still suffocating on his own laugh and couldn't say a word.

"Come on," I said. "I want to laugh with you."

And he responded, "Look at that man," he pointed, without a drop of shame, at a young man, mouth wide open, in an armchair.

Michele explained, "When I see that sort of person, I am so grateful to God that I am a handsome and fit Italian man! He's fucking so ugly! He looks like he has Down's Syndrome. Can't he just shut his big mouth? We don't need to see his ugly teeth."

The man was, in fact, a young disabled boy. I bet he was not even 15 year-old. It wasn't funny at all. I found his attitude detestable and I replied, "I really don't think your attitude is appropriate. I'd rather you'd stop laughing. You're embarrassing me."

Michele apologised and somehow stopped laughing instantly. Yet, I decided to leave without notice and disappeared in the crowd. Michele deserved this ending, and I was happy to ignore all his calls and texts. I also deleted all the silly selfies we had

together. Next!

Chapter Twenty-four – The Weeping Willow

Since I started swiping, I found myself constantly watching the guys around me, trying to recognise a Tinderboy.

Sometimes, I would just sit in a cafe swiping, and at each profile I'd turn my head around 360 degrees, to check that the person in the profile was not around me.

I have to admit, I was spying, but more so, I felt spied. But up until then, I'd never met my Tinderboys in reality before a proper date. I even tried Happn for a week, but the result remained the same.

Why did I not keep Happn? Only because I felt like it was an online cemetery. All the profiles died or were curiously resurrected on Tinder, and this was the case with Sami. I spotted Sami on Happn, but he was inactive for more than a month. Then I stumbled upon him on Tinder, and we started chatting soon after we'd been matched.

So, meet Sami. He lived in Croydon (where is this?) and worked in finance in London Bridge. Sami was quite direct, seemed to know what he was looking for and exuded confidence in his pictures and texts. He insisted we should exchange numbers, as he wanted to arrange a date ASAP.

Pre-date

Sami called me one Sunday morning. That Sunday followed a well-watered evening with the ladies where I had returned home at 4am in the morning feeling like my blood had been replaced with an Australian Shiraz. I had been properly pissed.

My brain was not prepared to talk to him!

I introduced him to the most incomprehensible French accents he would ever know. I wondered why I had picked up the call half asleep on my bed.

I totally lost my cool: I stuttered, misunderstood most of his questions, forgot the questions he asked, laughed on inappropriate occasions. I did not know what to say; my brain was in stupid-talk mode and the more I talked, the more I sank deep into a silly ocean.

Plus, his voice totally distempered me. It was deep, sexy, and confident. I completely fell in love with his voice. But his accent, as I said, I was not prepared, only understanding one word out of two, trying to guess what he was saying. So embarrassing (for me), so awkward for us, surely.

I was pissed, but I could realise that we did not have much in common. In fact, I wondered if I really wanted to meet him. I could have slept on his call. Why was it that financiers were either boring or stupid? Up until now, through my online chats, I had spoken with two types: dickheads (literally) or sleeping tablets. Sami seemed to be my sedative that Sunday, as I slept right after the call, didn't recall hanging up, and, upon my awaking, I wondered if the call had been a dream.

It was not.

A little later that Sunday, Sami invited me on a date on the following Wednesday. Who would want to meet a French woman who stutters and laughs for nothing? This man had heard the worse of me and still wanted to meet, and for this reason, I decided to dig a bit further and meet the man behind this Barry-White-voice.

The date

We decided to meet at St Paul's station. I recognised him straight away. Sami was kind of handsome, with beautiful dark brown eyes and I could tell the guy was hitting the gym on a regular basis.

We hugged very warmly, and his first words to me were, "Wow, you look absolutely gorgeous!" immediately followed by, "Do you mind the beard?"

His voice, full of doubts was soaked by a Cockney accent. Well, his beard was well trimmed, sleek, and clean. His mouth was findable if I wanted to kiss him, so I simply replied, "Not a problem at all. I like a beard; it's very manly and sexy!" He smiled and responded, "You're titanium!"

I wasn't sure what that meant, but it sounded positive.

Sami brought me to the very chic Madison. I really liked the atmosphere; it was completely my style. It gave a fantastic view of St. Paul's Cathedral along with the rest of the London skyline. A relaxed atmosphere, yet sophisticated, I didn't feel overdressed in my new Louis Vuitton dress.

We sat at a table and we started to talk about each other.

Let me introduce you to Sami again: he goes to the gym five to six times a week and was searching for a partner he could go with (that wouldn't be me), a trader from Kabyle in Algeria, 40-year-old and turning 41 at the end of the year. He celebrated his big birthday the year before in Barcelona with a few friends and his ex. I was surprised he mentioned her; that was clearly too much information for me. Especially when he started disparaging her. I interrupted him, asking more about his family and his life. Why did I do that?

Sami basically narrated the story of his life, with so much emotion in his voice; I didn't dare interrupting. I felt like he needed to confess to someone, and I let him monopolise the date. So, Sami mentioned that he had a big sister, a single mother of four, who lived an hour away from his place. Sami was paying her rent; she was not working and her former husband had stopped paying the maintenance allowance. So, with her being penniless, he felt obliged to help her financially and so he had had to make some sacrifices.

I also learned, to my dismay, that this situation was one of the sources of the dispute with his "gold-digger" of a former fiancée to use his own terms. She had not approved of Sami helping his sister to the detriment of the couple's activities and social life.

Then, when Sami found out that I was living in Knightsbridge, he exclaimed, "Wow, you're titanium; so up-market!" He added, "Why don't you date locally? There are a lot of rich men in your area."

I couldn't help but retort, "Why would you advise this to a date?"

"Because you're titanium, babe. Look at you: your posture, your manners, and your words. Plus, you're beautiful, successful; you know what you want to do and where you're going. You look like a million pounds, hun. You'd never marry someone like me. You're so titanium."

I don't think I replied. I'd never thought about the status of my boyfriends. The only thing I was sure of was that I didn't want another loser. I had had my fair bit of mothering my former husband.

But, I hadn't known, and Sami made me realise, that my manners, my attitude and the way I spoke were sending a message. And therefore, I was probably filtering a certain

category of men. Was it good or bad? It didn't really matter, as through online dating, these things could not been seen. But it could upon a date and I supposed some of my former dates might have had an attitude because of this.

I just smiled at Sami's response and he continued, "You know, Valérie. Life had never been easy for my family. I moved to England when I was six and my sister Nadiya was 12. I was born in a small little town in Algeria called Bouskene. My mom left Kabyle when she was 12, running away from an abusive father and nine abusive brothers that she had never seen since.

In fact, since my grandmother died, my grandfather was raping my mom from the age of nine. My mom arrived in Algiers and started begging for money and food in its streets, and that was when she met my father, 20 years older than her.

He was married but offered Mommy a shelter and job as a live-in maid. Not even a few months passed and she became his sex slave. Having nowhere else to go and developing the Stockholm Syndrome, she nonetheless decided to stay there, my dad being as abusive as he was generous. He could shower her with expensive clothes one day and beat her up the following day for no reason. She had five miscarriages, three dead babies and she admitted abandoning two kids, but for some reason she decided to keep my sister and myself.

"Whilst, my father never recognised me officially, being the only son, he really spoiled me. We were living a fairly good life until my dad died and his wife kicked us out. We had no money, no house, no future. My Mom begged for money again in the streets of Algiers, this time with two children."

Sami kept on narrating, indefatigable with a voice full of tears, "At some point, we managed to live in a small studio in Birkhadem with six other people. It might shock you, but my mom was determined to sort things out. She dreamed and wanted a better future for us, so she prostituted herself, saved

money and left Algeria without looking back.

She dedicated her life to us and never married nor had a relationship. We were a united family, helping each other and she gave us all the love we needed. Unfortunately, she passed away two years ago and I really do miss her. My sister does even more so, as she hasn't been working since being on sick leave for depression. It wasn't easy for her, as she divorced the same year. Mom was a fun and loveable person to be around. Life had been a bitch to her but at least she had our love."

This time, Sami's eyes were soaked with blood vessels and ready to water. I hugged him and the only thing I managed to say was: "I am sure your sister and you made your Mom's life magical to an extent you would never imagine. You guys gave her the love she needed and I'm sure, that alone, made her happy."

Sami wiped out the tears appearing on his depressed face and apologised.

"I don't know why I told you all this. So sorry..."

"You probably needed to talk," I smiled deeply touched by his emotional side.

Yet, it was getting late and we decided to leave the Madison. We kissed on the cheek silently and awkwardly, still oppressed by the morose ambiance set on the date. We looked at each other, knowing deep down that we would never meet again.

I grabbed a cab to mine, and for the first time, I left a date gloomy and almost depressed. It wasn't a nice feeling. Sami had clearly given me too much information and the date had affected my spirits immensely. I went to bed feeling miserable. Thank God I had magnificent dreams. The following day, I was titanium again! Next!

Chapter Twenty-five - Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

There it was! The only profile I was unsure of; I paused in my swiping for at least five additional seconds to decide what I should do: right or left?

Doug had an excellent profile description, one amazing face picture, and that was it.

Doug had beautiful green eyes, a puff of hair I liked, and a very charming and intense smile. His profile was fun and full of energy. While I didn't like silly/funny pictures, I absolutely adored fun profiles. I was a firm believer that if you are really funny, it would show in your profile and there would be no need to show stupid pictures. And Doug's profile fit that bill. I decided to swipe right and we instantly matched. Doug messaged me straight away; he was really amusing to chat with. I think it was the funniest conversation I had ever had in my life. Full of banter and lots of conversation about music.

We had the same interests, and apparently the same sense of humour. I knew it was going to be a pretty good date.

Meet Doug, 35: a fashionista who dressed to kill (those were his own words). He was a musician in his spare time, and living his passion working for Warner Music. We planned a date for the following day.

Date No.1

We agreed to meet at the very trendy Prêt-à-Portea. In fact, that was my idea. I really wanted to go there, and since I knew that Doug was into fashion and music, I thought it would be a very

good idea to meet there for a nice afternoon tea.

As I arrived at the Berkeley Hotel, I received a text from Doug describing where he was located. He was very clear in his directions and seemed to know the hotel like the back of his hand.

I sort of recognised Doug straight away, and when he said he “dressed to kill,” it wasn’t a lie. It literally killed my eyes to see his orange Moschino jumper on top of a pair of bleached ripped jeans. A complete eyesore! And the sideburns! Had I just arrived via the DeLorean time machine? I couldn’t help laughing internally, which translated politely as a big smile.

We kissed on the cheek, and the banter started straight away. “What happened to your razor?” I asked.

He replied, “What happened to your trousers?”

We laughed. In fact, I was wearing some Victor & Rolf navy shorts on tights, and I thought it was a funny reply from him.

Doug and I chatted the night away, and I had never laughed so much in my life on a date. Doug was a genius, yet he wasn’t at all my style. He was probably about 5’4 and a half in height, which meant that I was taller than him in my heels. While I liked his hair on Tinder, in real life I wasn’t sure about his Beatles haircut on top of the old-fashioned sideburns. But he was friendly, fun and full of energy, and I really liked being with him. I was more than willing to see him again.

Pre-date No.2

I had to wait a week before hearing back from Doug, which for me was a first on Tinder. I usually heard from my dates the following day, or three days after the initial date, maximum. This made me think that Doug was playing a game, but we decided to meet near Shoreditch this time, as he lived in

Islington. I didn't know much about this part of town, and I was willing to find out more. This time, we opted for the Strongroom Bar on Curtain Rd.

Date No.2

I arrived at the Strongroom right on time. I couldn't see Doug, so I decided to sit at a table and order a glass of Blandine Le Blanc. Strongroom had a friendly atmosphere and was a fun, quirky venue. That night was quiet but they usually have live bands and DJs playing all sort of music.

Doug was late, which really pissed me off. A good 15 minutes late! I was about to leave when he finally showed up. He had a really weird reaction, like he hadn't recognised me. Even on his face, something had changed. He looked like he had had a meeting with the devil and become more wicked. His banter was still as sharp, but it had something malicious about it. I liked it, this side of him. This time his hair was brushed aside, which showed more of the green in his eyes. He was looking way better, and even his clothes were soberer. His attitude really bewildered me, making me wonder what I now wanted from him, and his ravenous eyes didn't help. I really felt like he could see through my clothes.

After a few jokes, a few laughs and a lot of flirting, Doug drew his chair near me and started to lick my lips before kissing me passionately. I could feel the heat all through my body; it was earth-shattering. I was shaken, yet I cherished the moment.

Doug wanted me to go home with him and he was kind of insistent. It was almost annoying, so I politely declined. Comparing that night with the first completely disturbed me; I wasn't sure whom I had had in front of me. If Doug had initially told me that he had a twin brother, I would have bet a million pounds that I was with him that night. But, I was aware that people could change dramatically from one date to another; I

had experienced it so many times.

Post-date No.2

When I got home, I had a text from Doug. He had really enjoyed the night and wanted to see me again soon. On our first date, I had seen him as a friend and couldn't have imagined being with him romantically. I thought I would just have fun. Though I was still in a "fun" state of mind, I could now see Doug as a potential boyfriend. His style, his attitude, his jokes, his kisses; I wanted to see him again without any sort of expectation this time.

Pre-date No.3

Doug and I were speed-texting when we decided to have dinner at Tartufi & Friends. I was surprised by Doug's pick, as I had understood that he wasn't a fan of my neighbourhood with its opulent people. Well, I thought, that didn't mean that he couldn't appreciate excellent Italian cuisine.

Date No.3

This time, Doug came and picked me up in a cab before getting to the restaurant. In the three minutes that separated my flat and Tartuffi & Friends in Knightsbridge, we had lots of passionate kisses. I almost asked him to cancel the restaurant and come to mine instead. His kisses were that powerful, arousing, and deep.

Doug and I reached the restaurant, sat at our table and started ordering. This date was all flirty and sensual. We touched each other, had deep eye-contact and I invited him home with me after. As such, we both ate our food like Popeye ate his spinach. We were done within 25 minutes, got the bill and headed straight to mine. That was probably the reason why I can't remember much about that restaurant.

As soon as we reached my building, we kissed passionately. We jumped in the lift, and the higher we went, the more intense our kisses became, and the more I wanted him to sex me up. We reached my floor, I opened the door of my flat and for the first time in my life, I was going out with a man who couldn't carry me. Doug totally ruined the passion. He lifted me up unmanageably with a hefty breath. He was out of puff after two steps into the flat, and I was getting too close to the floor. He managed to find my bedroom and I could sense his relief when he let me off onto the bed, like a vulgar tissue. But he was quick to undress me a few seconds later.

I undressed him too, and within a few seconds he was going in and out of me. Doug was a charming man, but during our intercourse I was under the impression that I was having sex with Mr Hyde. Oh my! Doug was pulling unbearable ugly faces, to the point that I couldn't look at him anymore. I started laughing. He looked at me incredulously, "Are you ok?" he asked with a normal face.

I could still reply at that stage. "Fine!"

But then Doug went on again, literally mugging for me. I closed my eyes. After the missionary, he wanted me on top. I was forced to open my eyes again. I had a big smile; Doug looked normal. But then, we were there again – the tongue was stuck, his nostrils were wide, and his nose was deformed and wonkier than a Formula One circuit. His upper lip was upside down, his screwed-up eyes set close together and misaligned, his ears stuck up like a rabbit, and he was red as a tomato. I couldn't help it; I was laughing out loud! I had to stop, as my eyes were watering tears of mockery. For the first time in my life, I lied and faked it. "I am coming! I am coming! I am coming!"

And Doug came and slept not long after his clown show. I couldn't; I was still haunted by his faces. This time, closing my eyes wasn't helping, as I had the fresh memories of Doug's

grimaces. It took me a long time to stop giggling, calm down and sleep.

Post-date No.3

I didn't know if the sex with Doug was good. Obviously, it wasn't, but that was because I hadn't been able to concentrate entirely, and I needed to find a way to enjoy this moment with him properly. Eureka! I had a solution! Next time, I'd shut the lights off. I couldn't wait to explore him again.

Pre-date No.4

Two days later, I received a text from Doug: < Sorry I haven't been in touch for so long. Lost my phone! Can't wait to see you again. I'd be happy to cook for you and organise a romantic date at mine. > I was slightly surprised that Doug considered two days to be a long time, but I imagined that he was missing me. I couldn't wait to experience him again but I would have to find a way to turn his lights off. With a bit of luck, he would light up the flat with candles.

Date No.4

My cab drove me to Islington. When I arrived, I saw that Doug lived in a fantastic big house with a little garden. I really liked the atmosphere. I buzzed, and to my surprise, a woman opened the door.

"Oh hi, you must be Valérie. Doug is setting up your dinner. Please come in; he won't be long. I am Asita, his flatmate"

I smiled, "Nice to meet you Asita."

I waited in the kitchen downstairs for a few minutes. Doug seemed to have a lot of secrets; I was not aware that he was sharing his flat with three other people.

Doug arrived, all dressed up in a rainbow suit and with way too much aftershave. I think my nose was blocked with the smell.

Yuk! He was back to his naff-self again with his Beatles hairdo.
Not sexy!

He grabbed a bottle of Prosecco and I followed him to his bedroom. It was lit up with small scented candles and looked so romantic.

We ate some pasta Bolognese and after two bites, Doug started his monologue; he couldn't stop talking. It was the most talkative version of him I had that night, and for once, it was real stuff he was talking about: his work, his friends, his concerts, his band, his DJ work. I hadn't realised he had so much going on. We had a more substantial unilateral conversation. I found out a lot about him, but he didn't know anything about me. He didn't seem interested at that stage.

Sick of listening to his life, I started kissing him. We kissed and kissed and kissed. This time it was delicate and soft. I supposed it went well with the romantic setting.

Then, I undressed him slowly; he did the same to me, still delicate and romantic. He was kissing me all over and not only his lips were involved; he was also doing things with his tongue that made me shiver.

We had sex and this time it was sensual. Despite the little flashes I had in my mind of his funny faces at mine, I managed to enjoy it. We slept after three lots of intercourse.

Around 3am, I was awakened by my sudden urge to scratch all over my back. God, it felt like I had lice and fleas all over my body. I couldn't stop scratching.

As the light of the sun came up, I discovered that I was sleeping on dirty sheets. Yoghurt blobs or sperm stains? Those stains were not from last night, and when I analysed my back, I had a skin rash all over it – probably a reaction to the dirty sheet. I

realised that we were not even sleeping on a futon, but a cheap mattress that was falling apart. The place was a dump; Doug had no notion of cleanliness. I was horrified.

His walls were full of post-its with biblical verses written down, and family pictures. Oh, my! Doug had a twin brother! I don't know why, but I was overcome with a bad feeling. That wicked smile; that sleek hairdo; those ravenous eyes...

"Doug, Doug! How many times have we met?" I woke him up, worried.

"What are you on about? Are you crazy? It's our second date."

I went quiet, before whispering. "Who is that man in the picture?"

"Lady, you are scaring me! I knew when I met you that you were a crazy doll, but darling, this is mental! Sorry, I forgot to tell you that Francis is my twin brother. We're not very close, and we are pretty different. In fact, he's the reason why I didn't see you for such a long time after our first date."

"We didn't have sex last week?" I asked timidly, knowing the answer.

"Pardon me? What are you talking about?" he said.

I rushed into his en-suite bathroom and vomited. I had just slept with two brothers. Doug kept talking to me, but I couldn't hear anything anymore. Next thing I knew, I was on my way home with a rash on my back. I had a voicemail from Doug, in which he offered to meet me with his brother to give a proper explanation. He had probably found out the whole story by the sound of his voicemail. I didn't care about the explanation; I found the whole situation disgusting and felt like I had had a threesome by procurement. I never returned his call and decided

to ignore all his texts.

Six months later

A few months later, Doug and his brother Francis both sent me dick pictures, all sent within a few hours' of each other, asking me which one I wanted to see again. I didn't know where their unwanted attention was coming from, but I clearly understood that they were getting on well now. I decided to block their numbers. Next! Next!

Chapter Twenty-Six – Friends with Benefits

After eleven left-swipe mistakes, ten right-swipe mistakes, two dick pictures and two hundred NO's, I finally stumbled upon a Tomas without an "h".

An interesting profile, I thought, but not in a good way. He had pictures of himself on a boat, with a Porsche, a picture of his Rolex, Italian shoes, pictures of gold. I was curious – I had always thought that men flaunting their wealth either had severe self-esteem issues or were looking for a trophy wife to go along with their other possessions. I wanted to experience it. What sort of personality could that man have? He was cute too. So I decided to swipe right. Bloody hell! We matched! I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing on this occasion.

Well, to my surprise, Tomas (without an "h") started chatting with me straight away. He was living alone in Guildford but worked in South Kensington as a cook. He wanted to phone me and, after giving up my number, I had Tomas on the phone half-a-second later. He seemed sweet, yet abrupt as he talked. The call lasted two minutes – just a way to check if I was real and hear my voice I supposed.

The date was planned just before my second date with Doug. I planned to only stay one hour with him. I was officially a serial dater. Three dates with three different men in the same week! This time I swore I'd stop when I slept with one of them or started to have feelings. For the moment, Doug, Tomas and Stefano were all "friends".

The Date No.1

We decided to meet in Wimbledon, since it was between Guildford and Knightsbridge.

I arrived right on time at Cafe Kaldi, but Tomas was not there. He came 10 minutes later and I was as straight as an arrow, "You're late! Not very gentlemanly!"

Tomas blushed and apologised all through the date, which made me swallow my annoyance quickly.

Tomas was a very cute man: brown hair, blue almond eyes, discreet lips, but embraceable, but unfortunately, he had a dripping belly that could be seen through his too tight t-shirt. His stomach gave me the impression of a huge deflated balloon, and it was not sexy.

Tomas was a calm guy; he was really cute with his shy ways. I understood that he had two brothers, from Lithuania, and had been living in the UK for just over a year. His brothers and his mother were living in New Jersey in the United States. We had the same musical tastes, and I had nothing else to add about him. There was nothing I hated or loved on that date. I left the date completely neutral.

Well, maybe his belly? I had to admit I couldn't help but look at it. When he sat on the chair, his belly sat on his legs.

Would I see him again? Maybe. Why? Well, I felt a little bit weird on that date. There was something I could not describe about him. Was it his timidity that was blocking me getting to know him? Was the one-hour date too short? I was not sure, but I was still very curious and I wanted to discover more.

One Sunday evening, Tomas called me to plan our second date. He suggested we went to the cinema. I declined immediately

and offered to have a look at other activities. I was still in shock with the two cinema dates I had had with Joseph the robot and Bozo the clown (Adrian).

After our call, I received the following text from Tomas: < Valérie, I never been married properly, but I have a daughter 11 year-old back in Lithuania whos living whith her mom. I love children and was dreaming to have a nice family but it didnt work woth that woman. Wouldnt be that a lil problem for you? >

Ok, Tomas had a daughter. He was honest; she lived with her mother in Lithuania, but at this stage, did it really matter?

I didn't really care. I knew about it – great! But it wouldn't stop me seeing him again. And what did he mean by not “married properly”?

Then, five minutes later, I received another text from Tomas: < Claire, I hope you understand. >

I kindly replied: < Sorry, wrong girl! >

He replied back: < Sorry, my Tinder was playing up. >

I just didn't respond.

Date No.2

Tomas was there, waiting for me, looking so cute in his clothes that were more appropriate to his body type. This time, his belly wasn't showing.

He told me that there was no cinema in Wimbledon. I strongly doubted it, but I did not want to go there anyway and was shocked that he ignored my unwillingness to go.

As we went to look for a place to have a quick drink, we stumbled upon a cinema. I looked at Tomas mockingly, with inquisitive eyes. He explained, embarrassed, that he had a Cineworld card and it wasn't a Cineworld Cinema. But it was the first Red Flag. It seemed a little cheap for someone who owns a Rolex and a Porsche.

Tomas and I went to eat in a pub, and Tomas wanted to resume the conversation about his daughter. I interrupted him by saying that it was not relevant at this point and that it did not bother me. I thanked him for his honesty, and I suggested that we spoke about it more in depth when things became more serious between us.

And then he added, "Val, i need to tell you something else. I do not work anymore. I've been sacked for the fourth time since I've been in London. It's very hard for me, but thank God, I'm lucky enough to live on benefits. They are the reason I'm surviving these days. So, I'd like to apologise in advance if I'm not taking you to fancy restaurants for now."

Seriously, the man behind the Porsche was saying this to me? Part of me wanted to keep listening and discovering. It was like watching a mediocre movie but still curious to see how it ends. Could it get any worse for God's sake? No! The New *Moi* had heard enough.

I excused myself to go to the loo, and for the first time on a date, I asked a friend (Bianca) to make the run-away-from-date-call. A few minutes later, I was in a cab going home.

As if what Tomas had said upon our date wasn't enough, he sent the following text later that evening: <Hi Valérie, I thought I would ask this question: i did recon that we like each other very much and could have a very nice long family type of relationship but i was about to rent some property in London soon and need to pay a high deposit, sign a contract and stuff

and would be deffinitely stuck in that place for long. So I thought we like each other and so on and why couldn't we move in together in to Knightsbridge, your place and see how the things will further go. We wont get to know each other well unless we lived together under the same one roof. We could pay the rent each 50% be nice couple we could save time and money and would be really cool ;) think about that please and let me know later today ;) we could try this movemnt in the next 7 days :)>

Dumbfounded, my mouth went Sahara-dry. I really thought it was a joke! Big laughs! Obviously, I never responded to this proposal, and it was the end of this cute adventure.

Was he what we call a gold-digger? He sounded like it. I bet he wasn't messing with no broke ladies. Get down man, go head get down! Next!

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Kung Fu Loving

Sunday morning, I was in my bath swiping – left, left, left, well maybe right, no, left thanks, left... Wow! I stopped on Chris's picture. He had no text profile but a dozen of good-looking pictures. For some reason, his face seemed familiar. Even toooooo familiar. I questioned myself, *"Where could I have met this man? One of my colleagues in the accounting department? My ground floor neighbour? Cashier at Waitrose?"* I wasn't sure. His profile didn't give anything away. My shallowness took the hell out of me; I decided to take the risk and swiped right.

We instantly matched, but I felt that 9am was a little bit too early to message, and I decided to postpone our chat to later that day.

I totally forgot about the match until later in the evening, when I received a Tinder-text from Chris: < Do you fancy me? >

What a way to start a chat, I thought, and replied: < I suppose that I like the look of you. >

Two minutes later Chris replied: < I only ask because I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable by trying to kiss you on our next date tomorrow. >

I didn't know what to reply, but his audacity made me smile.

He texted again: < May I have a phone number? > I gave my number to Chris and we spoke until midnight. I hadn't spoken to a man for that long since Harper. He was quite interesting.

So, Chris, 37-year-old, blond, almond green eyes, 6-foot tall, extremely well-built. The reason why I felt like I knew him was

that Chris was an actor, and had played in a plethora of American and British action movies. We planned to meet Monday for a cinema date. I know cinema date...

After I had hung up and was all snuggly tucked up in bed, Chris sent: < I really fancy you. I think you look beautiful. Shall I send you a picture of me in my underwear? >

Well... I was confused dot com! What the heck? What made him think I was ok with such a thing?

I replied, trying to hide my annoyance: < Why would you want to send me a pic of you in your underwear? >

I could feel the embarrassment from Chris through his text. He simply replied: < I have no idea. Silly text. Sorry. >

Seriously? What was wrong with these men? The world was spinning out of control. Was daddy's romance dead? I hoped not. I wished not. I knew not.

I added: < Or maybe this was a trick to get mine > and Chris rushed to reply: <I would love to see you in your underwear. Less even! >

Now, I wasn't feeling too sure about the date.

That is why it took me 15 minutes on the day to decide whether or not I should meet him. Then I realised that the more I was thinking, the more it was getting late and it would be rude to cancel. Too late! Chris was probably being on his way. I had to go.

I didn't like that Chris texted me on his way to Leicester Square, "The cinema is a treat on you! I'll pay for the drinks!". Why would you send such a text? I found the approach quiet rude. Clearly shows his lack of manners.

Anyways, Chris and I were to see Mad Max at 8pm. I arrived 15 minutes after him and Chris was clearly not happy about it.

Well, I ignored his fury. He was still super sexy, even more handsome in the flesh. As for me, I had three huge spots and a puppy mood because of my period. I bought the tickets and we decided to have a drink at Chiquito before the showing, two steps from the cinema.

Chris and I sat for at least ten minutes and nobody was getting our order. It seemed that the service was very slow. Either way, Chris appeared to have his period as well, as he started to grumble and went to find someone.

He returned to the table, looking cross, with a waiter who seemed somewhat embarrassed.

The mood at the table was disconcerting and tense. I'm not sure what had happened, but I was very uncomfortable. As soon as the waiter took our order, Chris exclaimed, "What a fucker!"

I stood there and said nothing, but Chris added, "When I went to see him, he told me he was not in charge of our table. I said that I couldn't give a fuck who was in charge of what. Quality and service require teamwork."

I was wide-eyed by Chris's audacity. The waiter, who was disconcerted and probably still shocked and upset by Chris's behaviour, came back to us, and unfortunately, he spilt wine on my shirt and the table. All of a sudden, I saw Chris taking him by the neck, "You piece of shit! You did that on purpose! Son of a bitch!"

I shouted at Chris, afraid by this desire to fight. "No, no, let him go! What are you doing? It's all fine. It's just white wine! It does not matter!"

Chris tried to punch the waiter in the face, but thank God, the waiter dodged the hit. The security officer arrived and threw us out of the restaurant like non-recyclable paper – without consideration.

Pissed, I asked Chris, "Chris, what the hell was that?"

"Leave me alone," he said calmly. "I'm too upset to talk."

He sulked as we walked quickly towards the cinema. I wasn't sure what I was still doing there. I suppose I just thought that Chris needed to talk to someone to help him evacuate his anger.

As we arrived at the cinema, the movie was about to start, and we sat in an awkward silence.

Throughout the film, Chris did not say a word. He looked cold and full of hatred, his lips clenched and pinched. He watched the film, bubbling with tension.

The film ended, we left the cinema. The atmosphere was still so strained that I allowed myself to take a cigarette (something I have never done upon a date).

Chris asked, "Can I have a cigarette? I need to relax now, I am still fuming."

I replied, a bit reassured, "Indeed."

I gave him one, and we both lit up.

A few seconds later, a guy came and asked for a cigarette. He sounded French and really friendly, but I did not even have the time to respond and chat with him. Chris took him by the neck and shouted, spitting in his face, his eyes full of anger, "Do you think that this lady has an off-licence shop?"

I couldn't believe it! Not again! "Leave him alone, please Chris! You're scaring me. Why do you act like that?"

"This son of a bitch doesn't respect ladies," screamed Chris, his eyes infused with raging nerves, and he kicked the poor French guy, who collapsed head-first on the floor – all for a cigarette. I was horrified and frozen. A few tourists passed by, horrified by the ordeal. The French guy ran away, surely beating Usain Bolt's athletic world record.

Utterly mortified, I burst, "I'm leaving! You're nuts! I can't take anymore!" I started running towards the road to get a taxi.

"Valérie, Valérie! I am so sorry! Please wait! I like you." He caught my arm and kissed me awkwardly. The kiss wasn't reciprocated.

"I have to go home Chris, I don't feel well, and I think you should have a rest as well."

"Ok, beauty. Sleep well!"

I didn't reply and rushed into the first cab, still shocked by Chris' aggressive and scary Kung Fu moves.

In the cab, I quickly pulled myself together, wondering what was wrong with him. He wasn't even drunk.

I arrived home safely and climbed my stairs. I exchanged the following texts with Chris:

< Did you get home safe? >

< Yes, I did thank you.> I didn't want to say more.

< Did you have a nice night?> I was flabbergasted that he dared to ask the question.

I just texted back, < Were you ok? >

< Yeah. Really sore head through. Too much chocolate. >

< Scary effects on you > I retorted.

< No, it came on before I came out. >

I didn't get what Chris meant, and I didn't want to know. That night, I just put myself to sleep, had a few nightmares of Chris beating me up with his Kung Fu moves.

Well, I never heard back from him after that. He surely understood that his attitude wasn't appropriate and very improper. What the hell had happened to that guy? Maybe he was on drugs or medication? Was he just trying to show off? What an arrogant waste of oxygen! Next!

Chapter Twenty-Eight – The Animal

I was at the Tennyson with the ladies, relating my horrific date with Chris, the Kung Fu fighter. The combat scenes I described horrified Camellia and Bianca.

"For God's sake, where do you find all these psychos? Madame, you don't make mistakes, but you date them!" Bianca commented, ironically.

"She needs to join Celest Connections, just like me, and start meeting the gentlemen she deserves," said Camellia, hastily. "I understand that you and Stephanie are friends now – why don't you ask for a discount and join? She loves you! I'm sure she'll do it!"

"Who's Stephanie?" asked Bianca.

"Camellia's matchmaker," I said, "I don't want to join your Knightsbridge dating agency. What is a 10% discount on £15,000? Plus, I like my experiences!"

I didn't have time to end my sentence, as Bianca interrupted, "Well, I wouldn't be proud to date a vagabond, or a woodpecker, or a clad!" she said, mockingly.

"You seriously need to write a book! Your stories are so funny! Sometimes I feel like you're dating the wrong guys on purpose, just to make us laugh. And maybe not fall in love quite yet?" advised Camellia.

I smiled. Maybe Camellia was right. I hated boring dates, but I loved talking about the crazy ones.

"Who's your date tonight?" Bianca asked.

"An Italian named Stefano. He will be here in 30 minutes."

"God! Is it because you're French that you attract Italians? I've never dated an Italian in my whole life!" said Bianca, enviously.

"You mean you've never fucked an Italian in your life!" I laughed.

My phone beeped. It was my date. "Stefano's early!" I exclaimed.

Stefano had texted to say that he was two minutes away, and a bit early, but that he would find a table for us.

Panicking, I kicked Bianca and Camellia out of the Tennyson. "Sorry, sorry, he's here! He's early! You need to go! Quick, Quick! Quick! He shouldn't meet you yet! Don't stay here, please! You can go to Petrus or Ottolenghi for drinks next door! Gooooooo! Pleaaaaaaase!"

The ladies were trying to be as quick as possible; I could hear Bianca groaning, "Kicking us out for another loser!" I smiled at her sarcastic comment.

Half a minute later, Stefano arrived. We kissed on the cheek and started chatting.

Meet Stefano, who I had met on Tinder. He was Italian, 5'7", 32-year-old, with dark rounded eyes, black hair, a cute goatee beard, and smart Italian dress-sense. He really looked like the king of ostentation, parading proudly in a Gucci suit and a big Rolex. Yet, I took an instant liking to him.

Stefano, as the perfect Italian stereotype, bragged about his life.

He was selling his family's Italian wines in the UK, with the ambition to sell them all over the world. He wasn't quite my style, but he had this sort of sound, confident, and grounded attitude that made me want to stay around him. Or maybe it was the glasses of wine I had had beforehand that made me feel that.

Those drinks also removed all sense of inhibition. I do not know why, but I was mega-comfortable. I was myself, and in just a few hours, Stefano had seen all of my facets: silly Valérie, blond Valérie, awkward and clumsy Valérie, funny Valérie, and hopefully, cultured and smart Valérie. For the first time on a date, I felt really at ease with someone.

The date went so well that we decided to have dinner together. Stefano wanted to go to Petrus, but I wasn't sure if the ladies had chosen to go and decline the offer. I didn't want to bump into them there. Stefano called his lifestyle manager (I know... Sounds pompous, *hein?*) and his recommendation was the Bombay Brasserie.

I was not a fan of Indian cuisine but I was more than willing to give the food another go, hoping I would not be sick that night. Bombay Brasserie had a stunning interior; I was impressed. Chic and sophisticated with an exotic refined decoration, the food quality was also excellent. To my tongue, it was the most delicious Indian restaurant I had ever been in, and the reason was probably that it was a traditional yet fusion cooking experience. I just loved it.

After five glasses of Chardonnay, a bottle of champagne, and one bottle of Chateau Gazin, Stefano started to look very attractive to my eyes and I wanted to kiss him. The more he was talking about wine, the sexier he looked. Those feelings stopped dead when Stefano started criticising French wine; we had a fiery debate. He apologised and said it was an inappropriate discussion for a first date. I agreed.

We left Bombay Brasserie and decided to share an Uber. When it arrived, we requested a mini tour of London and jumped at each other. I believed it was the most passionate moment I had ever had in my life. Stefano was holding my neck firmly and sexily; he bit my ears, my cheeks, and my lips. His tongue was sensually all over my face. He pulled my hair delicately, held my face again and kissed me all over. The moment was hot and we had some fantastic views of London by night to make for the most romantic date.

We finally arrived at mine and Stefano asked if he could come in. Though I was aroused by all of the passion, I decided to decline the invite – I was simply too drunk to appreciate it. He insisted for a couple of minutes, and then, hearing my annoyance at his persistence, Stefano politely accepted my decision. I arrived at my flat and collapsed, fully dressed, on my sofa.

The next morning, I felt like I had the worse hangover of my life. And a hangover of a different kind – my face was burning. I checked my phone and it was 5am in the morning; I still had three hours to sleep before getting dressed for work. I looked again to see if Stefano had sent any texts. I read: < Most amazing date ever, thinking about you, in my bed naked right now! > I wondered if I had kissed him too quickly. Then I received: < You should come to mine now. You'll never forget this sex. You'll beg for more! > I found his text inappropriate and way too soon in our “relationship”.

I didn't reply. I needed tablets to get rid of that horrible headache.

Feeling spaced out, I managed to get into my bathroom and took a tablet.

Clothes removed, I went to my bedroom. God, my face was

burning like I had put a hot iron on it! I couldn't even put my face on my pillow without feeling the pain. I seriously considered sleeping with my head in my freezer.

I decided to go back to the bathroom to check if I had a rash from the Indian food. In front of my mirror, I shouted out loud – so loud I am sure all the building thought I was being killed! I couldn't recognise my own self that morning! My neck was bruised like someone had tried to kill me. My lips were swollen, my nose had teeth prints, I had hickeys all over my neck and shoulders and my face was covered with scratches. In fact, I looked like I had been fighting with a tiger. It wasn't the food, but Stefano's conception of passion all over my face. Apparently, the alcohol had helped to minimise the pain that night, which was now unbearable.

I threw up, called sick, and then hid in my flat for a few days, as my foundation wasn't powerful enough to cover up this horridness. And I never saw Stefano again. Next!

Chapter Twenty-Nine- The Sleeping Beauty

The last couple of dates had been absolute jokes! Yet, I realised that I really loved dating. I really enjoyed discovering what I had missed out for seven years. It was fun! I could never wait to share my experiences with the ladies. In fact, I couldn't wait to hear their experiences either. Though I was the only one on Tinder and Camellia had just decided to hire a matchmaker. And Bianca? Well, when she needed a man in her bed, she just went shopping in a hotel bar.

After sharing a few experiences with them and justifying the not-so-fresh scratches on my neck, Bianca said, "Ladies, why do you even bother getting into relationships? One day, when you're married, you'll wish you were single. Do we even need men in our lives? Some friends of mine have been married for 20 years and still don't even know what a real orgasm feels like!"

"Well, that's their fault! They should have married a better man for the bedroom," replied Camellia, indignantly, as if she'd just broken up with a man for bad sex.

"Anyhow, men will soon be obsolete. We already have dildos to replace them. And they are way better than 90 percent of them, I reckon. Climax guaranteed!"

"What about children? You can't get pregnant with a dildo!", I said.

"One day, and this will be very soon, people will sell dildos with sperm in them. The packaging will show the man's picture. Success guaranteed!"

I grabbed my coat. "I hope I won't exist in that world, darling. By the way, if I die single, do you think that a dildo will be legal in heaven?" I asked, intrigued. "If not, I am not sure I'm going." I winked.

I left without expecting a reply from them. I was going two minutes away, to Covent Garden Station to meet my date.

Date No.1

When I arrived, Romain was already waiting for me. He looked exactly like his pictures. I wasn't surprised at all.

So, meet Romain: French, blue doe eyes, blond, 5'11, athletic, and 40-year-old, a charming gentleman from South West France. He lived in London for 15 years, in Maida Vale, and back in France he had worked as a farmer. Romain was a very interesting profile.

But in London, Romain was a Market Development Manager in advanced molecular activity in an international biotechnology company. He was cute and he instantly gave me a warm hug accompanied by two kisses on the cheek *à la French*. We had a walk towards Leicester Square and decided to sit in Browns on St Martin's Lane and have a glass of wine.

Romain was a really cool and smart guy to be with; we had a few jokes and lots of banter. I understood he had a sister leaving in New York, and that his parents were still living in Bordeaux. He liked London, but preferred Bordeaux and couldn't wait to go back home when he reached his money target to build his own vineyard in the southwest of France.

This looked like a wink to my date with Stefano, but I was firmly decided not to get too passionate for a while, especially when drunk.

I was telling him about my decision to hand in my notice in order to start my own business in Arts, which was also a passion of mine. I was about to open my very own art gallery. We shared each other's ambitions in a relaxed atmosphere.

When Romain and I parted ways, I realised that we didn't have much in common, but what Romain was interesting, I could truly get into him. It was the same for him – he had always tried to understand art, and could even paint, but he wasn't as knowledgeable as me in this domain. That is why we both wanted to see each other again, as we both wanted to know more about each other. It was the most substantial and concrete sort of date I had had for a while. No cheap talk, just sharing real interests.

Date No.2

To be honest, that Saturday morning I almost called Romain to cancel our date, but we'd been trying for three weeks to arrange this second date, and I didn't want him to think that I was uninterested. I had moved into my new flat that Saturday morning and unpacked all day to find the dress I wanted to that night.

And, I had been off for most of the week, but I was running all over London to decorate my gallery, to buy and sell art, to find a new flat in Chelsea, and to chaperone Camellia to find a matchmaker in the seven agencies in London we had selected for her. From Celest Connection, 70/30, or Drawing Down the Moon, it had been tough for her to pick. She had decided to choose Celest Connections just because I had an excellent feeling with its head matchmaker Stephanie. In fact, ever since, she's been a very close friend of mine.

Camellia was determined to find her man and get married before the end of next year. Well, I knew she would, she was soooo resolute.

When I arrived in Angel that Saturday night, I was shattered by my full-on week. In fact, I was slightly moody, but seeing Romain quickly delayed my social jet-lag. He was smartly dressed; his shirt was unbuttoned and I could see his well-defined torso. When Romain hugged me, I could sense his defined biceps. He was truly sexy that night.

We decided to have dinner at Rodizio Rico, a Brazilian restaurant. Again I wanted to know more about the wine business, and Romain wanted to know more about the art business. We were basically exchanging knowledge. Then, we talked about our families, our work, and life in general. We quickly addressed French politics as well, but our opinion being divergent, we abandoned this sensitive subject.

After dinner, Romain and I decided to go to the Ladybird Bar. As soon as I got in, I knew I'd like it. The fun, the beautiful model-looking crowd, the swinging music, the good vibes and the beautiful neon lights were so attractive to me.

The bar was packed solid with the golden geek chic youth of the East Side, and after a few cocktails, Romain and I were hitting the dance floor. It was delightful and, both being very social, we made a lot of friends throughout the night.

At some point, I excused myself to go the ladies. Next thing I knew, I was sitting on the toilet bowl, woken by the banging on my door, "Val? Are you Valérie? Are you ok?"

I managed to move my head from the wall, which was glued with my saliva. I couldn't believe it! It seemed that I had fallen asleep in the toilet. It was 2:30 on my watch! It seemed that I had stayed there for at least two hours! I quickly pulled on my panties and tights and checked my face in my pocket mirror. I had dried saliva on my left cheek. My breath smelled like I had never owned a toothbrush. I was aghast. The voice behind the

door was becoming more and more insistent. I screamed back, "Yes, I'm ok! Thanks, I am getting out! Just give me a minute!"

In truth, I needed a trip back in time! Even my dress had lost its superb.

The voice shouted again, "Your boyfriend is worrying!"

"What?" I mused. "Romain!" Oh, my! Romain had bid his time. I couldn't believe it! Why would he have stayed? It would have annoyed the heck out of me. I walked out of the ladies, feeling ashamed, and Romain was there, holding my coat gentlemanly.

"What happened to you?" Romain asked gently. He wasn't even a drop aghast, nor was he sulking.

"I don't know. I guess I was tired," I responded, naively.

"Let's put you in a cab," Romain said, quietly.

In the cab, Romain didn't say a word. Romain just made sure I was driven home ok and gave me a kiss on the cheek. Silent people have the loudest minds.

Needless to say, I never met him again. I didn't even dare trying to arrange a date or contact him. I could hear his voice in my mind saying: "You are soooooo next Valérie!"

Chapter Thirty- The B.U.G (*The Big Unfriendly Giant*)

The Russian Bogdan, was 32, grew up in Moscow but was educated in the USA. He lived in Notting Hill, which wasn't far from my new flat in South Kensington.

Physically and on picture, Bogdan seemed to be slim, with dark blond hair and greenish eyes. We chatted on Tinder for a few minutes, exchanged numbers and the next thing I knew we were organising a date in Kensington High Street.

When I arrived, Bogdan was already sat at our table near the window and he saw me coming. He seemed to recognise me straight away as he stood up and welcomed me with a warm hug. I felt like a little infant. He was so tall! I bet he was at least a foot taller than me.

So, meet Bogdan: 6'5, an only child, born and raised in Russia until he moved to the US to attend Harvard University where he was a superstar student. He was now working in finance in the city after working New York, and had bought a two-bedroom flat in Notting Hill where (I quote) was ready to have a family.

Date No.1

Bogdan impressed me, as he was so elegantly dressed. I think he was the most elegant man I had ever dated in London yet Russian: slim-fit wool trousers, a printed square silk scarf carefully wrapped around his neck, and a Burberry embroidered shirt. Very chic!

Our date was very formal and clinical. I really liked Bogdan's

profile, but that was it. We had no chemistry; I wasn't encapsulated by his handsomeness, but he had an A+ profile – an ideal husband for Camellia, but something was missing for me with this gentleman. Maybe a bit of warmth?

Dinner over, Bogdan and I decided to share a cab. We gave both addresses to the driver but suddenly Bogdan invited me to have a few additional drinks at his to try a variety of Russian vodkas.

I wasn't enthusiastic and politely declined the offer. Yet, Bogdan decided that I wouldn't choose that night, and asked the driver to head to his. After a three-minute verbal fight, the driver and Bogdan sort of convinced me.

A few moments later, I was at Bogdan's gigantic flat in Notting Hill. In the living room, he had a selection of spirits from Russia. A drink or two (?) later, we both broke loose. We were, now, kissing passionately and ended up in his bed having the most bestial sex I had ever had in my life. We were like two bonobos who hadn't fucked for a century. Around 6am, I woke up all panicked and mega-ashamed: my first one-night stand at 32-year-old! A weird feeling took over my body; I felt sick, dirty, and more importantly I wasn't proud.

I know, I was meant to have fun and experience new things. But this one nightstand, I felt like a chicken being ravenously eaten by a starving carnivore and binned like uneatable bones. It was not a bad feeling. I decided to leave silently. Outside his building, I hailed a cab and went back home.

Date No.2

I decided to ignore all of Bogdan's texts. I wondered why he was calling me? He already got what he wanted! Why was Bogdan persisting? Plus, I didn't recall the sex being particularly great, so I didn't want to reiterate the experience. But after a few weeks of persistence, I was intrigued to know more and I

decided to see him again.

Bogdan knew how to organise a date. He booked a table at Vinoteca in Soho, which is wine bar & restaurant serving pan-European food. The décor is chic yet humble with a selection of amazing wine coming from all around the world. I was in heaven.

I arrived right on time and for some reason Bogdan looked very different, and I couldn't explain why. We awkwardly kissed on the cheeks; to be fair, I wasn't sure what to do, as we had done more than kissing last time we met.

Bogdan wondered openly, "What happened between us? Why did you disappear?"

Embarrassed, I wasn't sure what to say. But I decided to be frank; "I've never had a one-night stand in my life. I suppose I panicked and..."

"You made it a one-night stand, Valérie. I wanted to see you again and I still do. I really appreciated you, both physically and personally. I think you're a fantastic person and I believe we matched well." Bogdan interrupted.

I looked at him. Bogdan seemed honest and really hurt. He touched my feelings, and I realised he was right – I had transformed that night myself. Why not, make it something real I thought to myself.

But, my feelings changed when Bogdan stopped the waiter inappropriately with his right hand abruptly asking, "When are we going to get the wine list?"

After a few seconds, the waiter brought the list. "Not a moment too soon!" said Bogdan hastily.

After Bogdan and I had chosen our wine, I called the waiter back and ordered it, along with our food. I was still haunted by Chris's King Fu moves and I wasn't ready for the Russian sequel to that.

Bogdan and I had a great evening, and I discovered his sense of humour and it was fun. When I questioned him about the predicament he had provoked with the waiter (I needed to be sure that he wasn't a fighter), he simply replied that he disliked bad customer experiences, especially when accompanied by a beautiful lady like me, and Bogdan was just expressing his feelings towards it. We spoke about our past travel experiences and future plans, and one of them for me was a trip to Scotland the following weekend. Bogdan immediately proposed to join me, and I was very reluctant. Well, it was supposed to be one of my trips alone, but he insisted.

This was when it really hit me, I realised that I was scared to stay more than a few hours confined with a man in a hotel. I hadn't been on holiday with a man for two years.

And the idea was terrifying. What if I had nothing to say to Bogdan? More dreadful – I wouldn't be able to smoke at all! I would be confined to a suite in Edinburgh and obliged to spend three full days with Bogdan. I told him that I'd think about it, but he was quick to ask, "Why?"

I blushed, "Well..."

I didn't have any valid reason. Well, okay, I did, but I didn't want to share it.

We finished our dinner; Bogdan insisted on paying the bill. I insisted on leaving a tip that Bogdan took back, "Are you kidding?"

"Come on, just for that little delay?"

"Not only that!"

"Please leave it for him," I begged. "It's my way to participate in this dinner."

"You did! You smiled and made me laugh. You behaved like a perfect lady, and you are way too generous."

He gave me the money back. We walked out, but I pretended to go to the lavatories and gave my tip directly to the waiter with an apologetic smile. Upon my return, Bogdan was talking to the manager and complaining about our waiter. I rushed Bogdan out and started talking about Edinburgh and him coming with me. That was such a good piece of news for him. He rushed to leave. We had a drink at Bob Bob Ricard just next door and we planned our trip together.

Well, Bob Bob Ricard was a way to Bogdan to introduce me to Russia. Shamelessly decadent, Bob Bob Ricard offers Russian food, cocktails, and drinks in a delightful art deco atmosphere. A pleasure for the eyes!

Back to my date, I recognised that for the first time since I had divorced, I was about to have a trip with another man and this time I wouldn't be able to escape easily. I hoped God would help me to be a good girl!

Our trip - A series of dates

There we were – on the flight heading towards Edinburgh. We had met at Heathrow and eaten dinner at Gordon Ramsay's restaurant.

As we boarded our flight, Bogdan suddenly said loudly, "Thank God! I was happy to discover that you're not like those losers travelling in eco."

Embarrassed, I just replied, " Bogdan, I sometimes do. This is just a treat."

"I don't believe you; your little derrière is way too nice to have sat in economy."

His remark made me smile but I just asked him to shut up as I wasn't the only one annoyed by the comment – all eyes were on us. It was disconcerting. I started to wonder if Bogdan was a social racist. Or just a bit of a snob? Now, I couldn't help but worry that I wouldn't be able to bear three full days and three nights with him. I would learn it to my cost during the trip.

We arrived at Edinburgh Airport around 10pm that Thursday. We ordered a cab to the Missoni Hotel (now rebranded as the G&V Royal Mile Hotel) in the centre of the city. Edinburgh was beautiful, I couldn't wait to explore. It was June and the night was just warm enough – a nice heat accompanied by a gentle caressing breeze.

Edinburgh by night was romantically epic, with its walls protecting its inhabitants. I could tell straight away that the city had character; it was quaint with a mixture of carved stone and raw rock perched on top of old craggy rocks. I fell instantly in love with the light of the medieval maze of the Old Town.

Bogdan and I arrived at the hotel at 10:30pm. The location was fabulous – right in the middle of Edinburgh's historic centre, and everything seemed a short walk away.

We checked in, deposited our luggage in our fantastic room and decided to have a quick walk to the historic centre. Bogdan was so romantic and since he had been to the country before, he alimented our walk with a few historical facts.

Tired by our trip, we both had a shower and went straight to

bed. Bogdan just kissed me tenderly good night and we slept holding each other.

Friday

I had a very nice sleep in Bogdan's arms.

It lasted just ten minutes. I quickly felt uncomfortable strangled by his limbs. For the rest of the night I slept on the edge of the bed, as Bogdan was a natural human heater. He just made me sweat, and I never sweat!

I woke up to the sound of Bogdan's alarm. I could have slept more. We had breakfast together and I learned so much more about Bogdan. First, he was a cinephile; he absolutely adored movies of all genres, including foreign, avant-garde, and traditional movies – he had seen them all.

Well, that is what he said. Bogdan spoke eight different languages, which impressed me, including French.

That morning, I also realised that Bogdan liked the sound of his own voice. He didn't stop talking about himself. He bragged about his life, with his posh Russian attitude. He'd done this, done that, and when I was trying to share an experience of mine, he quickly ruined the memory of it by always trying to surpass my share. If I had won a million pounds on the lottery, he would have won ten million; if I had been a senator, he would have been a president; if I had bought a flat, he would have purchased a building. He always found a way to downgrade my experiences, in one way or another, no matter how amazing they had been. I wondered how I was going to survive the weekend.

By the end of the breakfast, Bogdan asked the waitress if she could order a cab for the Royal Yacht Britannia. She had the misfortune to reply that it wasn't her job, but that of the concierge. Bogdan yelled at her, "Are you fucking kidding me? I

am paying a fortune to be at this hotel, and you're unable to pass a message to your concierge? I have to go myself?"

I was trying to calm him down, "Please, it's embarrassing!"

"Sorry sir, I..."

"You what? Don't you know the definition of a five-star hotel? Don't you know how to use a telephone? Are you too lazy?"

The waitress blushed and apologised a billion times. I did too, feeling for her. We disappeared a few minutes later in a cab taking us to the Royal Yacht Britannia.

In the cab I asked Bogdan why he felt the need to act like that. He barely replied and was almost proud of himself and the predicament he caused for that poor employee. I clearly stated to him that if he wanted to act like that, it shouldn't be when he was with me. He hadn't needed to shout at her in front of everyone. It was uncomfortable and unnecessary. Bogdan annoyingly laughed out loud for minutes, showing all his teeth to me. For the first (or maybe the second) time, I really wanted to slap my date in the face. I felt like I was dating evil. God, I just wanted to have a nice time with a nice date!

The visit to the Royal Yacht Britannia was a most enjoyable and pleasant one – the main reason being, we both enjoyed the complimentary audio guide. So, I didn't need to hear Bogdan's bullshit. We spent our morning there and had a quick lunch at Bistro Provence, a charming French restaurant with a warm, relaxed, and friendly atmosphere. Thank God, the service was up to Bogdan's standard.

We ordered a cab to go back into town and visited the Royal Botanic Garden and Edinburgh Castle. We had a quick walk around the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and finished the day with the Scotch Whisky Experience. Oh, my! I don't drink

whisky, but at this stage, I needed it. I'd been quiet all day, and that afternoon Bogdan had been wearing his *Guide hat*. He couldn't stop speaking and commenting. He knew everything! I don't know how I managed not to kill him. At the National Portrait Gallery, I politely asked him if I could enjoy some paintings in silence. The longest silence lasted five-and-a-half seconds. And his attitude towards the employees was disgusting; he asked a poor girl to clean the coffee off his £500 shoes that she had had the misfortune to drop on them.

I was surprised to find that Bogdan was very silent when drunk! I had a soundless dinner at the Mussel and Steak Bar. Well, I had a long monologue about the things I had enjoyed that day, and the whisky I had bought for my dad. Bogdan was attuned with an incomprehensible stare and smiled all through our dinner.

As if we hadn't drunk enough, we decided to end the night at the Liquid Room, where we enjoyed a few more drinks and a lively concert in a buoyant crowd. I danced and chatted with a few girls and we went quietly back to our hotel.

Bogdan was drunk and feeling very sexual. I was drunk and very horny. We had sex like animals. I pushed him on the bed and I took the lead, kissing him all over. I unbuttoned his shirt, removed his trousers, and stripped in front of him.

Seconds later, we were sexing, and that's what we did for the rest of the night. It was bad. I slept unsatisfied under Bogdan's loud snores.

Saturday

I was completely spaced out and let Bogdan have breakfast alone. I didn't want to wake up and had a dreadful hangover. I had a quick phone conversation with my sisters and had to tell them that Bogdan was only alive because I was claustrophobic

and couldn't live in prison. And the only thing I could think of was my return to London. Bogdan interrupted my discussion and I gave him the fakest smile I had ever given in my life. I had to hang up on my conference call.

I had a quick shower and we left the hotel very silently. I just hoped that Bogdan hadn't heard anything. But I was quickly reassured when Bogdan resumed his role of guide, commenting on the Palace of Holyrood House, the Holyrood Abbey and the Scottish Parliament. That day, I confronted him a couple of times on his dates and inconsistency. I realised that some of the details he pretended to know, were just bluff and smoke! I thought it would calm him down. But, then I was having a Bogdan competition for the Best Cultivated Individual Award of the year. We were both fighting our turf, which ended up with us having really hot, violent and merciless debates.

The only highlight of the day was, when Bogdan and I decided to treat ourselves and dress up for the Angels of Bagpipes restaurant on the Royal Mile.

The Angels of Bagpipes will forever stay one of my favourite restaurants in the United Kingdom. It was delicious; the staff was fantastic and the food an absolute delight. Bogdan lost his tongue again and I was euphoric with that, as it also meant that I won a few debates. One of them included him being persuaded that Paul Boulangerie was founded by a Russian man. Bogdan *googled* the info, and he had to swallow his pride when he discovered that I was again right! Well, some people's egos are bigger than others.

When we left the restaurant, to go to the Shanghai Club to dance before our last day in town, Bogdan stopped at a table and spoke to a woman sitting with her husband. "Madam, excuse my frankness but your fake Gucci is an eyesore for this kind of restaurant. You..."

I wasn't sure I had heard it right, but I just ran out of the restaurant. I didn't want to be associated with him anymore. I hailed a cab and I heard him in the background, "Aren't you waiting for me?" I didn't reply.

When I arrived at the Shanghai Club, I decided to ignore Bogdan completely.

Big mistake!

Two men came over to me when I was on the dancefloor and Bogdan came straight after them, which started a fight. The security came right after all of them and kicked them out. The friends of the two men involved came after me, "Why didn't you mention your fucking boyfriend? You bitch!" I couldn't bear it anymore. I ran out of the club. Outside, Bogdan was mega angry, and we started to have an argument in front of the bewildered queue. I caught a cab; Bogdan followed me. The atmosphere was glacial; we didn't exchange any words.

At the hotel, I stopped at the reception, which Bogdan didn't seem to question and walked to the lifts. I asked if they had another room available, but unfortunately, they were fully booked. I swallowed my anger and joined Bogdan in the room.

As soon as I had stepped in, Bogdan jumped on me, and we had this violent, outrageous, make-up sex. Still, it was bad. We both slept, and upon my awakening, his penis was still in me. It seemed like the more sex I had with him, the more I loved and missed my dildo.

Sunday

I couldn't wait to get back to London and regretted picking a late afternoon flight. We spent the day in the Old Town visiting The Real Mary King's Close and the St. Giles Cathedral. We joined the Edinburgh Underground Ghost Tour and went

shopping. When Bogdan tried to act like the guide this time. I flipped out and couldn't help but say, "Could you, just for once, shut up! Please, shut up!"

And because Bogdan was still going on and on," Shut the fuck up! S. H. U. T. space U. P!" I yelled. "Is it my accent that you can't understand? Quiet! Please! I don't give a fuck about your bullshit! You arrogant, smug, numbsk..."

Bogdan didn't open his mouth again that day, but to say a glacial goodbye at Heathrow airport.

Bogdan was my last Tinder date. I deleted the app as soon as I arrived home.

A few months later

While I was queuing at Heathrow to get my cab back home, I stumbled across Bogdan. I had been on a party weekend in Miami with the Ladies and instantly regretted not booking myself a taxi straight from of my flight. He was just behind me with a beautiful and charming lady. I quickly turned away. I had a quick second glance to be sure it was him. The lady he was with was all freshened up, as if she had had a spa on her flight. I, admittedly, looked horrible, as I hadn't slept for three nights. I quickly put my sunglasses on, despite the rainy, windy and horrible London weather. I knew that the only place you could wear sunglasses on a rainy day was Knightsbridge, but this was a beauty and ego emergency. Yes! I felt like she was a Prada bag and I was a plastic one. I quickly got my cab and never saw him again. After that day, I always made sure I was all put together when coming off of any flight before seeing the daylight. Next!

Chapter Thirty-One – The Viking

After all the funny dates I had had, I decided to divorce Tinder. It wasn't working. I could barely remember if I had ever had a great date from that app. It was too random for me. I needed more than just physical attraction.

At first, I had felt that Tinder was saving me time, but in fact, it was wasting it. Going on random dates and chatting online with random men to check if we shared common interests was not efficient. Meanwhile, websites like eHarmony, Match, and others, did this part for you. You just needed to establish a chemistry and be pleased with the physical appearance of your date.

But, I decided to divorce online dating as a whole. I wanted to meet people in the street; being charmed in the flesh, smiling at them, talking to them and experiencing them naturally. I didn't want to be limited by an app, by over-Photoshopped or camera-unfriendly pictures. I wasn't willing to have an app that dictated what I could or should like.

Not being on Tinder, or any other dating app was pure deliverance. I felt free. I could live, check out, and breathe. I was breezy. I was looking at men around me; I was happy to open my eyes and see all these British hotties, finally. I decided that I was done with online dating. I had had my share of fun on it, and I was ready to mingle offline.

The first opportunity came when Stephanie from Celest Connections invited Camellia and I to one of her clients' parties.

The client had had an engagement party a month earlier, but he

apparently needed to parade his fiancée more and throw another party, just for the fun of it. He had invited everyone in Chelsea, Notting Hill, Mayfair, Marylebone, and Paddington. If you were not living in one of these locations, you were not allowed in. Some of those location-snobs were ridiculous! Well, I had been invited to parties with people from Chelsea and Mayfair only where allowed; I suppose this made that man a little bit more tolerant.

To be sure that I wouldn't turn up late, glowing Camellia came to fetch me in her executive Uber car. I was slightly aghast, as I had to finish my makeup in it, riding more like a roller coaster than a smooth limousine.

Camellia was excited, as she was about to introduce me to Michael, one of her dates from Celest Connections. She fancied him and couldn't wait to have my point of view.

When we arrived at Leon's St James Park mansion, I realised that we were not going to a miserable party, and I was thrilled I had chosen to wear my new designer dress. We could see people on the terrace and they were all looking shockingly chic.

I followed Camellia towards the entrance of the mansion. And as we approached the building, I could distinguish a shadow smoking and dancing erratically, like a large phone vibrating in staccato. Camellia and I eyeballed him from head to toe. The man was probably the sole guest wearing such horrible clothes. He had on some 80's multi-coloured ensemble and a fur coat, which burned our eyes. Then he started fidgeting around Camellia and I, "Hello!" he shouted at us.

Camellia was horrified; I could read it on her face, "How dare this clown speak to us!"

My face was probably saying the same, "Who the hell are you?" but accompanied with a polite smile. We just walked past him

and into the mansion. We heard the multi-coloured guy in the back say, "Enjoy the music! Because I'm the DJ tonight!" Inside, Leon, the host, appeared from nowhere and welcomed us like queens, giving us champagne, canapés and randomly introduced us to people.

A few minutes later, the party took off. Everyone was dancing and the music was fantastic! Multi-coloured DJ seemed to know how to entertain his guests; I was immediately in my element, and I started rocking the dance floor on my own while Camellia was searching for her future fiancé.

I was dancing like crazy and having a few pictures taken with some random Mayfair ladies on the dance floor, when Camellia came and pulled me away to meet Michael. Camellia wasn't joking when she said the guy looked like a better version of Leonardo de Caprio. Michael looked manly, confident, and he had that *je ne sais quoi* enthralling vibe about him. As soon as I saw him, I wanted him to be my friend.

Camellia introduced us, and he started talking about himself and his job straight away. I felt like he was trying hard to impress me. Bless him, Michael wanted me to like him, but at this stage, I was falling asleep on the hottest tunes of the year, in front of Camellia, who was prompting Michael's oration by funny remarks.

While I was not carried away by Michael's monologue, I felt an oppressing look, almost as if I was being sucked towards something. In fact, it was the DJ. The man was checking me out, but I wasn't a fan of the package: blond, the very old Rihanna's asymmetrical bob haircut, blue eyes, slim, with a rainbow style of clothes. He wasn't my type at all. I looked away and pretended to listen to Michael's very [not] interesting discussion with his annoying *I-Know-I-am-hot* look. Camellia seemed to be under his spell. She couldn't stop smiling and looking at him with loving eyes. I realised that I needed to understand why my

best friend liked him so much and started asking him some questions that mattered more than his job.

A few minutes later, I totally understood why Camellia was so smitten by Michael. He was eloquent and cultivated with a great gentlemanly manner, handsome, a proper British accent and he looked at you like you were the most interesting person in the world. He was a great guy. I was so happy for her and could see them together as a couple. Camellia looked at me, searching for an approval sign. I raised an eyebrow as a “*wow!*” smiled and reassured them. “I am euphoric to finally meet you, Michael. You're a fantastic guy and I feel like Camellia will be happy around you. You are exactly the sort of man she needs. And I am confident you'll make a great couple.” Yes, I may have overdone it but I wanted to dance so badly!

Camellia seemed relieved and kissed Michael politely on the lips. I smiled, I was so happy for her and started questioning if I should join Celest Connections one day.

The party ended, and Leon began his after-party; food, music, drugs and crazy guests. Whilst I was congratulating Stephanie for her work with Camellia and Michael, the DJ came and joined our conversation. That was where I took a closer look at him. He really was not my type, but something in him was sincere. Why was this guy so dishevelled?

DJ started getting closer and closer to me, but oddly not with the same approach he had had with the other girls. He went on tiptoe, with less arrogance and certitude. He was cute, and when Stephanie left, we started to remake the world all night. The Dom Perignon made DJ Thor look sexier by the minute.

Then, around 5am, probably fuelled by alcohol, DJ Thor and I kissed. Inexplicable! Camellia was long gone to lecture me and everybody was acting crazy and nonsensical.

So, Meet DJ Thor. Primary occupation: super-popular DJ who had made his reputation in the Nordics and was constantly travelling around the world. He had a girlfriend at each airport and they all knew about each other. Frankly, it did not bother me at all, and I was not interested in a serious relationship with him. In fact, I enjoyed the flirt and the fun of it. So it was in this form that my relationship with DJ Thor began.

Date No.1

I was amazed to discover how well educated DJ Thor was. We spent the rest of the night talking about art, culture and politics. I had been very quick to judge the book by his cover and I almost apologised to him, yet I didn't. After all, DJ Thor didn't know that I had thought he was the oddest DJ on earth when I had first seen him. We exchanged our numbers for an official date the following evening.

I went back home, collapsed in my bed, and woke up around 3pm. I hadn't slept that late in a very long time. I had just enough time to get ready and join DJ Thor for our planned afternoon tea at 5pm at the Ritz.

In the cab I thought, why on earth did I decide to go to the Ritz with that crazy looking DJ? I wished we had chosen a funkier place in Shoreditch or East End. I wasn't sure DJ Thor's appearance would be appropriate at the Ritz, but I had no choice but to go now. Why on earth did he want to go there? And how could he possibly feel comfortable there?

At the Ritz, I didn't recognise him at all. He had removed his funky clothes, got rid of what was apparently a wig, and binned his fur coat.

So now, meet Sölvi: 34, Icelandic international DJ, short wavy blond hair, deep dark almond blue eyes, hitting the gym every day to make an elegant body to die for. Oh my! Sölvi was hot!

Sölvi was quite a renowned DJ and he was very proud of his accomplishments. In fact, he asked me if I had Googled him. I hadn't, so he Googled himself and showed me the results. I discovered that he had entertained private parties all around the world, for famous faces like Madonna, Beyoncé, Britney Spears and more. In fact, his Facebook was full of pictures of celebrities. But, I was on a date with Sölvi, not DJ Thor, which he said were two different personas from two different worlds. I genuinely liked Sölvi more.

Date No.2

We were just kissing goodbye on the cheeks. And, I was about to hail a cab when Sölvi said to me, "Let's do something crazy tonight!" I was thrilled at the idea. "Give me ten minutes."

Sölvi started talking on the phone in Icelandic and next thing I knew, I was on a private jet full of champagne, heading to Reykjavik.

I was mega-excited. We were kissing like two passionate lovers. I knew I would probably never see him again in my life, but for once, I didn't care. I just followed my primary and bestial needs, and I was lecherous. I wanted to kiss him and he wanted to lick my lips. I wanted to sex him up and Sölvi was horny. We had sex in the jet. Here was my second **real** one-night-stand. It was the most intense sex I had ever had in my life. Being so high in the sky, feeling so high, sensing so much pleasure with a wine-altered brain, was a fantastic combination for the intercourse. It was passionate, sensual, and the Viking's manhood was intense and pleasurable. His sweat was an aphrodisiac.

We arrived at Reykjavik Airport private airport around 9pm that night; a car was waiting for us on the tarmac.

The night was bright and beautiful, so Sölvi took me straight to

Gróttu Lighthouse where I admired the Northern Lights like a child admires his first Christmas tree; it was just majestic. We arrived right on time, as though Sölvi and the Lights had agreed a date and place. It was unbelievable and I was dumbfounded. We had passionate kisses under the lights and then Sölvi and I were driven to unknown and exciting destinations.

The experience was all so surreal. The driver drove us to see lots of dramatic scenery. Sölvi and I had the pleasure to see Reykjavik by night and its most cherished treasures such as the Þingvellir National Park, Gullfoss Waterfall, and Geysir where the earth's North American and Eurasian plates pulled apart. I enjoyed seeing Geysir and its geothermal waters and the cascades of Gullfoss Waterfall, where a glacial river thunders 32m into a canyon.

Around midnight, we decided to go dancing with other Vikings in B5, one of the best clubs in Reykjavik, or so I was told. "A place for ladies like you," said Sölvi.

When we arrived, the bouncer in front of the club recognised Sölvi, so we jumped the queue in front of the crowd who looked at me like I was Whitney Houston. In the club, we sat in the VIP corner where Sölvi introduced me to one of his VIP friends, including a footballer named Kolbeinn. I looked at him with a disbelieving smile, wondering which team he played for, as I had never heard of him. Yet, a few months later, he was the one sending England home from the 2016 European Football Championship.

All through the night, Sölvi and I, were constantly interrupted by men and women coming to greet me, talk to me, and get to know me. I had smiles, hugs and kisses. I was a novelty there. There were indeed not a lot of black girls in Iceland.

As far as I am concerned, scrutinising the crowd, I had never seen so many blonds in my life. I felt like I was in another world. Blonds had never been my type, but these Icelanders had

managed to make me change my mind. It was like *Hotties Only Night*, they were just very delicious. Pale yet hot (an Englishman would look Spanish next to them), cold but funny, slim yet very masculine, and so open-minded. That night became one of the most amazing nights I had ever had in my life. Around 4am, we took the jet back to London where two chauffeurs were waiting for us at Farnborough airport.

I kissed Sölvi goodbye and I never saw him for real again. We tried to get in touch a couple of times, but life tore us apart, and we never had the opportunity to meet again. I liked the experience, and until this very day, DJ Thor and Sölvi have held a special place in my heart. Life went on and I had to write other chapters in my life. Next!

Chapter Thirty-Two – A Ghost from the Past

I had just landed in London from Los Angeles, when I listened to my voicemails, and one of them was, "I missed you so much. It's so hard not to have you in my life. I don't want to be your enemy. I was angry with you and I tried to kill myself upon our divorce. I had so much love for you, it was killing me, killing my soul, killing my sanity. I wanted to hurt myself. I couldn't stay in London anymore. You're still in my heart, baby doll."

It was Pierre. That call was weird. After all that time, I had my closure, I wasn't sure I wanted new drama now. A few weeks later, Pierre sent the following email to me: "Hi baby doll. I will be in London for two weeks from tomorrow. It would be cool to meet for a drink or coffee. I'll be staying at the Mandarin Hotel in Knightsbridge."

I didn't want to meet him. I wasn't in the mood to see my former husband that week, after arguing over the phone with Taylor (*story very coming soon*). It was too hard for me to handle presently. I was in an emotional state of mind. I thought it was too risky, so I didn't reply back and forgot about his trip to London.

The Date (?)

Monday evening, I was in front of my laptop, very proud to have sold one of the most profitable pieces of art I had ever had since I'd started my business. I was in the mood to celebrate. I was about to call Camellia, when an unknown number called me.

"Allo?"

"Val?"

"Yes!"

"It's Pierre."

"Oh, Pierre! How are you?" I responded back with a big smile in my voice.

"I am great. I wondered what you were doing in the next couple of hours."

"I am at home now, but in the mood to celebrate. I've just sold a sculpture for £90,000! I'm so happy!"

"Would you like to have a drink then? On me? We could meet at the Mandarin?"

"Wow! The Mandarin! Business is good then?"

"I am working at the Mandarin Baby Doll. What about 8pm? I'll have a break around that time."

"Well, I don't really like to go to your workplace. I'd rather go somewhere else. What about Tattersalls Tavern?"

"Is it expensive?"

"Excuse me? It's a pub. Why? You wanted to invite me to the Mandarin!"

"Well, it would have been on the client's note."

It reminded me why I had divorced him. Pierre was so greedy and was always taking advantage of other people's money like usual. And, it had been my money in the past.

I replied, "The drinks will be on me. See you at 8pm at Tattersalls Tavern."

As soon as I hung up, I was nervous; I was overtaken by an overwhelming banging migraine. I had to find tablets urgently.

Thirty minutes and two tablets later, I was ok and was heading towards my date (?).

Pierre was in front of the Tattersalls Tavern. Even with an additional shocking two stone on his body, I recognised my former husband. The whole style made him look like a snowman; he had now grey hair and looked like he was in his fifties. He had changed so dramatically in two years. I could tell he was struggling with life. We simply hugged tenderly. We were both happy to see each other.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, let's get inside," I breathed relieved.

"You look amazing! Not a grey hair, not a wrinkle! You're still beautiful!" he complimented.

I had to return a compliment, "You're in good shape for someone on antidepressants."

"No, I've put on so much weight!"

We walked into the pub and sat at a table. We smiled at each other for a few seconds, talking with our eyes. It was great to see Pierre.

After asking me a few questions about my professional life, and being quite shocked that I had quit the job I liked and had fought so hard to get. Pierre was babbling about his life and

how many assignments he had received from all over the world.

He was earning a significant amount of money and he finally had the job of his dreams: being the bodyguards of High Net Worth Individuals.

I was listening to him, scrutinising his body language, his gestures, his eyes. All I could see were lies, lies and lies. I knew Pierre was lying; yet I decided not to say anything. My head was banging so much it was unbearable. Pierre asked, "Are you okay?"

I responded, "No, I am not. I have this migraine - I think it is caused by one of my teeth. I don't know, it happened all of a sudden, and now I am just dying!"

"You're so extra!" Pierre replied, "You've always been dramatic."

"I swear; it hurts." Pierre gave me tablets, which instantly calmed my migraine. Wow, I had had four of them in less than three hours. Not a good sign.

My migraine calmed down and I looked at Pierre straight in the eyes, "Pierre, I have never told you this, but I would like to apologise for not being as supportive as I should have been with your businesses. We should have acted more like a team to that extent, and I wasn't. I suppose I was scared off by my first investment in you."

Tears rolled down Pierre's face, "You've always been the strongest in our relationship. You've always been the more successful one, earning more money. Yes, you are right, you should have invested more money in my British business."

I clarified, "To be fair, Pierre, I was more talking about emotional and business support, not financial support. I think I

should have used my marketing skills to try to build an empire with you."

I waited a few minutes waiting for apologies, which never came from him. I was surprised Pierre didn't want to apologise for all his lies and his faults. He simply looked at me and smiled, "I really missed you, you have no idea baby doll. I never cheated on you. I flirted, I was tempted, I chatted up girls, but I swear to God, I never cheated on you. I loved you and I will always love you. You are my first love."

"I know." I simply responded but I could not care less today.

I had divorced him for the whole package of lies I found; for the debts he had accumulated behind my back; for the fact that he was waiting for things to come to him rather than fighting for them. We were different. I was searching for something else. I wanted to conquer the world and Pierre wanted to conquer Chelsea. We had different ambitions.

Our couple had been solid until I discovered all the lies, which I suppose, made things harder for our divorce. Pierre hated that I hadn't given him another chance. His love transformed into a very deep rage and loathing. We couldn't speak properly anymore whilst communication had always been our forte.

I just replied, "Okay," but sensing the cold atmosphere at our table I added, "I have to admit, I missed you too. Our daily lunch calls were the most unbearable loss. Those were the moments that made me realise that you would not be in my life anymore and it hurt."

Pierre reminded me, "I hate to rain on this, but I have to go back to work. It would be fun to catch up again before I go. I enjoyed tonight."

We left the pub and my migraine took over again. Pierre knew

me. "What's wrong with you? Let me have a look."

"No!" I shouted, "You can't do that!"

"Come on! I've seen worse and more of your body than this, baby doll."

"No, no, no, please Pierre, don't do this here!"

Pierre took my head between his hands, asked me to open my mouth and declared, "Baby doll, you have an abscess. You have to go to the dentist."

"What! That can't be possible! How? Why?"

"Here are a few tablets for you for the night, but you will need to go to the dentist first thing tomorrow!"

"God! I am so busy tomorrow!"

"Yes, beauty! Look after yourself and let's catch up before I go."

"Okay," I moaned, my voice full of pain.

I caught a cab and went back home in pain, looking forward to my bed.

Post-date

At home, I was glad I had met up with my former husband. It was a lovely evening and despite him not being accountable for his mistakes, I enjoyed seeing him. I missed our friendship and the closeness I had had with him; I could say anything and everything.

The following morning, I went to see an emergency dentist. My left cheek was swollen. I couldn't feel it anymore.

And yes, it was an abscess! I had to see my own dentist to proceed with a treatment. The emergency dentist gave me stronger tablets and recommended I saw my dentist as soon as possible. I was really upset, but happy I had efficient and stronger tablets to take in the meantime.

That week, I received a few texts from Pierre, and I couldn't believe that he thought I wanted to get back with him! He was already considering living back in London. I was horrified. How in hell did he imagine that I wanted him back?

I started to think that the whole friendship idea with my ex-husband was a bad one. He wasn't ready at all. For a few days Pierre sent texts about us living back together, loving me more than ever, having our baby, registering his company in the UK and searching for a place to live. I soon had over 50 texts per day with hearts and kisses emojis. I tried to make him understand that I wasn't up for a relationship but he ignored me.

So, I took the matter very seriously. Was it my fault? Maybe?

Because I had healed, that didn't mean that my former husband had as well, and I had probably ignored the signs. All I wanted was to get in touch with him. I wanted to be a close friend of his.

I had to be rough and honest, and with Bianca's help, I texted something along these lines: < Dear Pierre, I am sorry you misunderstood my feelings. I just wanted to be honest with you and more importantly put the final full stop on "us". I needed closure that I found upon our meeting. I also realised that today, if I had met you, I wouldn't look twice at you and I wouldn't consider you to be my boyfriend. I have seriously changed Pierre; I am not that 22-year-old girl you met a couple of years ago. I had mature. London has changed me, and I am now dreaming ultra-big! I feel like it's not an ambition I want to accomplish with you. I am sorry if I hurt you. I wasn't meant to.

Maybe we should just part ways with the best memories of our marriage. >

All I heard back from him was: <You are such an evil woman. The only reason why I do not wish for your doom is because of my faith! Go to hell you bitch! I am so happy I am leaving this fucking country tonight. Adieux, I hope to never see your face ever again in my life. >

From that day forth, I decided to never reply to his emails, and curiously, when I went to my dentist, it was as if my abscess had never existed. It appeared with Pierre and was gone with Pierre. His presence literally made me sick. That chapter of my life was now definitely closed. Pierre was part of my past and always would be. I was grateful I had met him. I was grateful I had divorced him. I was thankful I had learned so much from him and our relationship because it was probably why I was now where I needed to be. Pierre crossed my path and made me change my whole outlook on life, and I would always be grateful for that.

Also, now I was a proud divorcee. I had learned from my mistakes. I knew what I wanted; I know where I was going. And I couldn't wait to challenge myself, day after day, with more surprises, more fun, more discoveries. I could now safely move on without regret. I was loving my life, still learning from my mistakes, and taking full responsibility of my actions. I was prepared to write a whole new fresh chapter of my life, next!

PART 3 - NOW WE'RE TALKING...

Chapter Thirty-Three – Let's Move on

After my date with Pierre and my divorce from online dating. I decided that it was time for retrospection and the best way for me to do that was to have a date with London. I felt like walking. I was happy and nothing could dent my mood on that day.

I walked under the sun, but it suddenly started to rain. I didn't care; I love London. I realised that we shared the same conflicted personality. We were both ambivalent, controversial. Ancient, yet modern; seductive, yet frigid. Wild, yet sleek. Friendly, yet provocative. Well, like London that day, I stopped fighting my inner demons, ceased to ignore my weaknesses. I accepted them and embraced them from that day.

It was pouring, yet London and I were still functioning, crazily hopeful with an unpredictable messed up fuel. I stopped in front of the magnificent view of Big Ben. I felt powerful. I felt magical. I felt happy. I was myself.

Then a rainbow came up and I felt excited. I admired the colours. The colours of life: some are dark, shiny, or bright... Our emotional, personal, and professional experiences are reflected in these colours. All through our lives, we experience all sorts of events and some are darker than others. But if you can see the bright side of the rainbow, you'll get out of it improved, brighter, and stronger. That rainbow summed up my life and most our lives. Yes, your life too!

To be rebuilt ourselves, we all need to go through difficult times and *c'est la vie!* But our story remains to be written and the end

will be as harmonious as this rainbow. At least that's what I thought that day. I heart London; it is my home place now, and it is the only place I can see myself living.

Yes, a new chapter had already started, with my new career as an entrepreneur, my philanthropist work, my solo trips, and me meeting like-minded people around the world. I had the life I had always dreamed of, now I wanted to find true love.

I was ready to share this life with someone and give my whole self to a relationship. Lastly, I needed time to heal, then to have fun, then to understand my experience through my closure with Pierre and my writing, to finally find someone I know I will be attracted to and fondly in love with. I was ready. I needed to move on from these crappy dates before I started hating men and being frustrated. And it was the right time now.

This decision was mine; I didn't want my mum, my sisters, my hormones, my friends, nor my emotions to dictate when I'd be ready or what sort of guy I should be with. A few acquaintances tried and I was just listening with one ear while the other one was kicking out the absurdities from my mind.

After this long walk with London, I realised that I couldn't know myself more than now. I liked my experiences and I like London and its weird bunch of men. I like entertaining my friends with crazy stories. I just enjoy it! My life would be boring if it wasn't the case and I wouldn't be writing this book, which in fact started as a blog right after my divorce. But my experiences were so crazy that my dearest friends Camellia and Bianca advised me to write this book.

So finally, meet Valérie Duval, born in Paris 32 years ago. People, in general, would say that she's a friendly smiling woman and under her apparent coldness, is a very sensitive person. Attracted by original and atypical things and intriguing personalities, her ingenuity surprises and irritates. Her self-

sufficiency, independence, and her confidence would hurt sensitive and insecure souls.

Utopian and eccentric, she has an exaggerated taste for excess and even chaos, which is probably why she liked, once upon a time, passionate and irrational relationships.

I know today who I am. I am Valérie de Paris, businesswoman Val, former wife Valérie, divorced Valérie, friendly Val, Valérie of London, and probably much more... I was all of these women. I loved the new version of myself, which was manufactured in Paris, and now improved in London, and after making peace with my inner self, was looking forward to the future.

Next chapter, please!

Chapter Thirty-Four – Drunk in Emotions

Roof Garden, High Street Kensington. Bianca was parading her new Gucci bag, chasing for a shag. Camellia was posing near the stage like she was being photographed for a new sleeping pill advert. And, I was trying to dance to a music I didn't like. But after a very busy week at work, I was mega tired and needed to unzip.

A few minutes later, mega-bored by the lousy music, the lame picking up lines, the exasperated version of Camellia, and the usual show of six-foot-something Eastern European prostitutes dancing like hairy baguettes on the dance floor, I decided that it was time to get another drink. I have never drunk only to get pissed, but that night, it was my aim.

Two drinks in my hands, I was on my way back to join Camellia's when I felt a long stare on me coming from the VIP area. I don't know why while I would ignore it on a standard night, I confronted the look and stopped right in the middle of the dance floor, annoying a few dancers on my way.

I was immediately charmed by this tall, dark, and handsome stranger. We both smiled and stared at each other. He was totally my type. Great, this evening was finally going to be fun.

I reached out to Camellia and gave her a drink. "God, I am so bored. Can't we go elsewhere? I just bought you a drink!"

"Why didn't we book a VIP table?"

"Are you kidding? There's nothing worse than being bored in a VIP area. Plus, I thought we were having a drink," insisted

Camellia.

No, it wasn't possible. I had to talk to this guy. I responded, "Where's Bianca? Wait for me here. I'll look for her." In fact, I was looking for that stranger who disappeared from what I thought was his VIP table.

After ten minutes walking around in a circle, I started to think that he'd left.

So I gave up and started to really search for Bianca when I got a poke on my shoulder. The stranger said, "I was looking for you! I thought you'd left!"

With the biggest smile, I responded back, "I was looking for you!! Hello!"

Wow, he was so my type. Our surroundings seemed to fade away as I gazed into his mesmerising eyes and we could both barely talk. Something in my body wanted him, now, immediately. I could have made love with him straight away in the middle of this imaginary world. We kept on looking at each other for seconds, both enchanted by each other. I felt like our eyes were communicating; this was so intense. We were talking to each other, staring into each other's eyes. He took my hands and introduced me to his soon-to-be-married brother and friends. We all had a chat, a laugh or two, and they decided appropriately that it was time for him and me to have a chat.

Meet Taylor, 34, Canadian; in London for a few days attending his brother's stag do. We were still talking, staring at each other's eyes when we realised Bianca and Camellia were trying to get into our world, holding my coat to go.

"I think your friends are waiting for you. Should we exchange numbers and meet sometime before I go?"

I smiled at him, listened to his number in front of two pairs of

impatient eyes, faked-call him to save his American-Canadian number, and disappeared towards the unknown.

Pushed in the cab, Bianca broke in "Who was that guy?", while I was still enthralled by Taylor's charm.

"God, he was so handsome... So your type too!" commented Camellia, very over-excited for me.

"Well, Taylor's Canadian, he's in town just for a few days, so basically nothing serious will happen," I lamented.

"Stop being so pessimistic! Oh là là!!! You might move to Canada and live with him!" smiled Camellia.

"Don't be silly Cam, I just met him," I reasoned.

"Well, the way you guys looked at each other. Wow, I could sense the instant chemistry. It was like in the movies. Sooooo romantic..."

The cab went all of a sudden so quiet, I asked, "Where are we going?"

"Boujis," replied Bianca.

"They'll be closing in a few. Bianca?????" I shoot back, aghast at being moved from a potential date or maybe fling to a dead end.

"What???? No, it's not!!!!" Bianca shouted back.

"It's 2 am. They might be closed already. I need to go back to see Taylor. I want to see him and spend the night with him. Driver, please stop me here. I want to spend the night with him," I remarked.

The driver stopped and Bianca commanded, "Drive please, she's crazy!"

"No, I am not! What a silly plan! Boujis, really?????" I protested.

"Nooooooo, come with us. You don't want to make it a one-night stand. It started so well. You want to marry him, don't you Val?" implored Camellia.

"Shut up! You'll get laid before he goes; don't worry. By the look of his eyes, he wants to fuck you. Driver, move!" commanded Bianca, again adding, "Don't you have his number, honey? You'll fuck him tomorrow. Don't be too sentimental."

"And we can't leave you there alone," continued Camellia, with a voice tinted of selfish guilt.

The driver was like a mile away from Boujis and despite Bianca's command, he hadn't moved and queried, irritated, "So what?" I looked at the ladies and surrendered to their begging baby-looks.

Thirty minutes later, I swallowed my fury in bed as Boujis was indeed closed. The only thing that consoled me is the fact that Bianca didn't have a shag that night. We were two losers!

Date No.1

I didn't have a hangover that Friday morning. In fact, I woke up in a great mood. I had my 30 minutes' run in Hyde Park, grabbed my coffee and my croissant at Paul Boulangerie, and went back home with a pretentious big smile on my face. I couldn't wait to call Taylor.

I took my phone. Switched on my phone. Tried to turn my phone off again. Tried, tried, tried.

I plugged it in to charge. Checked 30 minutes later and it was not charging. I started to get really nervous. I left the phone an

hour on charge. Still couldn't switch it on. I wanted to shout out mega loud. I quickly took a box full of old emergency phones, to an iPhone 4, and inserted my SIM into it. All of my calls were gone. I lost Taylor's number and he didn't have mine. I would never see him again. This is when I received a call from Camellia.

Two hours later and after leaving the failing phone at Apple White City, the Ladies and I were shopping at Harrods. As far as I was concerned, I was window shopping. I wasn't in the mood at all. Camellia was so disappointed for me. "You may meet him in the street or elsewhere. And if not, He'll go back to Canada, and you'll be here. It only means it wasn't meant to be him. There is a better person for you out there."

Bianca was more straight forward and fatalist; you win some and you lose some. Baby, there are plenty of fish in the sea."

"You don't have this instant chemistry with all of the fishes you meet," I deplored.

Bianca and Camellia aborted a sad and compassionate smile. I received a text on my old-fashioned iPhone 4 from Apple, advising me that my phone was ready for collection. I kissed the ladies goodbye and disappeared in a cab.

My mobile fixed, I checked with a fake hope if Taylor's number was saved by a miracle. Well, nothing was kept. I hated my phone at that time!!! Why was I paying for iCloud if Apple couldn't even keep call logs or messages? I then decided to drown my sorrow in work.

When...

A couple of hours later, I received a text from an American number: < I really thought to hear from you after those few magical minutes we shared together last night ... > My heart

started pounding faster than the light's speed; I almost collapsed by the end of the text. I think I flashed a hundred watt smile and couldn't help but call him straight away.

Story explained, date sorted, and pampering done, I was at Raffles all dressed up with Taylor. We shared a fantastic time. Taylor and I were politely holding hands, no kissing, just gentle caresses, and sweet kisses on the cheeks and neck. I understood, Taylor, his brothers, his cousin, and his friends were all staying at the Mandarin Knightsbridge. His brother Elliott was living in the U.K. for two years hence why the choice of the exotic London for the stag-do. The last part of their adventure would be to sail all weekend in Dorset. They were leaving the following morning and he was flying back to Canada two days later.

I knew it was probably my last night with him and I wanted to make the most of it. This was probably why I looked like I'd stepped off the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. I had called off my MUA, my hair stylist, and was *Oh My...* Evidently, I liked him, I liked the way he made me feel willing to ignore all of the dating rules. I wanted him so much that night.

Taylor and I left the Raffles and were wandering around the streets of Chelsea. The weather being fantastic, we decided to walk, holding hands like the world belonged to us. And then, at the junction of Fulham Road and Sydney Street, Taylor eyed me with a look that shivered my whole body, making my crotch ocean wet. He then kissed me. This was powerful. I had goosebumps all over my body and I could feel his penis getting harder.

"I don't want to leave you like this," Taylor said.

"I had no intention of leaving. You didn't need to ask; you had me with your kiss."

A few moments later, we were in a cab driving toward the Mandarin Hotel.

I knew very well the Mandarin Hotel, I was going back to my neighbourhood: Knightsbridge. The Mandarin Hotel is one of London's most celebrated 5 star hotels. It is located in front of the most luxurious English department store: Harrods. The décor exudes elegance, chicness and modernity. You can dine at the Blumenthal, have a dance at Bar Boulud, a drink at the Mandarin Bar, or an afternoon tea at the Rosebery Lounge. It conveys ever shade of chicness.

Upon our arrival, the porter opened the door for us, Taylor and I reached his suite, and I loved that it was overlooking Hyde Park and made the whole atmosphere magical.

I didn't really have time to admire the view as half a second later; we were kissing passionately, jumping at each other, taking off each other's clothes.

Naked, we admired each other's nudity. Our eyes were as bright as the shiny stars in the Park.

Taylor carried me, and a moment later, we were both in the shower. Warm water running, both under the showerhead, we explored each other's body with our delicate hands and fingers going everywhere: hair, face, neck, breast, stomach, intimate parts, and legs. We quickly replaced the fingers and hands with our tongues and lips. It was sensual, orgasmic, and pleasurable.

Taylor lifted me up in front of the mirror, backing this luxurious marble wall, and we made love. It was rough; it was passionate, it was deep, it hurt so much that I loved it.

I exploded at the sound of his sexy growls of pleasure. It was a delicious moment and I wanted more. I wanted more of him.

With a few cushions on the floor, we were both naked, admiring the view. We were voiceless, touching delicately each other's face like two animals discovering our humanity.

Then Taylor had an idea. He called the concierge. A few minutes later, we had a call back. He went downstairs and when he reappeared in the room, he asked me to wait a few moments in the bathroom.

"Come in!" He shouted proudly a few minutes later.

When I came back into the main part of the suite, it was all illuminated with candles; the table was set with canapés, strawberry, ice cream, chocolate, and cheese cakes. The whole gesture filled my heart with joy and gratitude. I almost wept tears of joy.

"I don't know when I'll see you next... So let's make this night the most amazing night we will ever have together." So we did. We made love until the morning light, romantically, passionately, and sometimes painfully.

I wanted the night to last forever for the sake of our hearts, for the sake of the passion, and for the sake of what tasted like love. I wished I had stopped time.

Around 7 am, Elliott, Taylor's brother, called at our suite advising that they were leaving in 30 minutes to Poole. At the call, I was getting dressed in dashing.

"Val, I really..." he started.

"Please Taylor, don't say anything..." I interrupted melancholically. "I hate goodbyes. So let's just kiss as if we were about to meet tomorrow again. Thank you for this magical night."

Puzzled, Taylor kissed me. I left straight away. I ran out and emerged from the hotel practically horizontal, ignored the porter, grabbed a cab in front of Harrods, and on board, started a tear of joy appear on my right eye. I smiled melancholically.

Home, I called Camellia to talk.

Post-date No.1

I slept all day that Saturday. In fact, Camellia was the one who interrupted my sleep. She was so full of hope for Taylor and I. I wasn't... I felt forlorn. Forlorn because I liked him and I knew that the feelings he procured to me the night before would cease. But, I loved that feeling; it was the closest I'd been to love since my divorce. I was reassured; I knew I could love again.

When Camellia left, I had a lighter heart. I could love again and this experience with Taylor just proved it. I wasn't sad anymore. I felt more alive than ever. I could feel it. I wasn't that damaged emotionally and I loved this feeling.

Later on that day, I received a picture from Taylor on a boat with his family and friends accompanied with the caption, "I wish you were here. Miss you already."

I smiled and simply replied, "I loved our night. I can't thank you enough for the sentiments you gave me."

Date No.2

Taylor sent me a few texts over the weekend, which I was really pleased with, but I also knew when I woke up that Monday morning, that he was flying later that afternoon.

Monday was a very busy day for me and just when I was breathing in between meetings with a sandwich in my mouth, I received a call from an unknown number. When I picked up, Taylor was talking to me. "I can't leave you like this. I can't

leave you without talking about us," were his first words.

I went all silent. I didn't really know what to say. Taylor carried on, "Let's meet at the airport," he begged. I almost puked up my sandwich. I hated goodbyes and more so in airports. "I can't do this; you know I..."

"Val? Please. Don't do this," Taylor broke in.

"It is tearing my heart apart not to be able to see you before I go." By the sound of these words, I felt my heart bleeding.

"Val? Val? Are you there?" Taylor continued.

I nodded.

"Val?"

"Yes," I said.

"Val, my flight is at 7:40pm. Call me if you decide to come. I will be devastated if you don't because Friday night meant a lot to me," were his final words.

The world started to blur around me. I was sad at the idea of saying goodbye. Everything would be so real. Well, I had to embrace that pain and meet Taylor at the airport.

Taylor was waiting for me at Yo! Sushi Restaurant. When we saw each other, we immediately hugged in elation. He had ordered a variety of sushi for both of us.

As in a proper date, we started talking about our lives, our families, our work, and our ambitions. It didn't feel like a goodbye dinner. The dinner was full of jokes, joys, shared experiences, and romantic touches and attentions. Taylor was very affectionate and caring and I couldn't help but wonder

why was he single. Such a good-looking man, very successful, and so gentle. The big bonus was that the sex was amazing! What more could a woman ask for? When I was about to break the question, I was amazed that Taylor asked the same to me... I laughed. And well... I just replied that I was not ready for a serious relationship until now and after a 7 years relationship with my former husband. As soon as I heard myself say "former husband," I regretted it, as I saw his face questioning. But we didn't have the time to talk longer about it and we kissed goodbye. This time, the kiss was longer, stronger, and charged with so much emotion and feeling. It was deep and nice. We touched each other's face for the last time and I was gone without looking back. I was looking forward to feeling this loving again.

Post-date No.2

Taylor and I kept in touch for two months. We had like a long distance relationship.

We shared laughter, we shared our lives, we shared our everyday life like a couple living together. We even had sex chats and a few video chats. But I quickly realised that this relationship was a newer version of the one I had with Harper a few years back and it would undoubtedly lead nowhere.

Both Taylor and I were driven by the emotion of one single night and when Taylor started to be a bit too intrusive, abusive, and over jealous, I decided to put a brake on our video-calls as we were just driving each other nuts.

I wanted Taylor as a friend; our telephone fights, his insecurities, the sulking... I couldn't take it anymore. Our fights would sometimes put me in a state of mind where I couldn't go out with the ladies without feeling guilty. I was completely going out of my mind as if he was living with me. The ladies hated me like this.

Our love affair abruptly ceased when Taylor heard me having sex with another man through my phone, which was too much for me and more so for him, and accused me of cheating. Sadly, I never heard of Taylor again after this final fight. It was hard at first to live without his calls, but a relief at last.

I always remembered our night together at the Mandarin rather than all of the fights that ruined the whole story. It was intensely emotional and I hadn't felt that way for a long time.

Anyway...

Taylor was one of the dates who opened a completely new direction of my dating experience and brought me to a completely different level. I knew I was ready, but this time I felt it all through my body. It wasn't just my brain or words. Therefore, I couldn't wait to open a new chapter with the man of my dreams. Next!

Chapter Thirty-Five – Desperately in Love

Monday morning, I was going to have lunch with a client-turned-friend called Victoria at the Bar Boulud. When I got into her office overlooking Harrods, to pick her up, Victoria was over the phone, and her receptionist made me wait in the elegant waiting room.

Another man was waiting there and he suddenly started chatting me up and introduced himself as Sam McAlister. A few minutes spent together and I was laughing my heart out. When Victoria arrived to apologise, she mentioned, “I can see you are having fun with our new IT Manager. Sam’s starting today; his jokes helped him to get his way in,” said Victoria, with a wink towards Sam. “Valérie, I won’t be a minute; I am going to the lavatories.”

In the meantime, Sam gave me his business card and invited me for dinner. I accepted, and we had a date for the following evening.

Date No.1

So, meet Sam, 5’10, slim, 40, Irish, blond, living in Twickenham, IT manager for my friend’s hedge fund. Sam was funny; not my type, but he had that wit and that sense of humour that made him more charming than the average Joe. He also exuded confidence and was dressed so elegantly that the whole package probably made him an eight, as opposed to a six without all of these tricks.

We had dinner at La Trompette in Chiswick, which was a French restaurant. La Trompette’s ambience was calm and

classy though the décor was a bit too traditional to my likings. Sam and I were looked after splendidly and everything was delicious and beautiful to watch. We really enjoyed our meals.

I understood that Sam lived a billion of lives and lived all over the world, he could speak Turkish, Russian, Italian, and Spanish. He was crazy, kind, and very passionate about all things surrounding him. There were no grey areas for him. He loved or hated. He wasn't the kind to hide his feelings or pretend.

Sam was also slightly pretentious and he knew it. He explained how that ladies of his age bracket liked him and bragged about how they would look at me with envy, going out with the alpha male of their dreams. As you may have guessed, Sam was an ageist. He wasn't interested in women over 35. He would later say to me, "They're not fun, they are not sexual enough, and they sometimes hate sex. And often hate men; their last porn watched was probably in the 80's when going down on a man was the 'New Thing'. They're usually divorced and carry luggage full of emotional restriction. If you're lucky enough, you'll have sex once a month!"

I looked at him intensively and asked, "Because you men don't have any emotional baggage?"

He smiled and replied, "We don't deal with them the same way as women."

I shot back sarcastically, "Well, when you've been cheated on once, you guys become either the cheater yourself, and the next girlfriend is the new object of frustrations, or you are mega careful and you're like little dictators in the next relationship."

He laughed out loud. I decided not to tell him about my divorce yet. It's not that I didn't want to tell him, but I just wanted to challenge his opinion with actual facts.

All I knew right then was that Taylor was in my mind and our phone calls kept on getting me high. This is the reason why I shortened our dinner and went back home to get his call...

Post-date No.1

Sam was fun. I really enjoyed his company. Taylor still all over my phone, it was quite challenging to be fully involved. I didn't feel like Sam would be more than a friend. But I accepted his second date in a secret destination.

Date No.2

Sam and I were meeting in Victoria. When I arrived, Sam had two tickets for Canterbury. I was so glad he made an effort and he remembered that Canterbury was one of these places I wanted to see in the UK.

We took the train and we couldn't stop chatting. I really liked this close relationship I had with him. We were like two buddies always having things to discover and say to each other.

So, what I thought would be a simple getaway turned out to be more romantic than I expected. When we left the station, Sam stopped me and kissed me for the first time. It was sweet, but again nothing like Taylor.

"I dreamt of it since I met you. You have no idea how much I like you. I think I am going to like you too much, too soon. I feel love going through all of my body. You're so perfect, Valérie."

"No, I am not," I responded, feeling guilty for comparing his kiss with Taylor's.

Sam just smiled, "Your eyes say so much. You're such a mysterious young lady and I like this."

We then started to hang around town: shopping, visiting, and picking a place for lunch. All those sweet words from Sam. I wondered if I would ever be able to say them back to him and all because I had Taylor in my mind and I had to make a choice. As long as he was in my life in that way, I wouldn't be able to move forward with anyone else. Tough decision to make; what I felt with Taylor wasn't one tenth of what I was feeling with Sam now. I decided to enjoy the day and think about it later.

It was a sunny bright day and it seemed that everything was on our side: the sun was out, people were smiling at the sight of us, birds were singing, and the weather was warm with a gentle breeze.

We had lunch at quaint Old Tavern Brewery where we spoke more about each other, about our ambitions, our fears, and our hopes. I felt at ease with Sam. I felt like I could be low key, that I could be every day that chill, relaxed, and laid-back lady. There was something peaceful, solace, and enjoyable about these moments. Being away from South Ken (*for South Kensington*) and the Mandarin helped as well.

We then took a medieval tour of the Canterbury Tales. The smells, sounds, and sights of the medieval times filled our heart with romance. We were holding hands, kissing each other, laughing at each other. Followed by a romantic boat trip on the River Stour, which included epic views of the Cathedral and a 13th Century chapel spanning the river.

The day over, I sat quietly in the train, resting on Sam's shoulder. He was all tender and sweet, kissing me and caressing me all over the face.

Why couldn't I feel what I felt with Taylor? It would have been so much easier. Sam lives in Twickenham!!!! So close and Canada was so far!

Sam didn't want to leave me so soon, whilst I wasn't sure I wanted to stay too long with him, as I wanted to hear Taylor's voice.

But, I changed my mind. After all, I wasn't sure whether Taylor had a girlfriend in Canada; so I had dinner with Sam and ate in London at Kouzu.

Kouzu is in London and is an elegant Japanese restaurant set in one of these historical London building. I love it! The food has always been amazing and I will die for one of their tempura soft shell crab.

Over dinner, Sam asked me what I was doing the following weekend. I hadn't planned anything special, so he was quick to offer a weekend in Istanbul.

What a date! I thought. I voiced out my excitement, "It would be so lovely." Sam was so easy to be with and he planned the day to perfection. I trusted we would have loads of fun and that the trip would make us closer. Sam grabbed his iPad and we booked our tickets. I couldn't wait to put this relationship to the next level. Before this, I had to clarify things with Taylor.

Istanbul - Friday

I didn't have the courage to clarify things with Taylor. As soon as I saw him on Skype, I melted. I still wanted him in my life, as a friend. I obviously didn't say anything about Sam. I knew that if he had known, he wouldn't like to contact me anymore. I wasn't ready yet not to hear from him again. So, my selfish part of me, enjoyed our Skype session.

In our flight leading to Istanbul, Sam and I were kissing tenderly. He teased, "You know that we will have to have sex. I

only booked one room with one bed." I smiled, "Good try! I'm sure the carpet is soft enough for you to sleep on." I started to feel slightly concerned about the sex. I wasn't sexually attracted to Sam yet and therefore, I wondered if we were not rushing.

And with the magical sex I had with Taylor three weeks ago, an intercourse so powerful that my body could still shiver by the slightest thought of it, I wondered if it was a good idea. The story would tell.

When we arrived in Istanbul, the weather was mega hot. I felt like I was getting into an oven. When I was heading toward the taxi line, Sam advised that he had booked a coach ticket. I was sceptical at first, but I thought, Sam lived here before, he probably knew what he was doing.

Once in the coach, I started regretting the cab. The aircon wasn't working and I felt like my clothes were just coming from a 90-degree wash: hot and wet. The coach was full and underarm odours started to invade the bus, which made the whole three-hour trip unbearable.

To make matters worse, we got off the bus two stops too early, which is a lot in Istanbul. We were hanging around for at least 30 minutes looking for our hotel. While I kept my cool at first, I exploded and asked, "Can't we just take a cab????? I am thirsty, hungry, and tired! It's only so much I can take after such a long trip!"

Sam looked at me with apologising eyes, I hailed a cab, paid for it, and we realised that it was just an additional three minutes' walk, but I couldn't trust his sense of direction. We checked in at The House Hotel and upon our entrance in the room, I noticed Sam's aghast look.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

“Hold on. I am going to talk to the receptionist.”

I wasn't sure what happened to him, but I was just glad I could finally rest. 30 minutes later, he came back to the room with a smile, “I am sorry. This room is not what I had booked for us and the manager agreed to give us a suite in the penthouse, as I initially asked for.”

“This room is okay,” I smiled.

“Well, you're a princess. You don't deserve a room with a parking view.”

The porter behind Sam took our luggage and we then were in a suite three times bigger, with a view on the Bosphorus. The room was fantastic.

We both had a shower and decided to go out for a drink. I texted Taylor a couple of times in the evening and decided to leave my phone in the room by respect for Sam.

We had our first cocktail drinks at the hotel, went out to dinner to the cute Gram Kanyon which is a tiny restaurant ideal for quick bites. Then, we went to 360 for a couple of additional beverages. We were going all over the place. Sam wanted to go everywhere and nowhere. All drunk, we started talking about past relationships. I told Sam that I was divorced. He revealed that he was separated and had a daughter.

Sam and I went dancing at Sortie. Oh, my... Sam couldn't dance; it was embarrassing. I had never thought that I could feel so embarrassed with someone; even Bianca with her lame flirting line was less embarrassing than dancing Sam. I refrained myself from dancing for the rest of our stay in Istanbul.

On our way back to the hotel, Sam couldn't stop talking about what he would sexually do to me. He managed to arouse me

somehow and I couldn't wait to get to our suite. In our room, we jumped at each other, kissing at each other. We undressed each other and while Taylor's package was oh my... I was searching for Sam's. Okay well... It didn't mean anything, but I was a bit disappointed by the size of it. I just thought that Sam hadn't noticed my disappointment.

We kept on kissing passionately. Sam penetrated me. He growled. He held on. He moved a bit. He slowed down. Kept on going. Waited a minute and we were done. He stood there like a King, stating, "It was so amazing. I felt like my cock was made for your pussy." I was speechless with Poker face (I hoped) trying to hide my disappointment. And I fell asleep on his words.

Istanbul - Saturday

We had a fantastic full-on day, hanging around town: Beyoglu, Sultanahmet, Besiktas, and more. We visited Hagia Sophia Museum, the Blue Mosque, Basilica Cistern, and I felt like I was in a remake of Val in Edinburg episode. Sam acted exactly like Bogdan, like he knew it all. He didn't even let the guide express himself.

Having lived in Istanbul, Sam was euphoric to make me discover the places he had been with his ex-wife. I think I had two hours' talk on the yet to be former wife of Sam. Sam admitted that he still wasn't divorced, but he swore they were separated. The more I discovered from him, the less I respected him. Especially when he admitted lying to my friend about his references and skills. They were all fake.

"This is how much I love you," Sam confessed. I didn't reply back, as I wasn't sure I heard it well. Were we talking about love already?

Sam added, "I was jobless for three years, and I had this idea,

and it's working well. Victoria is very happy with me."I really felt betrayed, as Sam was putting me in a very uncomfortable situation where I didn't know if I should grass him to my friend. I hated it.

We went back to the hotel early, as we had to catch our flight early the following morning and I couldn't wait to be back home and talk to Taylor.

Sam and I had a few drinks at the hotel, but this time, we didn't have sex. The atmosphere was heavy. We just slept quietly.

Istanbul - Sunday

But early in the morning, Sam had decided otherwise. While I was texting discreetly Taylor, with the details of my flight, I felt Sam's hard cock on my *derrière*, which revealed the weak side of me. I couldn't help it now; I was aroused. We made love and this time, curiously, it was quite nice; Sam managed to make me come.

Sex over, we hurried up, as our flight was in two hours. We packed quickly and left the hotel in a rush. We grabbed a cab (thank god) and Sam confessed unthinkingly, "I love you, Val. This trip made me realise how much I respect you. I want your happiness. I would do anything to have you and marry you if you let me to. Do you want to be mine?"

I was shocked. I didn't know what to say, and this is when I was interrupted by Camellia's call. I picked up to escape any response to this awkward situation.

"Hello Val, Sorry; I know you're with your lover... Hehe. So happy for you... Please don't book anything next week. I have decided to celebrate my birthday and by the same occasion, introduce Michael to all of my friends. He proposed! So you'd better be here. I just wanted to be sure you don't book anything next weekend. Sam is invited of course. I can't wait to see him!!"

Camellia shouted happily, all excited.

"Ooooooooooh, Camellia! I am so happy for you! Congratulations!" I replied. Sam, who heard Camellia's high-pitched voice of joy, added, "Send my love to Camellia. Of course, I'd be happy to meet your best friend. Congratulations to her!"

I hung up. I was so happy for Camellia. "She really deserved it. I still remember how her former fiancé left her without notice."

Sam added in a patronising tone, "Your friend sounded euphoric to get married. Don't you ever get lonely? Aren't you sometimes worried you wouldn't be able to have kids? I think you should start thinking about committing, marriage, and a sound relationship. You know real love doesn't exist, Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. All these things are myth, let alone love at first sight and unconditional love. Just don't turn into some crazy cat lady."

I looked at him and protested, "Sam, I'd rather finish my life alone than have an average bloke with a mediocre relationship for the rest of my life." Sam looked at me like I still believed in Santa Claus. I probably looked at him like he cancelled Christmas. We didn't speak at all in the flight and we parted ways cordially at the airport. I grabbed a cab; he jumped on a train.

Now that I had a taste of love, this was the standard I was expecting. I couldn't settle for less than this. I was open to the fact that a relationship could evolve and become more meaningful with time, but I wasn't ready to be with someone just because I was afraid to be alone.

Date No.4

I didn't hear from Taylor all week, which was really weird. I

didn't have the time to preoccupy; I was in and out of the country for work and Camellia pushed me to plan her wedding with her. But, for some reason, not hearing from him buzzed me to death.

Camellia and I were all over town trying to recruit a wedding planner. We also spent an afternoon in Milan to meet Enzo Miccio, the famous Italian Wedding Planner. Unfortunately, he didn't get on well with Camellia.

I heard back from Sam, of course; he sent a few emails of love. He sent flowers of adoration. He left passionate voicemails. But nothing worked; I wasn't falling in love and I knew I would never do.

And while I didn't want Sam to come, Camellia insisted on having him around. He sounded like a great man to her and she didn't like the sound of how my relationship with Taylor was going.

Anyhow, she invited Sam, and I believed that considering the troubled relationship we were in now, he wouldn't dare to come.

Friday evening just before Camellia's party. Bianca and I drank a few glasses of wine and were having our makeup done by our makeup artist at mine. As usual, we spoke about Camellia, work, South Ken & Knightsbridge socialites, gossips, and love.

We spoke about Taylor and I complained to Bianca that he started playing the game: the dating game.

"What do you expect from this relationship? Don't even bother... He's not even in Paris Val!!!! He's in fucking Canada, mega cold country; you can't even go there just to chill a day. It

takes one-third of a day to get there! Leave him alone and get your heart and mind back in London. And please, bin this Sam as well. I don't even want you to introduce him to me if he shows tonight. A coach to get to your five-star hotel? Yeurk???? It's even worse than bringing a Tesco bag to the Ritz," cynically laughed Bianca.

"You know what! I am calling him now and this will be it! I just want to know what happened."

Bianca looked at me with exasperation, "Don't come and cry on my shoulder after this."

Taylor's phone was ringing. He picked up.

"Well, I am glad you're still alive," I sneered.

"I am pleased, I am not the only one to enjoy you blowing skills," he taunted.

"Excuse me?" I interrupted in disgust.

Bianca rolled her eyes.

"At first, I thought you were silly and that it was one of your jokes. Then I thought, you were masturbating and wanted to play with me. But I quickly realised that your moans were real that you were having sex with someone else."

My mouth went Sahara dry; I started suffocating. I didn't hear anything anymore. Taylor's voice went on angrier, so emotional to me that it was painful. Bianca came to me, asking me to hang up; she could hear Taylor shouting out without understanding a word. I barely had the time to say, "May I call you back in a minute?" then Bianca took the phone out of my hand.

I didn't remember what Bianca said and what I said. We just

checked my phone and we both realised that indeed, I didn't send the text with my flight's details. Taylor called me at 4:03 am and it seemed that I "picked up" and spent 33 minutes with him. I was horrified. He stayed 33 minutes on the phone listening to Sam and I having sex. I was sick. Bianca rushed me to put my dress on. We were running late. I swallowed my rage and went to my friend's party solely because I wanted to be there for her.

At the party, I managed to swallow my pain and enjoyed the food and chiefly the drinks.

Sam dared to show with a love card, at first, I didn't say anything. I was listening to him saying all his loving words to me.

Then, I asked him if we could have a smoke outside and excused myself to Camellia and Michael for a minute.

Once, outside the Claridge's, I couldn't help but slap him a high five! "This is for picking up my phone and ending a meaningful friendship that you will never have the chance to live in your entire life!" I yelled.

Sam understood straight away what I was talking about. "Val, I have done this for pure love. I was so jealous of you two texting all weekend."

"Well, you did it with full knowledge that it would hurt him and the relationship I had with him. This behaviour is sick! I am sorry Sam, but you are not the type of person I would like to be with. Please don't stay, you're ruining my night, and it's my friend's birthday."

"She invited me, though???"

"Are you kidding? Are you seriously planning to stay here?"

Sam did stay until Bianca kicked him out. I don't know what she said to him, but I did not care. He disappeared.

One month later

Victoria called me slightly worried to ask if I was still seeing Sam. I responded that I never really did and that we just went out for dinner once or twice. She was relieved, as she was planning to sack him. He did a terrible job for the company and his colleagues quickly realised that he was a fraud. I was glad he was now, really, out of my life. Next!

Chapter Thirty-Six – Back in the Nineties

Since I had given up on online dating, I was jubilant to look at dating differently. Men were everywhere and when I looked at the streets, in bars, in pubs, and in restaurants, I discovered that London had a whole full lot of handsome men.

I didn't need Tinder to boost my ego; the second looks of men in the street were enough; the smiles in the bars were enough; the drinks offered in pubs were enough.

I felt open to a relationship and I believed men could sense it as well. The big BUT was these men didn't accost any women nor me. Why was this? In France, as a single woman, you'd be accosted a bit too much to my liking, but London had another sort of style. After questioning a few friends and clients, both men and women, I learned that British men, especially English men, have an incurable sickness called the *flirt-phobia*. The disease touches emotional men terrified of humiliating rejection. Basically, most significant relationships (without online dating) begin with the help of several bottles of wine. Yet, relationships progress at a tortoise pace, as they avoid showing their true feelings until they are confident that they will be reciprocated. Well, I was not yet out of the woods.

So, I decided to put myself in a situation where I would be surrounded by single males. I signed up for a Speed Dating Event on my own. Well, Camellia was now engaged, and Bianca was... Well, Bianca was eternally chasing for the one-night-stand.

A week before the event, I received an email from the organiser, Julia. "Hi Valérie, we are looking forward to seeing you Friday

27th November at 7 pm. We know that going to this kind of event can be dreadful, so please do not hesitate to contact your new friends for a drink beforehand: Ginger Lovelle: 07 908 ### ###. Peggy Starr: 07 908 ### ###. And Sally Macintosh: 07 908 ### ##.

If this email was supposed to make the event less dreadful, the organiser had it completely wrong. Ginger Lovelle? Peggy Star? Where was I going? The names sounded like a porn star casting. Well, I decided to call none of them. I gathered all my courage and went on my own. Well, the day of the event, I regretted not having called any of these women. I was stressing out and the hair problem didn't help. I finally went for the simple bun and natural makeup. I didn't want to overdo it. I opted for my Viktor and Ross shorts and a Philipp Plein T-shirt with details on the shoulders. Simple, yet sexy, I thought.

When I reached the event, Julia (the organiser) welcomed me with a glass of champagne and introduced me to a few girls. I found it very sweet of her to help break the ice and I also thought that the event was well organised. So, I started talking with girls and immediately took a liking for Sally and Cali. We had a few laughs and a few minutes later, Julia was grabbing my hand to sit me at a table and the speed dating started almost immediately.

Well, I should say that all in all, the ratio men/women wasn't fair. There were more women than men, making them wait for another tour. I was sat at a table, which accommodated two people. Being a woman, I was lucky enough not to play musical chairs, which made the whole game a less serious affair for us women and certainly made it look more like a nerve-wracking interview for these gentlemen.

In this instance, I had a three-minute date with each man. I was also given a sheet of paper and a pencil to circle "yes" if I liked them or "no" if I didn't. The rule was if we both circled yes, we

got each other's contact information in an email the next day.

The champagne, the wine, the friendly atmosphere helping, I was confident and friendly. I decided not to ask any questions about their jobs. Unless that was their way of introducing themselves which for me wasn't a good point. A job is a job; this is not who you are but what you do.

Then if it's also your passion, I was hoping that you had other activities besides because this means that in a serious relationship, you will always put your job first and as a couple, we will have nothing to share.

The event regrouped a variety of professions; creative, fire-fighters, accountants, lawyers. I also noticed that you don't need to be a loser to shoot a few lame lines such as: "Baby, you're so hot, you make the equator look like the north pole," or, "Do your legs hurt from running through my dreams all night?" or, "Excuse me, I think you have something in your eye. Oh wait, it's just a sparkle."

I must say, I had a lot of fun. It was different from online dating and I liked it. On Tinder, I would have looked at every single detail and speed dating gave me the chance to meet people who were also looking for a date, but instead of learning everything about them up front, I could have a proper conversation with them.

Amongst the shy, the overly-confident, the cocky, the idiot, and the womaniser, I liked two men that were kind of interesting: Alex and Steve.

Alex was very cute with wavy, curly red hair, 34, he had the freckles that went with it, very charming, 5'10, looked like a creative, shy, had two big sisters, and lived in Hammersmith. We exchanged a few jokes and were separated by Julia, as we had so much to tell about each other.

Steve was more mature. I didn't ask his age, but he looked in his mid 40's, maybe early 50's. Tall, blond straight hair, magical sparkling green eyes. Steve wasn't quite my type, but there was something quite reassuring about him. He was calm, confident, and straightforward.

The event ended. Sally and Cali came immediately back to me, all smiling. We were gossiping about the various men we liked. Wow, it seemed that we had completely different tastes, which in fact made me realise that there is a man for every woman.

After my umpteenth glass of wine, the girls and I went dancing on the dancefloor and were chatted up by the few men who liked us. To my despair, neither Alex nor Steve came to speak to me. Determined, I left the dancefloor looking for them and was poked by Steve. "Great moves," he added. I smiled. "How are you?"

Steve had such a beautiful smile and I was charmed. He grinned. "I am leaving. But I want to see you again. May I have your number?"

"Certainly," I replied confidently. "It will be nice to meet again," I added. I gave Steve my business card, he left, and I was happy I had a good experience with speed dating.

Sally and Cali were getting ready to go elsewhere dancing. They invited me to join them. They were going at the Shoreditch House, East End. I wasn't sure I wanted to go to the other side of London. Well, as soon as I discovered that Alex was in, I was!

We took a cab to Shoreditch, we danced, ate, danced, chatted, and were chatted up by other men. We were all in a good mood and had positive vibes. Until now, Sally and Cali are still my friends and we shared amazing nights out and gatherings together. I was disappointed as I realised that Alex didn't show

any interest and decided to go home.

The following morning, I was matched with the two men I liked. I was surprised Alex liked me, as he didn't show any initiative the night before.

A few minutes later, I received a <Hello> text signed by Alex. Then, I texted back < Would be great to grab a coffee sometime. > He responded that he was free the following week, but I was flying to Miami for an Art Show.

One month later, when I almost forgot about him, Alex added me on Facebook. I accepted his invite. Nothing happened. A few weeks later, he invited me for dinner, and this would be the most confusing date I would ever have in my life! *To be continued...*

As to Steve, we had a date! We decided to meet at Great Portland Street Station. I had never been out in this area of London, so I was intrigued by his pick.

Date with Steve

Saturday night. I received a call earlier from Steve to confirm the date at Green Man Pub in Fitzrovia.

Later that day, my cab was heading toward Great Portland Street. Arrived, I called Steve to know where he was sitting. He stood up. I smiled; it was nice to see him. As I approached, his clothes didn't impress me: a red head sweatband (why?), green Graphic Print Sports Shirt, a dark orange Mod Corduroy trousers. Steve clearly called a stylist during the speed dating, as I didn't recall this ugly sense of style. Or maybe we were heading to an 80's party afterwards?

Steve presented his left cheek way too fast and abruptly, and unfortunately, I introduced my lips the same way, causing me

to bleed and him to hold his falling denture. Steve excused himself and left running toward the bathroom. Despite, my painful bleeding lips I started laughing. I couldn't help and alas, I couldn't stop either. I had to ask for a glass of water to calm down. I was pissing laughing tears with my tissue in my hands still trying to stop the bleeding on my lips.

Plus, I realised that Steve left a few antics on the table: a black leather fanny pack and a Nokia 8210. God, I thought they recycled all of them. I started thinking this guy is not in his late forties. What the hell? Surely, I was still not good at guessing people's age.

When Steve came back, he was clearly upset, though he started talking about his jobs completely deadpanned by his denture that kept moving all the way. It was clearly unstable. I couldn't help laughing. I decided not to look at it anymore, but I was still giggling. I excused myself and went to the bathroom.

It took me ten minutes to calm down. I wished I had some makeup with me. I would have washed my face with cold water. When I felt ready, I went out of the ladies and sat back at an empty table.

The waiter came to me and handed me a note from Steve. I read, "Your attitude is unacceptable and childish. I am not interested in dating you. Good luck and buy yourself a brain." I was then laughing like crazy. I couldn't stop! The waiter looked at me sceptically. I left the pub, grabbed a cab, and laughed on my way home. Next!

Chapter Thirty-Seven – What a Shane!

My first speed dating experience was fun; I really enjoyed it, but not only to find a date, but also to socialise. I met great friends and I am still in touch with them today. I've done it a few times and left with mixed reviews every time. I have been to one in the city where you'd have thought you'd find like-minded ambitious men but I bumped into an ugly bunch of wannabes.

I went to a town near Croydon; I didn't realise it was that far until the trip took longer than I thought and stumbled upon a group of scapegrace dudes. I was horrified, especially from the latter, when Bianca came with me and couldn't stop complaining all through our trip back and is still talking about that night today.

South Ken, Sunday afternoon on a cold but Sunny autumn day, Camellia and I were in my living room surrounded by decoupages of wedding dresses from all sort of brides' magazines. Camellia had breakfast at mine and we were still searching for the perfect wedding dress at 4 pm. When we lacked magazines to look at, I was very glad to offer a tea break. But when Camellia proposed to go on Pinterest; I was horrified!

“As far as I am concerned, I am done,” I said tiredly.

“Please! Pinterest and we are done. We will make a few screenshots and print them.”

“From where? I am running out of ink,” I lied.

“Oh, damn it! I'll do this at home... I'll spare you this,” chuckled Camellia.

"I can't believe you are getting married. I missed you in all these single events. With whom am I going to chat up handsome and intelligent guys, now?"

"Valérie, you are ready now. You don't need to go out and chat men up. And you're so picky!"

"Moi? Picky? Are you kidding, Cam? You would not have borne a third of the dates I have been to, you would have left straight away, especially the guy who let the door hit my head, or the other one losing his denture in front of me. Besides, that's why you signed up to Infinite to avoid all this shit."

"And you should do the same. Have a matchmaker looking for your dream man, Val. Stop this mess! Sometimes I feel like you're having fun going to these horrible dates. Are you writing a book or something? If not you should... Go to Stephanie. She's your friend now; I am sure she will make a deal to you."

"I feel that I have not tried everything and it hasn't been long since I've felt ready. I can afford to take more time."

"Listen, you know before I signed up at Infinite, I was part of this Affinity Club; they organise events for singles. I've never been, but you should call Stanley. He is the organiser, and he worked in conjunction with a few matchmaking agencies so you might find eligible men. Go with your new friend Sally. I'm sure you'll have fun."

I'd had my fair lot of dodgy events. I took Stanley's number, but I couldn't care less.

The following Friday, Bianca stood me up for a fling she'd dreamt of fucking for at least three years. So, I decided to look up at what I could do that night. I stumbled across Stanley's business card from Affinity Singles and contacted him to know

if they were up to something that night.

I was lucky. They had a meet up in a club called Quaglino's in Mayfair. I had never been there, so I was even more excited. I got myself pampered and went very confident to Quaglino's Mayfair.

I arrived at Quaglino's, which is a few moments away from the Ritz. Inside, two charming hostesses greeted me. I asked for Stanley's table. One of the hostesses took my coat and escorted me downstairs.

On my way down, I realised how big and sumptuous the Quaglino's was. I felt like I was in one of Gatsby's parties. It was opulent, magnificent, and yet chic. Nothing overdone.

The men looked young, successful, confident, and I liked the atmosphere. I knew I was about to have a great night. The restaurant host sat me on a pouffe alone and asked hesitantly, "Are you sure you're here for Stanley?" His tone really worried me; he sounded like I'd asked for Mr. Elephant Man. I confirmed my request. The host left, which made the whole situation awkward when he came back and introduced me to Stanley.

When I'd spoken over the phone with Stanley that afternoon, I'd really thought he was a younger man, and for some reason, I thought he was really good looking, which contributed to me making an effort to come. But I couldn't have been more wrong. I had in front of me the cubic crushed version of Gargamel. I forced a grin, Stanley took my arm, and we walked towards his table.

At his table, ugly old men salivated at my arrival surely happy to see fresh meat at their disposal. I was thinking of a way to get away from this shit. It was so wrong! Still standing up, Stanley introduced me to his Geriatric Club, four gentlemen looking

over 100 year-old, two very weather-beaten face women, and to my relief and big surprise, a woman of my age with a diving cleavage unveiling two football balls. Gross... She looked like a prostitute. Despite her vulgarity, I decided that she was going to be my evening's friend. I decided to sit next to her, but Stanley decided to place me between Mamie Nova and Santa Claus.

Mamie Nova at my sight gave me her back without concession, clearly showing her instant dislike for me, and obviously she ignored me all through the night. However, Santa Claus was delighted to have me at his side and started chatting me up, asking a variety of questions about my life. At least it allowed me to launch my very own evening well and laugh somehow.

However, I cut our conversation short when after a few compliments, he invited me to his hotel. I declined kindly with a puking taste in my mouth. He put his card in front of me, stating, "If you change your mind one of these days." This was disgusting; I could be his grandchild. I, then, introduced him to my back and stopped conversing with him.

To my greatest despair, I had no one to speak with. I could have left, but when I thought of the £100 paid, I was more than willing to drink my third free drink before running away.

My second glass started, I thought that I was silly not at least to talk to them and/or network, so I stood up and joined the conversation of the two other men sitting opposite to me.

Wrong move! I discovered that men could talk about hip problems, hearing aids, and dentures... I was dying alive in an excellent restaurant full of handsome men. Why was I still at their table?

I drank my wine like one drink a shot of vodka and decided to leave when Big Football Balls came to me.

"Your first?"

"Yep."

"This is the last time I come to one of Stanley's evenings." She claimed.

"Oh god! You think the same! I figured I was the only normal girl here. I can't believe that man just offered me to join him at his hotel."

"Don't worry. He's cool. He'll probably spin a few notes," she said in the coolest way possible.

"Notes????? Money?" I said, trying to sound and look as expressionless as possible.

"Yes, something around £ 500... What do you think? We are all here to date men full of cash... This dress cost me £ 800, my bag £ 5000 and this ring £13000... How do you think I got all these? And my new boobs! All from rich men."

I thought my evening could not be worse than that. I decided to leave. I was embarrassed even to be seen with these kinds of people.

I was going very discreetly toward the exit when Stanley took my arm and mumbled, "Do not worry, next time, I'll bring men of your age, with as successful careers as yours, very handsome, and searching for a meaningful relationship. They will be delighted to see you, my darling. And now, I know what you look like... You're a bombshell, and we will get you married quickly."

I made the fakest smile ever made in my life and I made a hypocritical kiss to Stanley. I was going home.

It seemed like the night was mega busy; there was neither taxi nor Uber to be seen or called. Even Minicabster and Addison Lee were busy. In agony, I started to walk toward Green Park station hoping to get a cab or worse, get a bus home.

My bus was coming in 28 minutes, which was a long wait in that cold autumn night. I saw a few taxis passing by, but they were all busy. I started being desperate by the thought of getting into the tube station, which I hadn't used for ages, when a gentleman interrupted my chain of not-so-nice thoughts.

"Bad evening?"

"Excuse me?"

"You look upset; seems like you had a tough day."

"Funny, I shall say. Well, I've been invited to a dating event which turned out to be a Geriatric club where I had to chat with Santa Claus, befriend with Cruella, have fun with Mother Christmas, or chat electrical hips with a porn star turned prostitute."

"Mamie Nova?"

"Yes, the yoghurt? Granny Nova?"

"You're funny."

"And cynical..."

"I like it."

"I'm Valérie."

So, meet Shane, 37, lawyer, blond, and charming. Dressed like an artist, T-shirt and South Pole sweatshirt; we were laughing

when after a 35-minute wait I made him miss his bus. I didn't even see mine passing by. Now, we had no choice but to go for a drink somewhere close.

After one drink, we decided to have a bottle of wine and sat at the Blue Post on Bennet Street. The Blue Post was just a local pub like many in Mayfair. Then, we spent three hours chatting about everything and nothing. We laughed, sang, debated. It was weird to have so many interests in common with a random guy. Plus, I was right. Shane was also an artist. He loved painting, writing poems in his lost hours. I love creative men, and of course, I fancied him right away. Shane and I talked about art, music, real estate, and history. The evening passed at the speed of light. Finally, I did not regret going out at Stanley's. In fact, I had forgotten the first part of the evening.

1 am, I was home, speed texting to Shane.

Date No.1

Shane and I planned to have dinner the following Thursday and he decided he would pick a restaurant and impress me. Well, I couldn't wait to see him again to have our official date 1.

I liked Shane; he was funny, he liked my humour, and never lacked saying something. Our discussions were flowing and we got on well.

But Thursday afternoon, Shane left a voicemail advising that he might not be able to make it that night because one of his best friends made a surprise trip to London from NYC. Well, I was disappointed, but texted back, < No problem. We'll catch up later this week. Have a very good time! >

A few minutes later, "I like you enormously. I don't think I can wait for more to see you. Join us at Masons Arms around 7 pm. I will have a couple with him and we'll have dinner. Can't wait to

learn more of you.”

I really felt honoured Shane invited me to join and see one of his best friends. I accepted the invite and couldn't wait to see his American friend. I arrived at The Masons at 7 pm. Shane introduced me to James. James is a childhood friend of Shane. He's amusing, smart, and he's newly engaged. He came to London to tell Shane about the wedding and he officially invited both of us to the marriage held the following summer. James also said to Shane, "Valérie is the woman to marry, Shane. Don't ruin this, she's amazing!" He left us in these terms and we headed toward the Shepherds Market to an unknown destination.

Well, in fact, Shane booked at Le Boudin Blanc, a French restaurant where the menu was too good to pick; I wanted to eat everything: snail, oyster, boudin... Very nice Parisian bistro for a romantic candlelit date. Well done, Shane! I believed I could easily fall for that guy.

We had a very deep conversation. We spoke about our concept of a couple, creating a powerful couple, a team where we could work towards the same goals and be amazing together. I didn't think I'd had a date where I had such meaningful conversation about relationships and dates that early. I really appreciated that he emphasised on his will to form a proper couple and the need to maintain the flame in the relationship, whatever happens.

This man intrigued me more and more. This wasn't the kind of intrigue I had for Adrian, Paul, or others. It was deeper; I really wanted to know what scared him, what made him laugh, what made him shiver. I wanted to know him at a deeper level.

I really liked the way Shane walked, and talked, the words he used, his manners, and his incredible and welcoming smile. I really enjoyed that date; again it was hard to leave each other.

But this time, when my cab arrived, Shane kissed me. My heart wasn't pounding. I still had flashes of Taylor's kisses, and I was still comparing him to others. It was very hard because since I met Taylor, nobody had kissed me and sexed me up as amazingly as he did. I knew I had to move on and I knew I would, either with some time or with someone else.

Post-date No.1

One afternoon, after Camellia had me trying a few maids of honour dresses, in a few shops around town, we went for an afternoon tea at Sketch. We started eating and enjoying our food, when I recognised a woman from my first-speed dating group. We smiled at each other and she winked "got a hot date".

Then, Shane arrived and joined her at her table. I must say I was upset that he was meeting her despite our fantastic dates.

Camellia was steaming rage on my behalf and decided we should just leave. She asked for the bill. When the waiter arrived, knowing us, he asked if something was wrong that we had to go that abruptly. I tried to explain discreetly, but Shane heard my voice and looked at our table.

Camellia looked at him like he'd just killed her fiancé. Shane awkwardly hailed me to join their table and seemed very uncomfortable when he tried to voice why he was here. Indeed, when I spoke to him earlier, he'd said that he was busy working outside London. A lie! I hate lies but forced a smile. And then, Shane and I, were both looking awkwardly at the Speed Dating Girl. I decided to break the silence. "Sophie. Nice to see you again, enjoy your hot date!" I winked at her.

And, I just left without hearing Shane's excuses, he blatantly started to voice in front of Sophie. Needless to say, I didn't want

to see him again. I was not willing to play any game or multi-date anymore. I was being myself and dating à la French in London. What a Shane, Shane didn't get this! Next!

Chapter Thirty-Eight - Classified Date

Meet Alex, wavy, curly red hair, cute freckles, 34, 5'10, very charming with his amazing hazel almond eyes. Alex lived in Hammersmith, which wasn't far from me. In fact, I'd first met Alex at my first speed dating experience a few weeks back. We were given each other's details by Julia (the speed dating organiser), exchanged a few useless texts there and there, and we forgot about each other.

But on a Sunday afternoon, I received the following text from Alex. < Hey! How are you? Still single? > I responded straight to the point, < We should go for a drink sometime? > He replied immediately, < What about this Saturday? > I would decline a first date on a Saturday, but I'd been in touch with this guy for what I felt was ages and was now so curious to know more about him, I accepted.

Saturday morning, Alex sent me a text asking for my address, as he wanted to pick me up for a surprise date in town. I found the approach romantic; I couldn't wait to see this man finally and gave him my details.

I was impressed by his organisation. Alex texted me an hour before, to confirm our date, I had no excuse to be late and I wasn't. 6:59, I was like a child waiting for her Christmas present, dressed up, pampered, and perfumed for him. Alex called me upon his arrival. I came down and Alex was standing up in front of my porch waiting for me. I smiled. Alex was cute.

"Hello, nice to finally see you," he shouted, hesitantly, giving me two kisses on the cheeks.

"Happy to see you too! I wonder where we're going. I love surprises."

"What?" he yelled again.

"I wonder where we're going," I said, with a questioning face.

"What was that?"

"I can't wait to know where we're going!" I shouted back.

"I know! Everybody loves my car!"

Well, I just smiled. Alex took my hand and opened the door of the vehicle.

Both inside, he added, still screaming, "I understood you like to dance, so let's go to a salsa class."

The chauffeur shot back, laughing, "Honey, you need to lower your voice; the lady can hear you." I looked at the driver, incredulous, and he pointed to Alex's ears. I saw that Alex had a hearing device.

Alex added, "This is just an aide. I can hear you correctly."

Well, except the fact that Alex couldn't hear or understand me, he was handsome, slimmer than I remembered. Full lips, high cheekbones, sexy eyes, and beautiful red hair. Mega bonus: he was behaving like a gentleman.

In the car, Alex and I didn't speak to each other because the driver decided to tell us about his blind cousin who married a beautiful lady who didn't care about his condition. A story I was very uncomfortable to hear. I was glad when we finally arrived.

The music was mega loud. We grabbed drinks and waited for

the class to start. Alex tried to talk to me, but I couldn't hear nor understand him and same for him. I'd never "sorry" myself as much in my life than this night. Same for him; our date was interspersed of innuendos, misunderstanding, and irrelevant statements. I already planned my way out after the class. I couldn't possibly have dinner with someone I couldn't understand. At some point, I thought that I could maybe disappear during the course, as the date was clearly a joke.

But when the class started, the fun commenced as well. Everybody was supporting each other; the teacher was fun to follow and very patient as well. We had so much fun dancing that I thought that maybe Alex and I should have dinner somewhere quiet. I blamed the music for the misunderstandings.

So, Alex's chauffeur was waiting for us, we got into the car, and headed towards the Claridge's.

The Claridge's is one of London's most iconic luxury hotels in Mayfair. It is or was best known for being at home of famous chef Gordon Ramsay, its amazing cooking master classes, and for its opulent art deco interiors. We were eating to its Fera Restaurant that night.

This time, Alex was much more talkative and seemed to have lowered the volume of his voice. We shared our point of view on the salsa class and the small party afterwards. We were now all excited and couldn't wait to eat. I was relieved; things were getting normal, and I was glad I didn't sneak out of the party.

Every time Alex looked at me, I felt like his eyes were trying to tell me something deep. He was so expressive and I could tell he was also hiding some sensitivity. I couldn't wait to know more about him over dinner.

We arrived in front of the Claridge's. I had a big smile, and Alex

said, "I understand you like great food. I hope you'll enjoy our meal here." He listened attentively to what I said upon our first meeting. I was euphoric that he made such an effort to please me and remembered almost everything I said that first night.

While our table at Fera was getting ready, we started the second part of our night with a cocktail at Claridge's Bar. Out of the blue, Alex caressed my face and delicately kissed me. It was so random. He had such soft and eatable lips that I wanted more. We kissed until our cocktails were served.

Alex and I, then reached our table and I can't explain why after going to the bathroom, Alex went back to his yelling self again.

"Your dress is fabulous. I can't stop admiring you." This time, I jumped on my own chair.

"I can hear you, Alex. You don't need to be that loud," I said discreetly, as everybody was looking at us.

"What?" Alex shouted again.

God, this was embarrassing. I was blushing scarlet red. All eyes were on us. I decided just to nod.

"I could tell that everybody was jealous of me having you. Those men were salivating," Alex, yelled.

"Alex, I think all the restaurant can hear us," I whispered.

"You were indeed fabulous."

I gave up.

"I like you very much," Alex barked, kissing me again awkwardly. I wasn't expecting this. I felt like everybody was looking at us.

"Listen, Alex," I started. "I don't think it's going to work between us."

"We are glamorous, aren't we? I am glad you think the same."

"What? That's not what I said! I am done, Alex. It's not working."

"What? You are not breaking up with me, are you?"

Oh my, people were staring this time. I nodded a yes and decided to go. Whilst I was getting my purse to pay for the bill, Alex just left. Well, I just had to stay alone, mega embarrassed, and finish my meal and his. Everybody was looking at me.

A few minutes later, Alex's chauffeur arrived and asked, "What happened?"

"I am sorry, I can't do this."

"Because she has a hearing impairment? She's good looking. She's intelligent and smart. Why must people make a judgment?"

A pang of regret washed over me and I barely noticed that he was referring to Alex as a "She."

"He can't even understand me!" I said in a voice full of remorse.

"You know, Mrs Valérie, Alexandra has been through a lot and she was looking forward to..."

"Alexandra?????????" I questioned.

"Yes," the chauffeur said timidly.

"Alex is Alexandra????? A woman????"

"You didn't know? But she's..."

Oh, my... I thought I'd seen it all... I felt my stomach gallop. Why did she lie to me?

I didn't let the chauffeur finish the discussion, but some of his words were resonating in me: "hormones," "a penis soon " always felt like a man."

I left about £200 on the table and headed flabbergasted to the cloakrooms without looking back.

Then three handsome men came to me almost running. One grabbed my arm.

"Don't go, Mrs. Beauty. I am Michael," said confidently, a blond head.

I looked at all of them confused.

"We understand you're popular after breaking up with red-head, you had grandpa after you? You're a heartbreaker!" I don't even remember replying back to that joke. I was still looking at these men so lost and puzzled.

"Meet Faisal, 35-year-old, dark, handsome, entrepreneur, and he likes you," said the other man without introducing himself.

I finally started to smile and regain my composure.

"Would you date him?" queried Michael.

"He's good looking," I reacted.

"Here's your next date then," he laughed.

I blushed. Faisal was cute. In truth, he had the look of a model.

“Well, here’s his business card. Would be great to call him sometime. In fact, very soon,” added his friend.

“I will do,” I answered with a shy grin, still baffled by the evening.

Business card in my bag, coat taken, I was rapidly in a cab wondering if I could have gotten a real relationship with Alex if it wasn’t because of the whole awkward situation. The response was and still is I have no idea, but she was hot as a man!

I have never met Alex since and never heard back from him. That night, I lost a date and gained another one. Who said one needs online dating? Next...

Chapter Thirty-Nine – Happy New Year 2016!

2015 was one of those years that I didn't see galloping away. Ups and downs, laughs and cries, great and good surprises, love, admiration, and fantasies. I swallowed these experiences up with a positive and fun attitude at the end. Feeling grateful, I could experience them, learning so much more about myself, what I am searching for, and fine-tuning my ideal man in my mind. I absolutely loved 2015 and I knew something bigger was coming up in 2016! I don't know why but I could sense it from the bottom of my heart.

31st December, I was in the Eurostar going back to London. After a fantastic time with my family, I couldn't wait to celebrate the New Year with my dearest friends Camellia and Bianca.

Then, I recalled all the dinners, weddings, and parties we'd had this year where Bianca, Camellia, and I were sat in life's equivalent of the sick patient waiting room at the doctor's office, in corner or toilet tables, like we were infected by a terrible virus called SINGLEDOM.

That night, Camellia wasn't one of us anymore, and she was organising one of these parties I'd like with fantastic music, unlimited champagne, delicious canapés, and a magnificent view. As a matter of fact, Michael and Camellia now moved to a great flat in the new building on Albert Embankment. Their place boasted a spectacular view of all the major attraction of London; it was just amazing: London Eye, Trafalgar Square, St. Paul, and so much more... Seeing them together was so refreshing; they were the happiest couple I had ever known in my life. They were just perfect for each other. They were inspiring. I was seriously starting to think of joining one of these

agencies.

Yet, being single had been amazing. I had achieved more than I had in my entire life up until that point. As a single woman, I learned so much about myself and other human beings. I was happy, my business was working, and I finally had the fabulous lifestyle I had always dreamed of. I could work and travel around the world, I met amazing friends all over the world. I was in a great place now and I knew exactly what I wanted to contribute to the world.

I lost a few acquaintances and fake friends down the road, but it was just natural selection; these people had to go to evolve healthily and without any negative vibes. The real ones were still there beside me, and more importantly, my sisters were by me encouraging, and this was the most important thing.

I learned something vital that year: a friend that always says nice things to you is a nice person, not a friend.

A friend that puts you down trying to belittle you and make herself look better than you, is not a friend; she is jealous. I met a few!

A friend that supports you by asking questions, challenging your decisions, or just confronting you upon a problem is a great friend. I was lucky, I had two: Bianca and Camellia. I was grateful I still had them in my life and still do today.

My Eurostar arrived in London and I had to stop my train of thoughts to get ready to celebrate the end of an amazing year and start an even more fantastic one.

London St. Pancras, it was good to be back home. "Welcome back, Mrs Duval! May I take your suitcase?"

"Hi Alan, please do. Thank you ever so much. How was Christmas for you and your family?"

"It was great, Mrs Duval. My wife and I really appreciated the presents offered by you. Thanks, Mrs Duval."

"My pleasure Alan. Oh, my... I missed London. Drive me home, Alan. Give me an hour or two and will go at Camellia's."

"Certainly."

As I get to mine, my assistant was waiting for me with the hairdresser and my makeup artist. My outfit was ready: Long Cristallini red dress with a pair of golden Jimmy Choo with a Celine pochette. I couldn't wait to catch up with the ladies.

Two hours and a half later, I was ready to party.

When I arrived at Camellia's, I was apparently the last guest everybody was waiting for, and there were like 50 of us. It was amazing. Camellia was wearing a white lace dress from Cristallini as well; not surprising, as we shopped together in Bucharest the weekend before Christmas. Bianca opted for the Crème de la Crème of England Brand: Burberry. A beige lace detail silk crepe floor-length dress. We all looked beautiful! We had a few selfies posted on Instagram Story, and we were ready to mingle. At least, I certainly was.

At midnight, the countdown to the New Year was off and the house was on fire! We were all alcoholised and were dancing the night away.

A new year had started, I was single, divorced for almost three years, had a few dates planned for January, and another life had begun for me. My phone was buzzing of texts: my mum, my sisters, my former classmates, former lovers? Adrian??? What Adrian? The bastard? Dream-seller? I smiled.

This was when I decided to delete the numbers of all the former

friends, the fakes, the losers, the wannabees, and the former horrible dates, or so called boyfriends (it was hard to delete Taylor's). My phone had accumulated three years of men's names that I would never ever call again. Some of them were even blocked.

On my way home that night, I deleted all the numbers I didn't need anymore. 2016 was going to be superb! To start the year well, I didn't need any contact with the past! I was going ahead of my life and ready to embrace the new me. Next!

Chapter Forty – Against all winds and tides?

It took me three weeks to call Faisal back. I had left his business card on my desk at the office. After all the celebrations and after getting back to speed with all my emails, I finally called him.

I could barely remember him. I knew he looked exotic and mega hot. I recalled liking the look of him, the way he dressed, and being charmed by his shyness.

I called him on a Thursday just before having a few drinks with the ladies.

“Good evening, Valérie.”

“Oh... How do you know it's me?”

“I don't have the habit of giving my personal number to every woman in love with me in London,” he replied ironically.

I smiled. Well, Faisal didn't sound that shy anymore. We chatted a few minutes and decided to have a drink the following Monday at the Redemption Bar in Notting Hill.

Well, I had a very nice feeling when I hung up with Faisal. I was in love with his voice: deep, sensual, sexy, and confident. I couldn't wait to know more about him.

Monday 6 pm, I didn't know what to wear; I was struggling to pick a dress. The more I was getting close to the time, the speedier my heart was pounding. My car had arrived and I wasn't ready.

I had chosen my outfit with which I wasn't completely confident. Just before leaving the flat, I changed my shoes and opted for my lilac Manolo Blahnik stilettos.

In the car, I completed my makeup. My heart was about to explode in my little body like some child stepped inside it and decided to have a party without my consent. I didn't know how to calm it down.

Date No.1

When I got out of the car, Faisal was standing, waiting for me. He smiled at me and came towards me.

Oh, my... The guy was DDG: drop dead gorgeous.

When I remembered the stubble looking beard, Faisal had, now, a well-trimmed and stylish Lumberjack beard. He was around 6 feet, slim, shoulder length wavy hair, had a natural tan, and amazing hazel expressive eyes that would make the whole North Pole melt. I had an immediate (re)liking for him.

"I had almost forgotten how good looking you were."

"I hadn't. You were in my mind as you are: splendid, chic, and beautiful."

Faisal grabbed my hand, took me to the restaurant. Inside, he took my coat, slid my chair, and asked for the drinks menu. I was quick to realise that the champagne, the wine, and cocktails were missing from the list.

I decided to have a second look and a third look.

"Are you okay?" asked Faisal.

"Well, I just wanted a glass of red wine."

“Oh... Sorry, redemption is a vegetarian restaurant, and they don't serve alcohol. Is it okay with you?”

I was at first horrified, but realised that an alcohol detox wouldn't hurt me after this festive season, and opted for an apple mock-jito and Faisal for a green is the new black.

I understood during the date that Faisal was born in Pakistan and came to London with his family when he was two. He had three big sisters all married with kids, and he was now searching to settle down with someone and have a family of his own.

All his friends were married, engaged, or in a relationship and after dedicating time and passion to his successful finance career, he wanted to give more time to someone special.

It was a sweet date where we both just wanted to check the chemistry. I wanted to know more about Faisal. We decided to have dinner the following Wednesday at one of his best (French) friend's restaurants in Clapham Junction. Faisal insisted he'd come and pick me up on his way there.

Post-date No.1

I really liked Faisal. When I met him, I felt like it had been ages since I had met the great full package: handsome, fantastic manners, successful, and caring. All through our date, Faisal touched my hands like he wanted to reassure me. It worked. I was at ease. I felt comfortable with him. No drama, no surprise, and he filled my heart with laughs and joys. This was all I was looking for at that stage.

Date No.2

That Wednesday evening was surprisingly warm, and after a

very busy day filled with meetings and calls, I couldn't wait to relax and have a laugh with Faisal.

That time I knew exactly what I was wearing and opted for a very sexy black lace fitted jumpsuit from House of CB and dark stilettos from Louboutin. I knew it. I had a look to stop traffic and hopefully Faisal would think the same.

Faisal arrived at around 7:15 pm, he was waiting for me in front of my building. At the sight of me, he took my hand, caressed my face, and kissed me delicately on the lips. He skimmed my lips, but my body shivered as if he'd penetrated his penis into my virgin body, it was such a powerful, sexy kiss. Faisal looked at me, "I couldn't wait for this. Beautiful. Let's go. I can't wait to show you my world." His voice was suave and delicate and again my body vibrated to the sound of his voice.

Faisal opened the door of his car for me and to my biggest surprise, I realised that he was driving. Not that I am so spoiled that I always need a driver, but, just because I hoped that he wouldn't be drunk-driving after our intimate party tonight. I decided not to say anything. We were, now, then both headed towards Clapham Junction at Gastronhome restaurant.

We arrived at Gastronhome and were welcomed by one of the chefs. Damien was amicable and sat us at a very special table. Damien discussed a few minutes of what was apparently business with Faisal and we were given the menu, which by the look of it seemed incredible.

Being French, of course, I opted for the snail, the Dover sole with spinach roll, and a fine selection of cheese. When I asked for the wine menu, Damien looked at me weirdly, and looked questioningly towards Faisal, who replied, "She wants to drink, let's have her some wine. Not a problem at all."

Faisal mentioned, anticipating my question, "I don't drink

alcohol. I am a Muslim." I felt a bit embarrassed that I didn't even guess he was Muslim. I decided painfully to stick with the same drink as his "fizzy water." Faisal insisted, but I refused to order. But, after washing my hands in the bathroom, I had the surprise of seeing a glass of Chablis on my side of the table. I smiled and thanked Faisal.

Again, we had a fantastic time together. Faisal told me about his life but also asked questions about mine. He told me about his family, his strong relationship with his sisters, and his parents, our marriages, our best friends, our activities, and his religion.

After this lavish dinner, we headed toward the Clapham Grand where we enjoyed a jazzy atmosphere. Faisal couldn't stop kissing me all over my face. It was so sweet of him. We stayed a bit more than an hour and Faisal took me home. We stayed in front of my building for 30 minutes kissing passionately and after he gave me a final goodbye kiss, handled an envelope, and disappeared with his driver.

I don't know why I started shaking. I suddenly remembered all the sorts of invites from the Arabs in Knightsbridge with their great slacks of money asking me to join them at their tables, promises of a very happy ending. "Please, please, please... Not money..."

But to my heart's relief, it was a sweet card saying, "I had a fantastic night with you. I'd marry you tomorrow if I were sure it wouldn't scare you off. I already feel the deepest of feelings for you. And can't wait to discover YOUR WORLD."

I smiled. Faisal moved me. He was so special; despite the religious concerns, I had, I wanted to be with him so much and decided to go on another date. I just hadn't had enough of him yet.

Post-date No.2

Bianca adored the look of him but despised the non-drinker part of him and questioned me. "Did he ask you to wash your teeth after your glass of wine? Did he kiss you despite your glass of wine? Did you eat pork? Does he eat pork?" It was too many questions; I couldn't handle it. Camellia was a little bit more relevant but still aghast. "Is his family okay with you being black?" Pakistanis usually don't like mixing. Would you cover up for love?"

We had two dates and everything seemed to be drama already. Upset, I went home and decided to ask the same questions to one of my best friends: my cousin Lara.

My cousin, Lara, was married for nine years with a Muslim and I thought she was the best person to ask questions to. Unfortunately, her answer was, "If I had to do it again, I wouldn't do it and the religion would be my number one no-no." I felt like I'd just been told that I would never eat cheese again: distraught.

Well, I decided to follow my heart, as I firmly believed that everyone has his or her own experience of things and each story is different.

Date No.3

Seriously? Why would I question the religion whilst I felt so much chemistry and I was filled with such magical joy in my soul? This man was magic and enlightened my days every single time I talked to him. He was my favourite notification.

When Faisal came and picked me up that Friday night, the first thing he said to me was, "The more I don't see or talk to you, the more I am feeling like I am slowly drowning. You're addictive. I am slowly falling..." Faisal kissed me. Oh, my... His kisses were

loaded with so much passion, and I could feel an intense sexual heat starting to burn between my legs. I was losing my emotional balance. I wanted him entirely and enormously.

A few minutes later, driven by my body's needs, I pulled Faisal in my building, we were on my stairs, and he suddenly reasoned to me, "This is not how I want to make love with you Valérie. I respect you."

I respected his decision too and we left for Jusu Brothers and had one of those magical dates again. Faisal wanted me meeting his sisters. I was impatient. I wasn't in love yet, but Faisal was the first man to make me forget about Taylor. And this only, was amazing!

I didn't want to compare but Faisal's hands on me, his legs by mine, his kisses, or the sole heat of his body melted me away. I knew I could fall in love.

Again, after this splendid and chic night, Faisal asked me what I wanted to do for my birthday and asked if we could celebrate it together. I was glad he thought about it and accepted his invite. Our party, he would cook Pakistani cuisine for me. I couldn't wait for our next date.

Unfortunately, this date never happened, as two days before, Faisal was crying his tears out. His dad on holiday in Pakistan died in a car crash and he had to rush to Pakistan to formally recognise his death. I was horrified by the news and asked him if I could help in any way. Faisal wanted me at the airport by him. So, on the day of my birthday, three years after my divorce, I was consoling the "new man of my life" over the death of his dad. I tried to find the best words possible to say before his flight. And Faisal left me in London all alone turning 33-year-old.

When Faisal was gone, a part of me was mortified. He'd shared

his pain with me, and then I was carrying that energy with me, and as if my morning hadn't been bad enough, I was stopped by three women in the middle of Heathrow Airport.

"Can we talk to you?" one of them said with a high-pitched voice, grabbing my jacket.

"I don't know you," I replied. "Who are you? How dare you touch me."

"We are Faisal's big sisters, Madame," responded aggressively another one.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, concerned and got my jacket back into place.

"Well, you need to give it up. We don't want a woman like you in our family. Don't ever get in touch with Faisal again."

"Faisal's gone to Pakistan and he's going to meet his future wife. He won't marry you e-ver, ne-ver Madame Frenchie Frog pork-eater," added another one.

"You can just fuck off! You're his past and Aicha his future." They looked at me like they were expecting a response from me. I didn't want to embroil myself into any sort of fight. So, I just walked. I completely ignored the Sisters, which seemed to annoy them even more. I could hear them screaming at me, saying things I couldn't even understand.

Then, I heard heavy steps running after me, and before anything happened, I snarled, "Don't even try to touch me, talk to me, or harass me. How dare you speak to me; I don't even know you. If you keep on following me, I will call the police right now. I am not interested in dealing with women like you. If Faisal has left to get married, so be it. But I don't want to be part of your rude and obscene attitude in the middle of this airport. I don't

hang with people like you.”

They were all shocked and stuck like statues in the middle of Heathrow. I tried my best to keep my tears from falling down my face in front of them. I am not sure I managed. At least, I can't remember. When I thought I'd be embarking in a big fight in the middle of an airport for the first time in my life, they decided to leave me alone and looked at me walking away. I walked as fast as I could and I grabbed a cab disappearing into the M4.

Would I see Faisal again? I liked him, but all this drama after three dates was more than I could handle.

This wasn't a battle I wanted to fight... I would indeed have gone against all the winds, tides, and storms for the right relationship. But not this one, next!

PART 4 - A NEW STORY

Chapter One - Meet Colgate

Faisal didn't stop calling and texting me, which didn't help me to forget about him. I've never picked up nor replied to any of his calls or texts. Basically, I had now a diploma of Online Dating with a major in ghosting and I was using my skills to its pinnacle now. Plus, I wasn't even sure whether he was in London or texting from a secluded house with his new wife in Pakistan. I read his first text, which totally broke my heart to bits. "Valérie, my body was in Pakistan, but my heart was always in London with you. Just thinking about you made my life easier and complete. You are an angel, Valérie, who managed to show me how love feels. I felt so empty without you in my life and I can't wait to kiss you again." I was weak and in pain. I almost replied, but Bianca took my mobile and deleted his number.

Well, of course, I still had some archived texts and WhatsApp, so I still had his phone number somewhere on my phone. But, I firstly just deleted his texts and a few weeks later, I blocked him.

To my biggest happiness, London was surrendering to the warm weather coming from the Caribbean. No winter blues for me that year. Plus, I was a free-spirited entrepreneur and I was enjoying that life: I went skiing in Finland, dancing in Tunisia, and partying in Greece. I was enjoying life to its fullest with my new fellow international jet-setter friends. I was enjoying Corfu with Kristina when Stephanie, still eager for me to join Celest Connections, invited me for lunch in between my travels. "You should let me set you up. I know the perfect person for you. In fact, I know loads of men who are searching for a lady like you, Val," she said.

I liked Stephanie. I wasn't sure about joining Celest Connections yet but I really liked her company and I wanted to befriend with her.

So, a few days later, still a bit jet-lagged from the crazy nights out I had in Corfu, I was getting myself ready to have lunch with Stephanie from Celest Connections. I was in my car heading toward Celest Connections in Knightsbridge.

I was late. Works, Works, works! It'd been like they'd been doing the improvement work on Brompton road since I'd moved to London. It took me like 20 minutes to reach Celest Connections. I could have walked, but those Louboutins were not the strutting type. When I finally reached Celest Connections Agency, Stephanie was still in a meeting. Her PA was standing at attention in front of her office with her coat and her bag ready for our lunch. I was smiling, impressed by her meticulousness, consideration, and professionalism. She was on point! I needed a PA like her.

Stephanie finally got out of her meeting; she was accompanying her guest at the door congratulating him for finding the love of his life through the agency and thanking him for the wedding invite. Well, I wondered if she didn't showcase the scene.

Stephanie came back to us, her PA took the files and pens from the meeting, helped her put her coat on, and gave her the Louis Vuitton bag.

"We're late! Let's go! Car ready?" she questioned.

Her PA nodded, "Waiting for you downstairs."

"Great," she responded.

Stephanie and I got into an empty lift, catching up quickly and

laughing out loud when two gentlemen joined us right when the doors were shutting.

I smiled while Stephanie stopped talking and the elevator went all quiet. It was quite awkward, more so because I felt a sharp and insistent stare at me.

But when we reached the ground floor, I had a quick glance and these intense green eyes along with that bold, strong look were literally stabbing my heart. I tried to recognise and distinguish his physical traits but all went blurred as his smile brightened my face. I was drawn to his lips and his smile; he was dazzling me. Meet Colgate; this guy had a smile to be in their advertisement.

I smiled back, enthralled by the unknown and left the lift before him with Stephanie. Prompted by Stephanie, we ran into our car, which drove us towards the Ivy.

This lunch was fun. Stephanie told me about the variety of men she could introduce me to with the membership; she was even ready to make me pay half of the membership upfront and the other half only if I found the man of my life. Risky bet! I was really tempted. It was a luxury I could afford now. I liked the concept and it worked so well for Camellia, why not? I took Stephanie's documentation and promised to give her a response before spring. I could tell she was disappointed but not discouraged. God, she was tenacious.

Lunch finished, I went back straight home to work. My keys were still in my keyhole when I received a call from Stephanie. I thought, wow, this girl really wants to sell her membership.

"Valérie, what do you think of the idea of going to a blind date?"

"Well Stephanie, I have just told you that I am not sure yet

about joining. Can you just give me a...?"

"Don't worry about this. My pleasure. First introduction for free!"

Stephanie was still talking but I wasn't listening anymore. I was very reluctant to the idea. I also thought it was a trick to force me to join. But Stephanie was adamant and persistent. In doubt, I asked her for a picture. She refused. Well, I wasn't convinced at all and decided to decline the date for now and promised to come back to her if I changed my mind.

This time, she sounded very upset. Well, I've never been to a real blind date and considering my dating history, I wasn't sure of the idea. Well, I thought after a few seconds, if Stephanie calls again, I will accept. What did I have to lose? Could be fun and she's a professional matchmaker, she knows what she's doing...

And, a few minutes later, I had a call from an unknown number, I wondered who this could be.

"Allo?"

"Hi Valérie, should we have that drink tonight?" A man with a deep sexy voice offered.

"Who's this?"

"Your Celest Connections date! Sorry, Stephanie has just given me your mobile number telling that you couldn't wait to hear from me," he expressed in a sarcastic tone.

"I see...." I replied, annoyed and blushing. "Well, I am a bit tired as I..."

He interrupted me. "Great! I'll see you tonight at Zuma. 7pm. Don't be late."

I didn't have the time to add anything else; he was gone.

WTH? Did he understand me??? And what was his name again? Should I call him back and cancel? Oh no! He was smart enough to hide his number. I can't believe this. I was confused yet amused by his audacity. But, I gave Stephanie a call. She didn't pick up and never did that afternoon.

God! How would I recognise him? Who should I ask for? Did he know how I look like? Was it a blind date for both of us? Oh, my... I seriously needed to have a small nap before that date; the nights out in Corfu didn't make me any prettier.

The blind date

Well, my supposed short nap became a long nap. I woke up at 6:15. I couldn't believe I didn't hear my alarm. I had his voice in my mind constantly repeating, "Don't be late." I ordered my cab straight away for 6:50, which should be okay. Zuma was just next-door and we wouldn't need to pass through Brompton Rd. Jumped in the shower. No time for a blow-dry. I needed to pull and put my hair up. I got rid quickly of the frizz. Before I knew it, I was called by my cab, which was waiting downstairs! I would have to put the rest of my makeup on in the cab.

All that stress and running around put extra fatigue in me; I couldn't believe I had a nap. I felt numb. I arrived at 7:03 and as soon as I got into Zuma, I was called by the stranger, "Here!" A man waved at the right-hand side of the bar in the middle of the venue.

The more he was getting closer, the more his face seemed familiar. I was walking very cautiously toward him. I just hoped it wasn't a previous date I couldn't stand.

Closer, Closer, Closer... This smile... And then the smell becoming more and more overwhelming.

Colgate???? This afternoon Colgate?!? Colgate was cocky blind date man with a deep sexy voice. He came to me and welcomed me as if he owned the place. "Hi. You're late," were his first words eyeballing me from head to toe with a penetrating expression that made me want to shiver. I felt transparent as if he could read and see right through me. Shaken but still grounded, I ignored his remark and smiled speechless carried away in the greenness of his eyes. I was just enthralled.

We stared at each other without any word. It wasn't awkward. It wasn't uncomfortable. We needed that pause. Colgate nodded with a smile and added, taking my hand, "Would you follow me?" he asked. I let him lead the way and I couldn't help but look at his derriere. Wow... Really? I thought... The man was fit. Colgate probably sensed my eyes and turned around, I quickly looked elsewhere but blushed purple.

He was really yummy to look at and made all the Zuma young men look like wannabe models.

We arrived at a discreet table and he asked me to have a seat, pulled my chair for me politely, and questioned rather icily, "How are you?"

I could tell he was upset. His eyes... Oh, my... I really felt like he could see me naked. I also felt like he could guess me or read in my mind. He had that certain sharp glaze that would make a liar feel uncomfortable and confess.

"I am fine, thanks. You?"

"I am great now that you're here. Thank you for accepting my date," He teased sarcastically.

I didn't quite have the choice. He smiled and asked me, "What would you like to drink?"

"A Zuma Bellini," I replied.

He ordered our drinks and our date started. Colgate insisted that he wanted to know me better and asked all the questions he could to find out more about me. For the first time in my dating history, I felt like someone was interested in me on a deeper level. He wasn't asking the annoying questions, such as "What do you do?" "Where do you live?" Or "What do you like doing?"

But more questions like "Are you a marriage-minded lady, ready to pack her bags and move into commitment tomorrow? What's the earliest memory you have of yourself as a child?" And "What's your interpretation of your parents' relationship when you were young?"

Colgate's questions made me question my life and myself. This inspired me to ask him even deeper questions and our date was amazingly beautiful, flirty, and emotional. My heart almost got out of my body a couple of times, his words were full of sense, poetry, and wit. It was another dating level I had never been in before. I absolutely loved it and for once, I felt valued.

Colgate was smart, funny, and incredibly handsome. Our date was punctured with silences, which were very intense and magical. I felt like his eyes were making love to me. I felt drawn by his whole body. I felt like I'd known him forever. There was something special in the air that night. I loved it and embraced it without building any wall of protection.

At the end of our date, Colgate called a cab for me. Upon its arrival, he kissed me on the cheek and I tried to hide how aroused I was by this simple kiss. I was home around 10 pm, he called to make sure that I was okay, and planned our next date (a word he wasn't afraid to use) for the following week at the Ivy (again!). I couldn't wait. I still didn't know his real name.

Date No.2

Obviously, I liked the guy. I felt something special about him and couldn't wait to see him again. I hadn't liked a man that much since... I couldn't even tell. I was both sexually and physically attracted to Colgate.

He occupied my mind all week, still mesmerised a week later by his words, his attitude, and his smell. I barely touched him, but I could also remember the softness of his kiss. God! I still didn't know his real name. How could I find out? I decided to give him a call from a private number, hoping to get his voicemail. I used my business phone. It was ringing, ringing, ringing... Colgate picked up. Shit, I hung up. Well, it didn't work this time. I also tried to call Stephanie but probably still scared of my anger, she didn't even pick up. Well, I didn't leave a voicemail and wanted to voice my happiness directly to her.

I was very much into him when we had our second date at the Ivy. I arrived right on time and he was there waiting for me at the table with a bottle of champagne. I was all smiling and so was he. He kissed me on the cheek, helped me with my coat, handed it over to the waiter, pulled my chair, and told me how beautiful I looked. I had to return the compliment.

I don't know why but I sensed that something had changed. Upon our first date, I found him quite calm, confident, and relaxed. This time a weird energy was circulating. Colgate's hands were shaking. I found him stressed yet still charming.

As soon as, I was sat and the waiter served me a glass of champagne, Colgate started talking about his passions: culture, history and geopolitics, and how his trips helped him to understand more of the world and its people. I tried to interrupt but there was no way I could say anything; he was like an old cassette machine playing with a stop button not functioning.

Then, I started to get annoyed. I tried to squeeze a little joke but Colgate was still very into his monologue. The worst was yet to come...

Being a financier, he went on for at least twenty minutes about the type of fund he owned while I zoned out, nodding my head at what I thought and hoped were the appropriate moments.

Colgate behaved as though on a job interview pitching himself. Maybe it was the champagne. I started to think... It was rushed, forceful, and boastful.

As an affectionate move, Colgate tried to touch my hand but hit the bottle of red wine that dropped on my white Alaïa bodi-con dress. OMG! Now, I was angry. I think my heart dropped as well. I looked at him in a fury but when I saw his angelic embarrassed face, I swallowed my anger.

Terribly embarrassed and blushing, Colgate called the waiter to help me out. The waiter brought all his equipment trying to make this stain disappear. No way. The wine was way too good to disappear. Colgate kept on apologising and telling me he'd pay for the dry cleaning.

I was upset. Suddenly, my attitude switched, like all my discontent and frustration of the dinner came out, and I was all boiling ready to explode, yet managed to say calmly to Colgate, "I'm sorry. I have to go."

I put some cash on the table and left without looking back. At the cloakroom, I realised Colgate was following me, begging me to stay and still apologising. I couldn't. I'd had enough.

"Listen," I insisted. "This is fine. I'll dry clean myself. I'm tired and I should go home." I took my jacket and went outside the Ivy in search of a cab.

Colgate was still behind me and again apologised, "I can't let you pay for this. Please let me take care of this dress."

Pissed, I removed my jacket, turned around, and asked him, "Unzip me."

"Excuse me?" he muttered, puzzled.

I looked back at him and I added, "Yes! You want to bring it to the dry cleaner. Take it now! I'll go home in lingerie. Or is it just your way to get to mine tonight?"

He looked at me in terror, powerless, and vexed. For the first time, I discovered a not-so-confident Colgate. And I realised how mean I was being. He was just being nice and polite. When did I forget that these kinds of men exist? I apologised and mentioned that I was tired and that I should probably just go home.

Colgate was powerlessly letting me go. I kissed him quickly on the cheek, jumped in the first cab, and as soon as I sat in, I wanted to cry my heart out. No reason. Just crying. This is what I did in my bed later until I got a phone call around 1 am from Colgate. This guy had the audacity to call me that late. I couldn't believe it. But I picked up.

"Hi Val, Cassius Daniels here." Cassius??!?! That was his name?

"Oh, Hi. Are you okay?"

"I am not okay. I am sorry; this date was a catastrophe."

I couldn't agree more but I abstained myself from saying anything. The call went silent for a second.

"Mmm." I managed to say.

"Well, I want to see you again. I want to re-start date 2. Let's forget about tonight. In fact, we didn't meet tonight. Let's set up our second date tomorrow. Would you do this for me?"

I was smiling. I didn't even have the time to reply before he added, "I've been terrible. So terrible... I am so sorry. I was so excited to see you and wanted to impress you, but I acted like an idiot. I like you a lot, Val. Not only because you're beautiful, but also, I like your personality, the way you speak, your accent, your attitude towards things in life, and all the things you've done. This person you ate with tonight wasn't me; it wasn't who I am. It is not what I stand for. Let's have another date. I promise I won't drop anything on you." I heard him smiling.

"You didn't need to impress me, Cassius, I like you as you are and..." I just stopped talking and thought carefully of the words that I wanted to get out of my mouth.

I just added, "Let's have this second date."

"8pm?"

I nodded, then realised he couldn't see me over the phone. I then gave an audible confirmation.

"I will let you know where during the day. Goodnight, Val."

"Goodnight, Cassius."

I grinned and hung up. Cassius was genuinely nervous and I sincerely wanted to give him a chance. I knew and I felt I wasn't wrong. I knew that he was an interesting man. I felt like he was just himself: honest, passionate, and open on his feelings. I liked that, and for once, I had no doubt our second date would be great.

Date No.2 bis (?)

The Roof Gardens, I wished the date were elsewhere, as I was still haunted by the memories of Taylor. Well, it didn't last long, as Cassius made it magical. We had a drink over a live gig called "A Night of Amy." It was an evening of classic songs from Amy Winehouse performed by a full live band.

When we got on the Roof, the club being fairly packed, Cassius took my hand and led the way to grab our drinks. He was handsome, stylish jeans on, white shirt with a few unattached buttons. I was dying... I could guess his well-defined pectorals.

I couldn't help but watch. God if I were a man, would I stare at a lady's boobs like this? I would certainly do. Pecs are my soft spots...

At first, we were at the front line of the stage. Cassius just behind me, holding my waist, smelt my hair and my neck. He held me so tightly to him that I could feel his penis on my back. This was sensual, arousing, and so romantic.

We then went to the terrace to have a few drinks and cool down a bit. When we came back to the stage, the room was packed. Petite, I couldn't see anything. So, Cassius lifted me up, as lightly as a feather, and rose backwards over the heads of the crowd. Just him lifting me up was so sexy. I was all smiling, Cassius was ducking between my legs, supporting me on his shoulders, his hands holding me tight, firmly yet sensually. I had now a perfect view of the stage and it was incredible...

We left around 10 pm, took a cab to head at Balans to have a late dinner. On our way there, we spoke very vividly and passionately about how good the concert was. We both liked it. The date was flirty and fun. Cassius was back to his usual self to my biggest pleasure.

When we reached Piccadilly Circus, Cassius asked the cab to

stop and I was like, "There's no way I'm going to walk to Balans on Louboutin." He replied, full of cheekiness, "You're not going to walk." When the cab left, Cass lifted me, and I started shouting like a playful kid. "What are you doing?" We were drunk. We were giggling and laughing. Cassius hailed a pedicab and romantically, we headed toward Balans. Upon our arrival at Balans, we were still giggling. I was really enjoying this date. I was happy I gave him a chance.

Over our dinner, Cass took me off-guard and asked what was my relationship history. For the first time of my life, I wasn't ashamed to say that I was a divorcee. I took full accountability of my past. At first, I could tell, Cassius was a bit surprised but it didn't seem to be a no-no for him. This date was more about our life perceptions, our relationships, and our emotions. We had so much in common in terms of values. Now, I understood why Stephanie really wanted to introduce him to me. I didn't want this date to stop and I was longing for his first kiss.

Which unfortunately, didn't happen. What???? Cassius called a cab for me, kissed me on the cheek, and watched me hitting the quiet roads of London toward South Kensington.

Date No.3

Of course, Cassius and I had a third date. Well, in truth it was date 4.

I liked Cass and despite the first version of date 2, I was pretty much smitten. Cass and I would call each other regularly whilst we were both away overseas.

Date 3 took a while to organise. I went to Sweden, Cass went to New York, I came back to London and went to Paris, then Cass left for Geneva, and I went to New York. We hadn't met for at least five weeks and I was missing him like crazy.

I was in Miami and he was in New York when we organised a date in Washington. We both made an effort to meet again. I was glad he did because, at that time, I wasn't sure how much he liked me. The kissing situation didn't help either.

Cassius and I decided to have dinner together at the Blue Duck Tavern and have a drink somewhere downtown. We were obviously both tired from our trips and I had to take a flight back very early in the morning to Miami.

I was so excited that night to see him. We spoke for hours over the phone the night before and I knew that we would kiss that night. When I arrived, Cassius was waiting for me in the hallway. I jumped on him like a kid as soon as I recognised his slim silhouette. I was so happy to see him. I could tell that he was touched by my warm welcome. Cassius kissed me on the cheek. "I missed you, Miss Duval." I smiled and we went to the Chef's table.

Despite the call the night before, we still had a lot to catch up on and we were both very talkative that night. I first liked the fact that Cassius would give me advise on matters that were happening in my new entrepreneurial life, and I also really liked the fact that he asked for my advise or my point of view on different matters affecting his business life.

After the main, I went to the Ladies; I was all smiling and happy. It felt like we'd been together for ages, like an old couple in love. But at the realisation of these thoughts, my body started to shake; I felt dizzy, I wanted to vomit. I couldn't explain what was going on with me. Was it too fast? Was I scared? Was it even normal that after our fourth date, we were talking about our businesses lives like this? I was letting him get into my world and this was scary. I was breaking all my personal rules. I liked him; he knew it. I'd told him.

Sick and panicking, I stayed in the bathroom for 15 minutes. I

was shaking. Now, I was the one nervous. I had to calm down. I wished I had some of Bianca's weed at this stage.

I went back to our table, Cassius stood up like the gentleman he has always been, and I could tell he was worried.

"Are you okay?" he asked, caressing my face. Why was he so cute and perfect? I thought. I wanted to yell, say how much I loved him and how scary all this was but I just replied, "Yes, I am."

But Cassius ordered, "No, you're not. Let's call a cab for you. Where are you staying? We'll catch up in London. You have an early flight tomorrow anyway." But I insisted, "No, no, I am okay. And I want a..." He didn't listen. He paid the bill and in seconds, we were gone. Cassius decided to give me lift and told the chauffeur where to drop me. In the car, the atmosphere was silent. He was caressing my hair and kissing me all over my face. It was sweet. "You'll be okay by tomorrow," he reassured. I felt so safe in his arms. I was feeling way better already.

When we reached my hotel, Cassius's driver opened the door for me. Cassius took my head and looked at me like I was the only one in the world. "Good night, Miss Duval," kissing me on the forehead and disappearing in his car. What!!!!!!!!!! Again????? This wasn't happening. He didn't kiss me on date 4! Why? I ran into my hotel room. I needed a conf call with the ladies.

Inexperienced? Lacking confidence? Shy? Married? Wants an emotional connection and not just sex? He doesn't kiss in public? Gay turning straight, because his family won't approve a gay marriage? Is he looking for a friendship? Is he a romantic? Is he just English? Is he waiting for you to kiss him? Were all the reasons possible and imaginable both Bianca and Camellia managed to give me? I hung up, desperate...

I decided it was time for me to have a talk with him. What were

we doing together? And what if he liked me well enough, but wasn't attracted to me? OMG! I hadn't thought about this.

The only thought of this made me sad. I decided to think that Cassius was a romantic who doesn't kiss in public with the need of an emotional connection before sex. Full stop!

Date No.4

Cass and I decided to go for a brunch on a Sunday. We had our lunch in our local Aubaine in South Kensington.

I still had in mind all the explanations given by the ladies. Cassius was talking to me, but, all I could think of or do, was analysing his attitude and gesture to catch a lie. I looked at his neck to check for any hickey. I looked at his ring finger. Lack of confidence? Nope, I didn't think so. In fact, Cassius could be cocky sometimes.

Gay? Well, I had to ask him. "Are you bi?" I just broke in, whilst he was talking of... Well, I didn't know. "What?" he asked, puzzled by my question coming out of nowhere.

"Valérie, why are you asking this rather weird question?"

"Well, I just wanted to clarify your sexual orientation. Out of curiosity. You don't know if I like women or men or both, for example. Maybe I am pansexual?"

"You are not pansexual, Val. Nor are you Bi. You'll never settle for a woman. You wouldn't survive without our sworn," he said firmly and confidently, looking at me straight in the eyes. I blushed instantly at this remark. God, he was the one supposed to be uncomfortable, not me!

"For your information, I am straight. I adore women," he smiled.

After our brunch, in an impromptu sort of way, we decided to go bowling in All Stars Lanes in Bayswater.

Again, that afternoon was marvellous. We played against each other first and like a gentleman, he let me win. I know he did! I suck at bowling. Bad and clumsy!

We played with another couple and we won because I'd met a woman worse than me. We celebrated with a drink locally and both started walking towards Chelsea.

Cassius was already talking about our next date. I wasn't listening. I was preparing my speech about the non-kissing situation in my mind. Come on! Date 6!!!! It was taking too long.

We arrived in front of my building and I started. "Listen Cass..."

Cassius kissed me. He began with a wet sexy and gentle kiss. He looked at me profoundly and then licked my lips and introduced his tongue to my mouth and this was heaven. He then paused, looked at me right in the eyes. He kissed me more deeply the second time: a real French kiss. His warm arms were caressing my back. His wild green eyes were so sexy. Cassius took my head between both of his hands, looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time, and put his tongue deep into my mouth again. I was enjoying this. Lips against lips, tongue licking my lips, mine licking his, his tongue in my mouth, mine in his. His hand was holding firmly my face and my neck. Oh, my...

A shiver ran all through my body. I wanted to have sex with Cassius right then and to make the matter worse; I could feel on my stomach his mini him awakening. Cassius flashed a hundred-watt Colgate smile. "It's getting late beautiful. I have to go; I'll call you later." Cassius kissed me goodbye, that night

and I couldn't wait to discover his body naked.

Chapter Two - U.S

I was smitten and aroused just by the thought of that night. No one else had ever kissed me like this. Cassius was just doing it right. It was just delicious. I wanted the whole of his body and I had no doubt that the moment both of our bodies merged would be magical. Yet, I didn't know when this moment would happen, as Cassius and I had very busy travelling diaries.

I hadn't seen him for three weeks when I received Faisal's letter. It was an emotional and powerful love declaration. I knew I had to meet him and explain. I couldn't just ghost him like I haven't ever felt something. It was just fair; we had a great connection despite our differences. We could be great friends. But for now, I wanted to arrange my next date with Cassius in New York.

Date No.5 - A date in New York

Cassius picked me up at the airport. When I saw his face, I was all smiling, it wasn't often that the sight of a man caused me to gape, but Cassius was gorgeous! I loved his style, his attitude, and his posture. He had that solid confidence and elegant chicness that I really loved in a man.

He kissed me tenderly, caressing my face, gave my suitcase to the driver behind him, held my hands, and we were ready to go.

Whilst it was my first night in New York, it was Cassius's last and he wanted to see me as much as he could. He asked if I was bothered to stay with him at The Standard hotel. I was very happy, I couldn't wait to share my fluids with him. "Happy" was an understatement, I was over-excited.

We kissed all the way to the hotel. When we arrived in Cassius's suite, he asked me to get ready and left the room surely out of politeness. Yet, I must say, I was somewhat disconcerted. I wasn't expecting this. Cassius was being far too polite. Or was I being used to randy rabbits and other over the top horny dudes? I start to think so...

I just got myself ready. A few minutes later, I heard Cassius coming back to the room. "Are you ready?" he asked benevolently. I nodded, we both looked very elegant, and I was so glad to be with him in New York. It looked all surreal. Even our relationship seemed surreal. We were both living in London, five minutes away from each other, but just managed to date in New York.

A few drinks at Le Bain, Cassius and I were having a fabulous time talking and discovering more about us. He also mentioned that he wanted me to meet his sisters and that they'd love to organise something soon when we were all in London. I couldn't wait.

The whole Cassius experience was amazing. I really liked dating him. I hadn't been introduced formally to a member of a family since I divorced. And for me, it was quite scary and nerve wracking. I was really dating at another level.

We headed toward the Jean-Georges for a romantic meal and as soon as we stepped into the restaurant, we were welcomed like the trendiest couple of Hollywood. The staff was attentive and helpful. Cassius and I sat next to each other.

Cassius made a big smile and started searching his pockets. I was mega nervous, what was he searching for, I thought?

Seriously, if we were not dating just for three months, I would have thought that Cassius was about to propose, but handled a gift. A beautiful necklace from Tiffany's. I was so grateful, yet I

firstly refused to take the gift.

I felt like it was too early in our relationship to offer me such a valuable present, but Cassius insisted. "The only valuable thing in this restaurant right now is you. You're the biggest present I have ever had in my life."

How was such a gentleman not already married? Why was he so nice and caring? I knew that I would have to investigate on his downfalls and weaknesses sooner or later. Before I fell completely in love with him...

After dinner, we decided to get back to the hotel where Cassius and I had a few drinks again and went back to our room around 2 am, mega intoxicated. I went to bed first, waiting impatiently for him to arrive.

Cassius looked at me with his intensive green eyes, which filled my heart with intensity. He laid in the bed beside me, took me in his arms, kissed and licked delicately my neck, turned me around and kissed my back, and my ears passionately. Oh my, I was so aroused; but he murmured, "We have time for this. Let's not rush it. I want it to be a very special moment for both of us."

I was boiling. What the hell??? This man wasn't gay; his cock (not small!) tried to say hello. Was he just being romantic? Was I to blame? I was being too quick and romance was exactly what I was asking for months... So, I just embraced the situation, happy Cassius wasn't a randy rabbit.

I suddenly woke up around 4 am, just to realise that Cassius was still sleeping peacefully next to me, his head on my back. I liked looking at him: his thin pink lips, his tiny pointed nose, his cute freckles, and all his little imperfections that I fondly admired. He was so perfect to me and even his snores were cute. A sudden and weird feeling flooded through my body. I didn't quite recognise it at first, at least not that early morning. I

thought my strong sexual desire for him woke me up. In fact, I was already falling for Cassius. Love was surely and slowly taking hold of me. I somehow knew it and I liked the feel of it. I didn't want to reject my feelings. I didn't want to over think it either. But at least, I was ready to receive Cassius's loving and give him all of mine. At least, that was what I thought...

Date No.6

Back in London. The sky was screaming love, the birds were singing love, and I was falling in love. Cassius was inviting me at his place and wanted me to finally discover a part of him and his world. Still, we had a dress code: cocktail dress attire. I smiled at the read of his texinvite. I was happy we were both back to our London.

6:50 pm, Cassius's driver came to pick me up. I had a short sexy red dress signed Balmain with a cleavage to trigger accidents. I wanted to have sex with him, obviously. I wanted to be overly sexy. Hopefully, his mom wouldn't join the party.

I had never really realised how close Cassius and I were living from each other. Cassius was living literally three and a half minutes away from my place: Palace Gate.

In the building, just in front of Hyde Park, the concierge directed me to the top floor. As soon as the lift opened up, I heard "Welcome to the most beautiful lady I ever met. I so glad you're here", were Cassius's first words, which were accompanied by a smile that melted my bones. Cassius was drop dead gorgeous wearing a navy tux, with a fitted white shirt. The suit fits him like a glove, showing his rather sexy derriere and the jacket clung smoothly to his slim shoulders.

"Hello, you! Thank you for the invite. Here's a present for you."

"Oh, this is so sweet of you. Thank you, honey. Please, come

in," he said, kissing me tenderly with his soft and wet lips.

Cassius's taste was off the charts. I entered a massive living room decorated with contemporary arts that I loved, which opened to the chef's kitchen and dining room with an unobstructed view over Hyde Park. My breath was taken away by the view. I couldn't stop but stare. The whole atmosphere was magical. Cassius was delicately kissing me on the neck and I knew we would make love that night.

Some lounge music was playing very discreetly in the background. The atmosphere was very romantic. Cassius had set the table with a few scented candles and a beautiful set of flowers in front of this amazing view.

"Have a seat, pretty."

It was a beautiful evening of spring. Cassius had never been that sexy and my arousal for him was at his highest. He'd better sex me up tonight, I thought, or I'd be very upset.

We ate salmon salad, scallop tartare with smoked cauliflower, and cauliflower cream. Everything was beautifully presented. I really enjoyed the meal. After a glass of champagne and two bottles of wine, Cassius stood up, changed the music, took my hand, dragged me in his warm arms where I could smell his delicious perfume, and we started dancing slowly. He was caressing my face with rather ravenous eyes. My whole body was throbbing. I was surrendering, helpless and trapped. I wanted him so much.

"You have the softest skin I have ever touched. I can't stop caressing and kissing it. You're like a piece of velvet. In fact, you are my piece of velvet, you are my very own Velvet, dear Valérie Duval." Here I was nicknamed. I found it very cute and at least I wouldn't be called babe. I smiled and then laughed. It was so over the top. My heart was in pain. It has never

experienced so much romance for such a long time.

“What is going on with you, young lady?”

“All this romance, it’s...”

“All this romance is?” he questioned, his eyes full of sparkles.

“I’m not use to it anymore,” I responded timidly.

“Come on, Velvet! You’re French and Parisian. Paris, the city of love, the quintessence of romance, you should be falling in love like crazy for me right now.”

It’s already the case, I thought, but I responded, “Well, I think London changed me and...”

“I want this French flame back in you.” He interrupted.

I smiled and added, “Thank you Cassius. I sincerely like all this. I am really grateful for all the experiences and feelings this relationship procured in me. I genuinely appreciate the way you treat me and respect me, and the feelings I have now, I haven’t felt this way for a very long time. I like you for this. I am loving all this too much, you have no idea.”

Cassius looked at me with a strong burning desire in his eyes and asked, “What do you want now, Velvet?”

I looked at the whole of him. “I want you, Cassius. I want the whole of you, right now...”

I could tell that these words resonated in him as he started kissing me without concession everywhere and anywhere. The more he was kissing me, the more intimate his caresses and touches were. I responded to every tiny caress, every hot touch from his fingers, every lick; my nipples stiffened against his shirt. I was on fire; the man was driving me completely wild...

Cassius suddenly lifted me up and backed me up against the wall. This was mega sexy and a spasm of ecstasy went all through my body. I wanted this man so much. He got rid of my dress in half a second, discovering my very naked hard nipples.

I quickly unbuttoned his shirt all the way down to his navel. I admired his fantastic torso and started kissing him all over. Cassius took the control back, holding both of my hands against the wall, firmly kissing, licking, and sucking my nipples. I started feeling his package, caressing the top of his trousers.

I got rid of his trousers and his boxers. I'd never thought I'd say this one-day of a man, but I am not afraid to say that he had a penis to die for. A beautiful, perfectly sized penis, which penetrated me in such a powerful way that I groaned, having my whole body shaken up.

I could feel the energy and the intensity of his penis all through my body; he was rocking it in and out of me in perfect control. Cassius was breathing in my ears and I was so enthralled that a few tears of pleasure enveloped my face. I almost fainted of ecstasy; it was so intense, so passionate. I wanted it to last forever. Cassius romantically got rid of my tears with delicate kisses that moved me from heart to toe.

Then, after so much excitement and teasing, the block of pressure in our bodies suddenly dissolved when Cassius moaned in such a powerful way that both of our orgasms shivered all through our minds, our souls, and our bodies. It was a mind-shattering moment.

Despite our groans, Cassius kept on moving inside me, looking at me like he was discovering me for the first time. I felt the same. I wondered from which planet Cassius was brought to Earth.

This was the best sex I ever had: intense, powerful, fusional, communicative... I was free falling...

When I was expecting Cassius to come and relax in my arms or at least near me, he quickly and firmly asked me to turn around on my stomach.

Puzzled, I, nonetheless positioned myself, a bit confused. I didn't know what to think. Was he happy? Upset?

Then, I felt his tongue going down my body, followed by his fingertips caressing my back and tracing my spine. I also felt a few drops falling down my derriere... The man was sweating... I felt like he was analysing and exploring every part of my body. Emotional.

After this erotic massage session, we had sex all night. I slept when the sun was rising and I woke up with Cassius by his window, staring at me. I reached him out all naked, caressed his face, and lay on top of him, kissing him all over. I will always remember that night as one of the most magical we ever had.

Smile

I was thinking of Cassius's perfect penis when Camellia disturbed my train of thought. "How is it going with Cassius, Val?"

"Amazing," I said, startled out of my thoughts.

"Do you think you found the love of your life, beauty?" Camellia was now developing a new subtle English posh accent probably inherited from her fiancé.

"I don't know. And what do we call the love of our life? I don't know him that well yet but all I can say is that he's perfect. At least, he is as perfect as I want him to be. He ticks all the boxes

of my definition of perfection.”

“Have you discussed an exclusive relationship with him? Do you want to get married? Live together? Or?”

“Camellia,” I interrupted. “I’ve just met his penis yesterday! I am not going to ask him all these questions now. The man will run away.”

“I think this is something you need to talk about as soon as possible.”

“In truth, Camellia, I am not even sure I want to get married again.”

“What? You can’t be serious, Valérie.”

“I am. As long as we’re happy together.”

“And you’ll have children outside a marriage.”

“And?”

“I don’t believe you,” said a puzzled Camellia. “Plus, I’m sure Cassius is traditional and gentlemanly enough to propose in due time. Millennials? Feminism? Fuck all these! Anyhow, you’d better invite him to my wedding.”

“I will certainly do Cam and I can’t wait for you to meet him.”

We both smiled and continued talking about the past and all the adventures we’d been through since we had been in London. Camellia and I were now celebrating six years of friendship. I love her so much.

I had a smile when I went back home. Next week would be amazing. I was meeting Cassius’s siblings for the first time the following Friday. Our relationship was reaching another level.

Though, I wasn't sure whether we were dating or were in a relationship. This was something I needed to discuss with the expert in chief, Bianca, before having a proper discussion with Cassius.

The only thing not too pleasant to occur: I was meeting Faisal on Wednesday; explanation and official breaking up time. I was not sure what I was about to say. I would have to explain the sisters' situation as well. But I was going to be fair, the sisters' situation just helped me understand a thing I had already known: we were culturally not compatible. This is something I would have to explain with the subtlest words in the world. What a challenge!

The order

When I called Faisal that Wednesday morning to clarify where we were meeting, I was surprised he booked a table at Cecconi's in Mayfair. I felt a bit guilty that he picked such a nice restaurant for me to break up with him. I had tried to break up over the phone but he didn't want to hear anything. With all that ghosting and disappearing online, I totally forgot how a real break up must happen.

Maybe I should just text him and block him again. Well, he will come back to mine and leave a thousand of letters or roses like he did last Saturday.

When I came back home from my magical night with Cassius that Sunday morning, I was delivered hundreds of roses from a secret admirer. I guessed it was Faisal. It made total sense after his love letter.

That Wednesday was a beautiful day. I could enjoy the sunshine through my windows and Cassius's call put me in a smiling mood. Yet I was still stressing out about this whole breaking up/explanation time with Faisal.

13h45, I was heading to Cecconi's; the closer I got to the restaurant, the more anxious I became. I tried to be relatively calm and thought that it was just natural for him to have my side of the story. Plus, if he were to make a scandal or beg me to stay with him, I would just play the Cassius's card. "I am in love with someone else," This should be very effective.

I arrived at the Cecconi's right on time and spotted Faisal straight away. Wow, I'd almost forgotten how this man looked amazingly handsome. He smiled at me, which reassured me. I tried to kiss him on the cheeks but he gave me his lips, which made the whole situation very awkward for me. I probably blushed. "You're cheeky," I said.

"I just love you," he replied.

This wasn't a great start. I sat down noticing a glass of the only French rosé available in this Italian restaurant. I smiled, "Faisal, you didn't need..."

I didn't have time to end my sentence when a familiar voice broke in. "The world is small, here's my lovely Valérie. Hi Velvet, how are you?"

God, this couldn't be more awkward, "Euh... Well, I am great, thanks."

Cassius stood there looking at both of us. I wasn't sure what to say, as I wasn't sure what he saw. Did he see Faisal's cheeky kiss? I wondered, mortified.

It went all-quiet. Well, Faisal looked at Cassius. Cassius looked at Faisal. Cassius looked at me. Faisal looked at me.

"Well, sorry. Cassius this is Faisal. Faisal, Cassius," I finally let out.

"Well, okay guys. I leave you to what you were doing," surmised Cassius rather coldly.

I could sense some anger in his voice. I had never heard him speak with this sort of tone, which made me very nervous.

Cassius gone, Faisal naturally demanded, "What was that?"

I didn't have time to respond that Cassius came back to me, "Valérie, may I talk to you for a minute?" he commanded. "Certainly."

I stood up and Cassius mimicked my French accent, "This is Cassiussee?"

"Euh... I believe that is your name," I responded stupidly.

"Stop taking me like a fool! You're introducing me to your friend as a *Cassius*. *Who's that guy?* Is not a friend, isn't he?"

"Euh... no... I mean not quite yet ..."

"Is it a date?"

"No... Not really," I stuttered.

"It's a yes or no question, Valérie. Are you on a date?"

"I am not, I was about to break up with him."

"What?!!! You're breaking up with a guy dressed in a sexy Louis Vuitton dress with a glass of rosé at the Cecconi's? Is it a joke? Couldn't you just give him a call?"

"Euh... Well, I didn't think he deserved a breakup call," I said, voice full of guilt, not sure what to add or say.

Cassius was thinking. He was fuming but I also knew he was nervous. I could almost hear his heart pounding through his rib cage. I felt like he would explode like a tornado without a weather-warning siren.

Cassius finally broke the uncomfortable silence. "You know what? It's 14h15 right now. You have 15 minutes to break up with this man and come back here. I won't tolerate one more second. I swear to God!" he growled, pointing me out, "You'd better be here by then or you will regret me coming to this table and telling you off."

I shivered. I was upset but listened like a robot. I was in damage limitation mode. I liked him too much to lose him over Faisal. I can't even recall what I said to Faisal that afternoon but I was back after five minutes. Faisal never called me back after that rather humiliating afternoon.

Cassius and I went to his car and the atmosphere was awkward for the first few minutes. I didn't quite know what to say or do. We didn't kiss. The situation was bizarre. I can't really say that it was our first fight, as it wasn't. He ordered, I listened, and I regretted the whole situation already. I just decided to go quiet.

"How are you?" Cassius finally verbalised.

"Not proud."

"He will survive."

"How do you know?"

"I know," he said, all smiling and kissing me all over. "I missed you."

God, I was relieved.

"I missed you too."

"Don't ever do this. We're not dating anymore. You're mine. I am yours."

"Glad to discover this today..."

"Where are you going?" he smiled.

"Shopping. Harrods maybe or Liberty."

"Okay, I'll drop you at Harrods. It's on my way."

"Great! Thanks Amour."

"I like when you're calling me Amour, Velvet."

"I like when you're calling me Velvet."

"Here Harrods, Mrs Duval!" said the driver.

"Thank you."

"Here's for you," Cassius handed me a credit card.

"What is this?" I looked at him horrified.

"For your shopping..."

"No thanks, I can't accept this. I can buy myself stuff."

"Sorry, you'll be buying myself stuff," he said cheekily.

"What!? Okay, what do you want?" I asked, laughing out loud.

"Some sexy lingerie for my girlfriend. Pin code: your year of birth. Have fun! Love you!" He said, leaving me on Harrods'

pavement putting his credit card in my bag.

Did I hear him well? I love you? Really... Cassius loves me. I looked at his car going away to his office disappearing in the profundity of Belgravia. Oh my, I thought...

Meet the Colgates!

Cassius had three big sisters. I'd never met them, but, I had already spoken with them over the phone as they organised this little party taking into account everyone's preferences, and I couldn't wait to meet them.

My first thought at the news was: God, I would have to convince four women (if I include the mom) that I was good enough for Cassius. He's the only man of the family and the youngest. But, when the Sisters called me for the first time asking what I liked and discussing about what we should do for our first "family" date, I was excited, they seemed to have the same sort of relationship I had with my own sisters. I couldn't wait to meet them.

I was meeting Chelsea, Catherine, and Charlotte. I didn't know how they looked like but I already knew their personality and I felt particularly close to Chelsea and Catherine. The women had a hard time picking between a chic place and somewhere more casual.

The day before the encounter, Charlotte called me and confirmed that we would meet at The Phene at 18h00, a very elegant place in Chelsea as the Sisters described. I couldn't wait.

5:45, I received a call from Cassius's assistant advising me that Cassius would be late for the dinner, as he was still in a meeting. She apologised on his behalf and was sending the driver to pick me up.

I wasn't nervous before the call but at the sound of this announcement, I became very, very anxious. I wished Cassius had introduced me properly to his sisters rather than me having to go alone and meet them.

Well, in this occasion, I was lucky to have spoken to them a few

times before the party. I supposed I didn't have the choice and I had to swallow my anxiety and meet the Colgates without the baby youngest.

I opted for a mega sexy chic style that night, which I regretted as soon as I got into the car. I had a mid-length Boulezar dress with a very deep cleavage bought in Berlin. I felt uncomfortable as soon as I Googled The Phene and realised it looked sooooo casual. I wanted to die.

I hesitated to ask to be driven back home but I remembered Chelsea saying that she was searching for a new husband, so she was about to abhor a porn chic style. Well that's it! I would go like this and embrace my sexy chic style!

When, I arrived at the Phene, the girls were all there, and I had the warmest welcome I could possibly have. They all Colgate-smiled at me, hugged, and kissed me, complimenting my dress and my style. Oh my, they all had that advertisement sort of smile in the family. I couldn't help but joke about it.

I had an instant love and liking for them and I also realised that Chelsea had her own definition of porn chic style. I felt overdressed but I was fine with it.

Two hours later and probably two bottles of champagne down, still no Cassius. He didn't even reply at my texts. The alcohol had taken control of most of our brains; we were hungry and ready to order food.

I decided to freshen up in the ladies and call Cassius in the toilet to know at least if he was going to make it.

On my way to the bathroom, I realised that Paris St. Germain (my French football team!) was playing against Chelsea. They were winning, to my biggest contentment.

"Vive Rabiot!" I couldn't help and react.

"Valérie?" I heard. This was Régis, a former French colleague of mine. What a surprise! We started chatting up quickly about life and his friends joined us, introducing themselves.

We started talking about the progress of the match when I suddenly heard Cassius.

"What the hell are you doing?" He had that commanding tone.

"Oh..."

"Please, meet R..."

"I don't care who these people are."

"Okay, well, Régis, it was nice seeing you."

"It was delightful. Hope to see you soon, we should really catch up properly."

"Bye Valérie!", said Régis's friends.

"You couldn't be ruder than that. That was embarrassing, Cassius."

"Excuse me!?!? You're the one with the rude attitude. People are waiting for you downstairs and you are here chatting up men. Are you kidding?"

"It's been five minutes, Cassius."

"I don't think so! And where are you going now?"

"To the ladies."

"And you haven't been yet?!?!?!? Is it a joke?"

"It's not a joke and I am going right now."

"I couldn't believe Cassius was following me. I could smell alcohol, so I knew he was drunk."

"Are you coming in the ladies with me?" I asked sarcastically.

"It's not funny. It is not a time to joke."

In the ladies, I couldn't help but laugh... Cassius was probably being jealous and this made me smile. I went out of the restroom and he was waiting for me outside.

"Wow, we missed an additional 30 minutes of dinner." Cassius said annoyingly.

"Well, you missed two hours. You won."

"I don't think you can talk right now. I was working hard for us whilst you were chatting up some ugly dudes."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, you heard me."

I decided to do my best not to get into trouble and didn't want to have our first real fight in front of his Sisters. I just shut up, hoping Cassius would calm down over the dinner.

That was just a dream...

"Well, what were you doing, guys?" asked Catherine.

"Ask Valérie..." whined Cassius.

"Have you been naughty, guys?" Chelsea asked with a naughty

smile.

I blushed purple.

"I wish," said Cassius. "Valérie was just chatting up some idiots."

"I am afraid I was catching up with a former colleague."

"Well, when I arrived, all the chaps were salivating on your cleavage."

"Okay... ", I said, keeping my composure and not adding anything else.

"No, it's not okay. My sisters and I were waiting for you here and you were chatting up some bizarre dudes. Plus, what is it with this dress? Are we going to the Cannes Festival tonight?"

"Cassius, what's going on with you?" asked a rather embarrassed Chelsea.

"I am upset because my girlfriend is chatting up some numbskulls whilst I am worrying for her. I thought she was sick."

"Cassius, I didn't know you'd arrived."

"So now, you're saying that you didn't care about letting my sisters wait."

"This is ridiculous... Cassius, stop it! You're making Val uncomfortable," commanded Charlotte.

"You can be such an idiot sometimes," added Catherine.

I was boiling of embarrassment and anger.

"Valérie, please don't listen to him," insisted Chelsea, holding my hand and rightly feeling that I was about to leave.

"You know what," I added, "I think I should go home," I apologised.

"Nooooo! Please Valérie, stay," implored the sisters.

"You're not going anywhere, I am afraid. The girls organised this for you. How rude are you going to be tonight, Miss Paris de Cannes?" Cassius ordered without even looking at me.

"I am out of here!" I objected with a rather calm, polite, and controlled anger.

I was enveloped with rage and was trying my best to contain it and not make a scene. But I couldn't stay any longer listening to Cassius belittling me in front of his sisters. I stood up but he took my arms firmly. I was shocked.

"You are staying right here, young lady." Cassius hissed, unfazed by the ladies trying to reason with him.

"Excuse me? I don't think so. Stop it Cassius. I don't know if it's a joke for you but I am not impressed."

"Stop it Cassius!" yelled Chelsea. "You are embarrassing all of us."

"Val is embarrassing all of us, not me!" Cassius shouted back.

I sat down. But tricked him and stood up immediately, running towards the cloakroom. Cassius ran after me.

"What do you think you're doing here?" he said, slightly more discreetly. He clearly didn't want everybody to hear our fight.

"I am leaving!" I exploded.

"You are not going anywhere," he said, holding my hand again.

"Oh, sure I am! And I am also done with you!" I shrilled, not really thinking about it.

"What?" a desperate look invaded Cassius's once confident eyes.

"Is it your conception of the couple you want to have? Is it how you respect your girlfriend? Humiliating me in front of your sisters? Is this your conception of a team? Commanding me? Giving me orders like I am your servant or your soldier? I am not one of your employees, Cassius! If you were really upset with me, you could have waited till we got home."

"I am..."

"You are nothing! You humiliated me, belittled me, and insulted me in front of your sisters that I am meeting for the first time! Is it how you see our couple? This is not what I want! I didn't sign up for this."

"I love you! "

"What?"

"I love you. I am sorry and I love you. I was jealous. I was jealous of those men salivating at you."

"This is not going to work if this is how you respond to..."

"I was being an idiot! I just don't know what to do with all these feelings... I am just so in love with you, it's scary."

"You're drunk!" I quavered, not knowing another way to respond.

"I am not drunk! I am just chemically off-balanced," he added, with a cheeky child smile.

I looked at him, smiling.

"And what? I can't be drunk and in love?"

"You can certainly be in love and drunk."

"More seriously, Velvet. I will always do my best to make you happy. But I am only human; I am going to screw up probably a couple of times. I won't always handle things as you would or I should. I will probably use the wrong words, will have the wrong attitude, and will probably have the wrong approach. But my heart, Velvet, will always be in the right place."

"Are we back to eat? We are starving..." said Catherine, smiling and winking at me. Cassius looked at me in desperation.

"Yes, we are," I responded smiling.

The rest of the night was amazing, ended up being one of the best evenings I had with the Colgates. We laughed, ate, drank, shared funny stories, and childhood memories. Ever since, The Colgates' ladies are one of my dearest friends.

The Magic

The magic of our relationship seemed unbreakable. Cassius and I were getting closer by the minute. Though, we were both traveling all over the world, we always found a way to meet somewhere. We called each other so often that we felt so close no matter how far we were from each other.

I stopped counting the dates. We were now in a relationship

and shared some magical moments together.

Apart, we were talking to each other until the sun came up; we couldn't stop talking and always had something to talk about. I remembered when we exchanged our keys. At first it was by convenience, but it became much more than that. Cassius and I were traveling so much and spending a few weeks apart that simply looking at our iPhone's pictures were not enough anymore to fill our absences. We needed to feel. Feel each other. So, we started to sleep at each other's place when one of us wasn't in London. I would sleep in Cassius's bed whilst he'd be away. I would smell his clothes, his perfume, sleep in his t-shirts, or use his favourite perfume. It became one of our romantic routines. The feel of his positive energy in his flat boosted me for weeks helping me to wait for him.

I liked coming back from a trip to mine and smelling his presence in my sheets, even the head-print on my cushion would make me smile and make the pain of having him away more bearable.

Cassius and I created our universe, our "US." Our very own United Souls bubble. We felt so emotionally connected that we came with this concept that we were probably two love souls reunited from another lifetime.

Cassius could always guess when I was unwell. It was frightening. I didn't need to call him and tell him. He could feel me from a billion miles.

Our connection was telepathic. Reunited, we were the strongest and happiest couple ever. For once in my life, I felt like someone was healthily making me lose my mind. I was happy to follow him blindly, fall for him, and couldn't wait to tell him.

Chapter Three – The Emotional Clash: *Je t'aime moi, non plus*

I was in the Eurostar, getting back from Paris. It has been a long holiday. I stayed two weeks with my family and I was missing Cassius like crazy.

We quickly built our *US world* together with our own friends. We had our preferred restaurants, our preferred cocktail bars. I hosted a party at his with his family and my two dearest and closest friends. They all loved him.

Cassius and I had our first real getaway together in the Cotswolds, which was beautiful and romantic. I was in heaven with him and the scariest thing was that everything was perfect.

We had a few calls whilst I was in Paris but being with my family is worse than babysitting an infant; they all required my full attention. It was so hard to escape my family's grip. I could tell, Cassius was annoyed when my sisters, parents, or nieces constantly interrupted our conversation, but he seemed happy that I enjoyed my time with my family.

I was in my Eurostar back to London, and as soon as I crossed the border between France and England, I received a call from Cassius.

"Hi Velvet! How are you?"

"Hello, I am fine, and you?"

"I can't wait to see you. Are you still in the train now?"

"Yes, I am."

"What time does it get to London?"

"Around 16:45 I think. Why?"

"Should I come and pick you up? I will have a nice dinner ready for you."

"Well, I will need to go home first."

"Why do you need to go home?"

"To rest a little, have a mini nap and..."

"You can do that at mine."

God, I didn't really know how to tell him that after being surrounded by all my family, I wanted some time alone. At least one hour. Was it too much to ask?

"I know you probably feel like you want to be on your own now." This guy was amazing! A real mind reader! But added, "I am being completely selfish now. I've been missing you. And I'll promise, I will leave you alone. I will prepare a hot bath for you and let you relax with magazines whilst I cook us dinner."

"Very tempting, Amour. You know how to please a woman. But may I let you know?"

"Okay. See you tonight."

I absolutely needed to go home. I had no makeup, I was dressed like Madonna in Holiday's video clip (By the way it's the only video where she's not sexy), and my hair was a mess, my curls had no definition and looked like overcooked pastas: sluggish,

plain, and flat. A few minutes later, Cassius chased me, but I didn't reply. I would just go home. Period.

When I arrived at Saint Pancras' Station, I couldn't stop but laugh when I saw Cassius waiting for me. Well, I knew he'd be here anyway even if I didn't reply to his texts. Nonetheless, I was happy and jumped on him.

"Oh, God I missed you," I admitted.

"Not as much as I did," Cassius bounced back. "Don't let me wait that long again. It really hurts."

We kissed passionately and I immediately didn't regret having him there. I was so happy to see him. My curls would have to wait.

Then, Cassius handled my suitcase to his driver, still loyal to his post, kissed my hand, and we headed to the car. We sat at the back seat with the privacy divider on, and Cassius and I didn't stop kissing. We missed each other so much. I bet if I'd had a dress, we would have had sex on those back seats.

When we arrived to his flat, the candles and lights were all romantically set. There were amaryllises and sunflowers waiting for me all over. I gave Cassius a big smile. He prepared my bath and my magazines and left me alone for a little while. Then he joined me, massaging my back, and we were kissing again. I knew he was making an effort to leave me alone.

Then, we had dinner and jumped at each other. In fact, I jumped on him. "Cassius, I was dreaming of your penis for days." He looked at me rather horny, flattered, and enthralled. I took control that night. Oh God, I missed that man...

I woke up that morning with an uncomfortable feeling. I probably had a bad dream but then I realised that at 6am, I was alone in the bed. I knew something was wrong. I started to get

the man. Cassius was upset and I could anticipate fire. But why?

I reached the kitchen, spying on him setting up the table for breakfast. I could tell by his body language and abrupt movements that he was getting ready for some serious talk with me. I went back to bed and tried to think very hard of what Cassius could be upset on.

This was probably related to Paris and me being too busy to pick up the phone. Or maybe last night?

Well, I wished I could escape and let him calm down and come later today. But there was no way. I just took my courage in both hands and I got into the kitchen.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said with a tone that would have dropped the North Pole's temperature.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, why? Do you have something to tell me?"

"Euuuu, not really. What do you mean?"

"I'm asking if you've forgotten to tell me anything."

"I don't think so, Cassius."

"Okay," he icily responded.

"But you clearly think that I've forgotten something..."

"Just asking..."

I hated his short responses and he knew it.

"Why are you up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep," he suddenly looked at me with so much love. I was so confused.

"Ok-ay."

"Yes ok-ay, do you want to eat or drink something?"

"I'll just go with a coffee, please."

"Certainly."

What did I do? Or say??? I thought. I knew I would find out. As Cassius always speaks out when he wants. When he thinks it's right. I should wait. Though, I was getting very impatient.

After serving my coffee, with a voice full of tension, Cassius started opening up. "Would you live with me?"

Wow, that was unexpected. My heart started pounding so fast; I thought I was having a cardiac arrest. I didn't know what to say and the heavy atmosphere in the room wasn't helping.

I wasn't sure I was ready for this. But it seemed so important to him that I replied, "I would certainly live with you, Amour." He smiled.

I added, "Under two conditions." I paused, looking at him very tensed.

"Conditions?" he questioned, clearly anxious.

"First, I just don't want us to ever go to bed angry to each other. We must communicate until the matter is sorted out. I don't

want to be like these couples that hold a grudge on each other and sleep on it. Never ever... Would you promise this? Whatever happens? Even an early flight or an early meeting shouldn't be a reason to stop sorting things out. U.S. is our priority and should always be over everything else."

This was the first smile I'd seen on his face that morning.

"I totally agree. The second?" he asked, his eyes full of malice.

"I really want to live with you, Cassius. But I would love to start slowly; like sleeping at yours every other week, for example."

Cassius stared, took a long breath, clenched his jaw, adding, "It's already what you're doing."

"No, it's not," I interrupted.

"Yes, it is. What are you doing now, then?"

"Cassius, I usually sleep at yours 1/2 nights."

"And how is it different with your *every other week*?"

"I'll sleep and stay a full week full time with you. Or if you want, I'll stay two weeks and have one week at mine. It's just that..."

"Fine," Cassius broke in coldly.

I wasn't expecting this at all. And we went quiet. For the first time since we'd been together, I felt really uncomfortable with the silence. I knew Cassius was getting elsewhere.

"Is there something you're forgetting to tell me?"

Whilst I tranquilly had my coffee on the table, my brain went through a lot of flashback. What could he be possibly being

upset about? I'd just come back from Paris; Cassius was all-nice until we had sex. He seemed to enjoy it. But this morning, his mood just switched to the worse.

Now, Cassius totally changed the subject and went:

"We need to go in Paris together."

At first, I thought, "Need?" But I simply replied, as I could guess this was *The* sensitive matter.

"Of course, Cassius, I'll be more than happy to introduce you to my little Paris. In fact, I can't wait for us to go. Next weekend?"

"And meet your parents?"

A mild panic gripped my whole body. I tried my best to make it sound as positive as possible, as I knew I was walking on cracking eggs.

"Well Cassius, I can't wait to introduce you to my parents but it will have to wait a little bit. For now, my sisters can't wait to meet you and we could arrange things for next weekend."

"And could you please give me a valid reason why I can't meet your parents just right now?"

"Cassius, it has to be very serious between us."

"Because you think it's not. We created a world together, Val. *US*, our relationship is amazing. I am not sure what you are trying to do, but, I won't let you destroy *US*. I am not sure what you are looking for. Now, I'm starting to think that I'm not sure I'm the right man for you."

At the sound of these words, my heart started to shrink.

"That's not what I meant. What I meant is that I can't introduce a boyfriend, per se, to my parents. It needs to be more serious than..."

Cassius went mental, exploded, hitting his cup of coffee on the table, which hot drops missed me by a millimetre, and shouted at me. "When are you going to take this relationship seriously, Valérie? Who am I for you? A date? A fling?"

"Are you crazy or what? You almost burnt me with your *putain de coffee*. You seriously need to calm down Cassius. I am taking this relationship seriously."

"Oh, no, you are certainly not! You don't want to live with me, you don't want to introduce me to your parents and your reason is that our relationship is not serious enough for your parents. I'm looking for a marriage-minded woman, and you don't seem to have any interest in that..."

"Cassius let me explain. Please, listen to me."

"Do you love me, Valérie?" He interrupted.

I had now a blockage.

"Did you hear me? Do you love me?" Cassius repeated in desperation.

"I do..." I managed to mumble.

"You do what?"

I froze. Nothing could get out of my mouth. I so wanted to say something. I wished I could, but not a sound was getting out of me. I was looking at him, desperately searching for his understanding.

"And you can't even say," Cassius said, his voice full of pain that instantly crushed my heart.

I think I had shy tears coming up off my eyes and managed to mutter, "I swear I do."

"I don't think you understand how much I love you. How much I want to be with you and spend the rest of my life with you. Why did you put us into this, if you didn't seriously think of this too? I feel like you gave me everything and you are taking it back from me now. I thought we wanted the same things, Valérie."

"I do, Cassius."

"Oh, for god's sake, stop saying I do every time!" he shouted.

The room went all-quiet.

"I think I should go, Cassius."

"What? We haven't finished to talk," he yelled.

I walked towards his room to get my suitcase.

"Val, you can't just walk away. We are two in this relationship! It's not only about you, or me, it's about us. What is good for us? We were supposed to be a team and to communicate."

"Cassius, I just need a small break."

"But I love you."

"I do too," I implored him to believe me.

"Then for God's sake, say it!" Cassius shouted, shaking my whole body.

"Say it now! *I do* is not enough Valérie. Say it! Open up!"

"Why do you always have to push me?" I was mad with fury now.

"Push you???"

"Yes, you always want to push me, Cassius. Or force me whatever word you want to use! You forced our first date, you forced me to break up with Faisal in five seconds whilst I really appreciated the guy and wanted him as a friend. Now you're pushing me to live with you, to introduce my parents to you, and to tell that I love you!?!?! Why do I always have to listen to you, why can't I make it on my own terms and timing?"

"I just want to..."

"Well, today you decided that at 6h51 in the morning on Saturday 15th of July I should say that I love you. Again, an order! It's not all about you Cassius, as you said. It's also about me and us! I want to do things on my own pace and staying here with you pushing me to say these words won't help!"

Seeing his face in so much pain made me lower my voice and calm down. I just muttered, "I think I should go home before we hurt each other too much."

"Are you telling me you never wanted any of these things...? You wanted to stay with that Faisal? You didn't like our first date?"

"That is not what I said."

"Oh yes, that is exactly what you said."

"Look, you don't listen. I am gone now. I think we should talk

about it later today when our hearts calm down ...”

I left the bedroom and went to his hallway to get my suitcase and go. But Cassius grabbed my hand and backed me up against the wall and he said challengingly, “Do you know how many women out there would love to be with me right now?”

“Well, why don’t you marry one of them and I’ll marry that Faisal in this case. Hum?”

Cassius’s face was murderous; he hit the wall with such a force that his Banksy fell on the floor.

Our hearts were emotional messes. It had to stop. We both needed a break from this shit before it went too far. I freed myself from his hands. Weakened by what I’d just said, Cassius could only add, “You’re not going anywhere. We need to finish this talk.”

“Cassius, not under these conditions. I really don’t feel well.”

“Valérie, you’re not leaving.”

I just couldn’t, I couldn’t stay. I wanted to cry, to punch him, to slap myself. My brain was seriously damaged. I needed to process what had just happened.

“I am sorry, I can’t and don’t want to talk right now. Please, Cassius.”

“This is complete nonsense. You’re just finding a way to escape. Why is it so hard for you to express your feelings?”

I was ready to go. The flat went all-quiet. Cassius was just looking at me with tears locked in his eyes.

I headed towards the door and this is when he told me, “It’s

now or never.”

“What?”

He added, voice full of pain, a pain that I could sense all through my body. “If you don’t want to talk right now. Don’t ever come back here. You need to move in or move on, and there won’t be any other chance.”

I was shocked; his words were excruciatingly painful.

I dropped my bag and went towards him, pointing him with raising my right eyebrow. “You’re blackmailing me! Again Cassius, you are pushing me.”

He didn’t reply, challenging me by the eye. I left his flat, banging the door, yelling, “Voilà, I am gone!” I think I heard him groaning but maybe it was just my imagination.

I ran as fast as I could, I got into a cab, put my sunglasses on to hide my tears.

At home, I checked my phone. Cassius didn’t call. I went back to sleep and cried for the rest of the day, switching off any sort of communication whatsoever.

I couldn’t believe that I failed U.S and myself. What was wrong with me?

Chapter Four - The Bright Side

When Cassius broke up with me, I switched off my personal phone for two weeks. I am sure I cried enough tears to fill the Thames. I was working intensively and was hibernating socially. I was devastated to the point that I wouldn't even go out. What was I supposed to do with these daily reminders of Cassius all over Chelsea? The Botanist, Coco Momo, Zuma, Eclipse, Albert's, SKC, and so on...

We were and went all over. I almost thought of moving back to France. Even my mattress, my sheets, and my sofa were #TeamCassius, keeping his scents for ages! It was so painful I had to sleep in the guest room and sometimes on my sofa.

My new routine: eat, work, eat, work, eat, work, sleep, and maybe travel. My night outs were my 30-second dates with my take-away driver from Deliveroo. I wasn't in the mood to listen to Camellia's joy of planning her wedding either. I was hiding myself from civilisation, shunning everyone.

But after a few days, I started being very moody and decided it was time to go out to reconnect with the real world.

After a three-month break, I started jogging again in Hyde Park, preferably very early and on the northwestern corner of Kensington Gardens to be sure not to bump into my dearest Chelsea friends, such as Charlotte, Catherine, Bianca, Cassius, or anyone else. I gave up my flashy purple Nike jogging gear for some black Adidas outfit.

And, I stupidly ran with sunglasses on. Well, Knightsbridge is surely the only place in the world where you can wear

sunglasses on a rainy morning. Who cares? We are potentially all famous.

But despite the eyewear, I had the luck to stumble upon Cassius's associate who recognised me despite the sunglasses.

"Valérie! How are you? You're not with Cassius???"

"Not really, I am afraid."

"Oh, so, where is he? I thought he was taking a well-overdue holiday with you. He hasn't been in the office for a while. Are you guys okay?"

"Not really. We are going through sticky patches," I said, trying to minimise the situation and not willing to say too much.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, I have to go, Mike. It was nice seeing you," I said, my voice full of tears.

"Val! What happened? You seem upset."

"Mike, we broke up like weeks ago," I said, running back home, and not waiting to hear what he had to say.

I had never run that quickly since I started jogging. Tears all over my face, I decided it was time for a Ladies' Night.

Talking to the ladies didn't improve my situation. I was still miserable but my heart felt lighter. Well, if I couldn't tell Cassius that I loved him, it clearly meant that I didn't. And if he couldn't wait, well it just meant we weren't made for each other. Even if what we had was close to perfection.

Well, this was the only thing the ladies could tell to cheer me up. It helped until I found the bright side of life.

The bright side of life

I was ending my jog when a man came and said with the brightest and widest honest smile I had ever seen in my life “You’re back! I missed you. I was hoping to see you again one day.”

“Have we met before?”

“Well, I’ve been watching you running from my window up there,” he said, pointing at a building facing Hyde Park.

“You were my ray of light when I was very sick and grumpy. It was fun to see you dancing and running in the park. You made my mornings.”

I smiled. At least, I was making others smile, I thought.

“Sorry to hear that you were sick. Are you okay now?”

“Well yes, I am walking! I have fully regained the use of my legs, and I am here talking with you. I dreamt of that day for months!”

Meet Sonny Bright, Sonny is a former lawyer turned serial entrepreneur and investor. He had a car crash and was hibernating at his flat with re-education sessions every morning. Nobody believed he would walk again!

“I wanted to walk just to see you for real. I always wondered what sort of music was making you dance that crazy at 6am. You’re so energetic!”

I laughed out loud and I handled my headphones with my music on.

“Oh, Calvin! I should have guessed!” he said, starting to dance

with his sticks that I had just noticed.

After a short walk together, we both sat in the middle of Hyde Park. I was surely taking the risk of being seen by Cassius. But now, I couldn't care less. Someone managed to make me smile and to show me the bright side of life.

Sonny was well-built, around 6-foot, muscly, dark blond hair, green eyes with a bambino face. He looked like those little dolly faces. I couldn't tell whether he was younger or older than me. He had that sort of face that made you smile, very welcoming and engaging. I couldn't believe he was grumpy for a few months. I felt very grateful and blessed that I was the reason why he wanted to walk again. I forced myself to be in a better mood and see life in a different light.

I spent the morning with Sonny and understood that he now owned a luxury and lifestyle spa resort brand that operates all over Europe. He divorced three years ago from an unfaithful wife.

Since, Sonny admitted, being angry, frustrated, and hating women, he didn't even want a relationship anymore and didn't even care. Then, he had that car crash, first started hating life, and then sitting on a wheelchair the whole day, he started to observe people through his windows and appreciate the simple things in life like eating, laughing, and smiling.

And seeing me full of joy every morning (obviously, I was still with Cassius), Sonny decided that it was time to fight. To fight for what he wanted. So, Sonny dreamt about walking again and having a normal life. He dreamt of meeting me and laughing with me. Sonny was visualising himself being healthy and walking. I was moved, blessed, and felt grateful that I helped him through this process. We shared our life stories, Pierre, his ex-wife, my funny dates, and Cassius.

"You still love him."

"Excuse me? Who?"

"You love Cassius."

"I don't know. Maybe? But, he wanted everything yesterday," I just managed to respond.

"This is an excuse, Valérie. You're just terrified."

"Of what? I am not. If it was the case, I wouldn't even have started this relationship."

"Really? Were you not comfortable that both of you were travelling all around the world? You didn't have to see him that often... No full weekends together... Not too real... Just saying..."

Sonny looked at me all smiling and added, "Think carefully about all your dodgy dating stories that happened these last couple of years. You always had an excuse to break up. Then you had the perfect man that you didn't need to see every day. Perfect scenario! Until, he asked you to move in and that terrified you. To the point, you couldn't even tell him that you loved him. If you had told him, you knew you were signing in for a fully committed relationship. **Full-time**. So, you just froze unconsciously, probably. But you love him."

I looked at him puzzled, not sure what to say. But Sonny was smart and he knew how to handle the situation, he just left. "Well, I have to go sweetie. It was nice seeing you for real. We should have a friendly coffee one of these days."

"Oh, pleasure," I responded, still thinking of what he'd just said.

"Here's my business card. Call me any time if you want to speak. And thank you, Valérie, for being who you are. You

filled my heart with joy.”

“You filled my heart with light today,” I smiled.

“Good bye!”

“Good bye Mister Bright!”

What Sonny said to me haunted me all week. I agreed to some extent, but I wasn’t terrified to live with Cassius, I just wanted to enjoy a bit of freedom before being with him.

Plus, it’s been a tradition in my family, you don’t meet the “Boyfriend” but the “Fiancé.” It’s not only traditional; it’s cultural. It’s non-negotiable.

I wanted to call Cassius so much. But I refrained myself. I didn’t even know what I would say if he picked up.

The friendship

Sonny and I became really good friends. I liked him very much and he knew how to pep me up. He gave up his stick and we were speed walking together in Hyde Park, and had our occasional coffee from time to time. Sonny went back into dating and was asking me for advice, which was funny considering my situation.

This time, Sonny was the one with funny stories to tell me about women. He shared extraordinary moments together. I was happy Sonny put his life back together.

I also had a pampering day with the ladies to one of his spas and it was amazing.

“Valérie, how come he didn’t call you yet? It’s been like three months.” Camellia asked.

"Who?" Bianca asked.

"Cassius." she retorted.

"We don't care about him."

"I don't know." I replied sadly.

"Have you called him?"

"Don't call him!" barked Bianca.

"Why, he's the man of her life." said tenderly Camellia.

"I haven't called him and I won't."

"How do you know? He's a selfish uptight joke."

"Please don't say that, Bianca." I begged.

"Well, as long as you are not going back into the dating pool, I will be politely insulting him."

"I am not ready."

"See, she loves him."

"He crushed her heart."

"She probably crushed his heart too."

"I don't think so. He could have accepted the deal."

"Please, ladies... I don't want to speak about Cassius."

"What about Sonny? He seemed like a good guy."

"He's dating other women and I know all his secrets and he knows all mine."

"Yeurk!" Bianca snapped.

"Well, this is great. Maybe you should go for Sonny."

"Thanks Camellia for your very wise advice. But I think I am okay."

"Surely, this Stephanie can't really match people. She should have known you were not ready."

"Don't put this on her."

"Well, Val pretended she was ready! Whilst she wasn't!"

"Okay ladies, I am done..."

"Valérie!!!! Come on!" Bianca and Camellia urged.

This was the end of our spa session.

On my way home, I was seeing Cassius everywhere and remembered of him everywhere. Everything in this neighbourhood reminded me of him. I don't know why that night, it was overwhelming. I wanted to call him so bad and listen to his voice but instead I called Sonny. "I miss him," I said crying.

"Oh, Valérie. What happened? Are you okay? Do you want to have a chat?"

"No, I don't want to bother you."

"It's okay. Don't worry! I just want you to be happy. You helped me somehow to be a better person so I can help a friend now."

Twenty minutes later, Sonny and I were both having drinks at the Gaucho in our Little Chelsea neighbourhood. Weirdly, I wasn't confessing on Cassius but having fun with him. He had that aptitude to make a joke at everything."

We laughed (again) at the sound of our funny dates, recounted the most embarrassing dating situations we'd had.

After a terrible date, I left the restaurant just to realise that we were going towards the same direction and taking the same bus. I never used public transportation again, I said laughing out loud.

Sonny was like, once I had been to the cinema with a lady and there were the most graphic sexual scenes I had ever seen in my life. I am sure all the men had an erect penis and this included me. The girl looked at me stated angrily, "It's not going to happen."

I was laughing out loud. This was exactly what I needed: fun. Sonny was my fun! He was hilarious. He always knew what to say to make me laugh. I felt like he knew me.

"Valérie, I know now that you faked your tears over the phone. Admit it, you just wanted to see me."

"Well, somehow I suppose it worked!" I joked.

"Well, you don't need to do this! Just call me!" he said, caressing my face.

I looked at Sonny a bit confused. He knew I still loved Cassius but for some reason, he kissed me.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have. I don't know... I think I should go and I am also very aware that you're still in love with C..." I kissed

him back. We grabbed a cab and we didn't stop kissing; our lips were glued together. We arrived in his building and finally managed to get to his flat.

In seconds, I was naked in his bed, and Sonny was playing with my body. Kissing and licking every part of it. I couldn't wait for him to make love to me. It happened in the most impromptu moment. I groaned at the surprise of his penis getting into me. His kisses became more passionate, deeper, and wetter. We exchanged intense glances all through the intercourse. We were two friends making love and it was warm, sensual, and tremendous.

We both moaned and came at the same time. The room went all quiet, but Sonny broke the silence, "What are we now? What does this make us?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, staring the ceiling.

"I want you, Valérie. Not as a friend, but as my girlfriend."

My heart was going out of my body.

"I know you are still in love with Cassius and I am happy to wait," Sonny said, leaning towards me and caressing my face. "I know you'll love me one day and sooner than later."

"I like you, Sonny. Please go easy with me, as I am not even sure where I am now, and I surely don't want to hurt you."

"Valérie, time always heals... I have all the time in the world for you."

Date No.1 - Official

After three months of friendship, and after a night of love, Sonny and I were officially dating.

Unfortunately, I left London for New York the following day but Sonny and I were talking every day and we always had something to say to each other. I really liked the fact that we were friends beforehand and that we didn't have any secrets from each other. It was a really nice feeling. We were both very open to our thoughts, feelings, and impressions. It made the whole relationship very honest.

When I came back from New York, we had our first real date. Sonny invited me to Ormer Mayfair. I was so happy to go there, as I always wanted to go but never had the opportunity.

Ormer Mayfair is a very intimate restaurant. It's small with a few tables, which makes the atmosphere very romantic. We had a fantastic dinner experience where the food was amazing, the food presentation, and the attention to detail together were outstanding. It became one of my favourite places for business dinner since then.

After a few drinks and conversing about his family and mine, Sonny and I went back to his place and we made love in front of his magnificent view on Hyde Park on his very comfy carpet. I realised that I really liked Sonny and that I wanted to share so much with him. But, I wasn't sure I would be able to love him like he'd like me to. The only thought of hurting his feelings and destroying our friendship made me cry.

"Are you okay?"

"I am liking this too much, but I am also so scared to disappoint you."

"This is impossible. You've done so much for me already, you have no idea." Sonny kissed me and made love to me romantically and sensually. We fell asleep in each other's hands on his very comfortable carpet.

Date No.2 – The Getaway

To celebrate our union, Sonny invited me where his family originally came from: Chester. Indeed, Sonny and I had known each other for four months and we wanted to have our first little getaway together.

Sonny hired a convertible for the day and we headed toward Chester.

Chester was a very cute little Roman town located in the northwest of England. It is a classic, contemporary city bursting with 2000 years of history and spectacular shopping in and around town.

Sonny and I spent the whole day there, holding hands and kissing. It was great to get away from Chelsea. We were walking around romantically; we had lunch at the Edgar's Riverside Eating and an early dinner at Simon Radley at The Chester Grosvenor.

On our way back to mine, we stopped in the middle of nowhere and had a quick fling surrounded by flowers, bees, trees, herbs, and funny natural smells. It was fun and so not prepared; I loved it! I was really starting to like Sonny. He managed to make me feel alive again. And he was giving so much love to me... I was spoiled.

The offer

When, I woke up at mine that morning, Sonny wasn't in my bed anymore. I wasn't quite sure what happened. I knew he was flying later that morning but I wasn't expecting him to desert the bed this way. Plus, for some reason when I woke up that morning, I could smell Cassius perfume. It was so strong that I wondered if he wasn't here whilst I was away.

Maybe it was time to get my keys back and give his back too. There was no *U.S* anymore and he didn't need to come to mine to feel and smell me. *Merde*, I thought, maybe Sonny realised the smell and knew and guessed about my little world with Cassius.

I was just about to get dressed and get a coffee at Paul, when I realised that my own keys had disappeared.

I started searching around and heard the door. "Hey, sleeping beauty!" It was Sonny. He came back with his suitcase and some food. "Here, our breakfast." I couldn't help but have a huge smile on my face.

"Coffee, croissants, chouquettes from Paul Boulangerie, everything for the most beautiful French lady I have known," he said, charmingly kissing me.

"You're so sweet."

"Well, you deserve to be treated this well, Queenie! Are you sure you don't want to come with me at this opening in Edinburg?"

"I wish I could. But I can't postpone my exhibition opening. It's impossible, *mon chéri*."

"Never mind. Next time. I will need to assist to one of your openings and you need to do the same with me. We should never again pick the same dates. We need to support each other."

"Certainly! I totally agree! I am going to miss you so much!"

"Three days apart, do you think you can manage?" Sonny asked, feeding me with a chouquette.

"I will try," I laughed. "Of course, I will". I smile confidently.

We had breakfast and we made love again. We made love like it was the last time, exploring all the parts of both of our bodies. There were no parts I didn't know of him. I sensed his powerful penis deep inside me, shaking up my body. We didn't moan or groan that time but roared. It was that intense.

It was time for Sonny to go. In fact, he was almost late. His car was waiting for 15 minutes. He couldn't stop kissing me.

"Okay, I shall go now."

"Okay," I replied sadly.

"Don't look at me like that. It breaks my heart, Queenie."

"I am going to miss you."

"Me too. Bye, I am late!"

Sonny left and two minutes later, I heard someone knocking at my door. I opened and it was he: "Did I say I am going to miss you?"

"Yes, and you'd better go, you're going to miss your flight!" I smiled.

"Well, at least I could stay a few additional hours with you!"

"Well, you won't be able to check all the infrastructure of the spa before the opening."

"You're right. I am gone. Bye queenie."

"Bye!"

A minute later, I heard someone knocking at my door again. I was laughing out loud.

"Come on, Sonny!"

"I know, I know! What is it with you that I can't leave? Come with me."

"You know I can't!"

"Oh, yes surely. I will miss you like hell!"

"Me too!!!!"

"Okay. I love you."

We went both quiet. Unfortunately, those were three words I was way too familiar to hear, but not to say those days.

"Don't worry. I will wait until you are ready. I am not expecting anything and any word from you now. I just want you to be you. But I also want you to know that I love you. Have a look underneath your pillow; there is something for you. Good bye Queenie."

"I am going to miss you too," I managed to say.

Sonny made his brightest smile. And he was gone. I ran immediately into my room, looked below my pillow, and I discovered a little present with a love card.

*To my little Queen,
By the time you'll read this letter, I will be probably gone for
Edinburgh.*

*I love you! I have never loved anyone more than you. I am so happy I
am re-discovering these feelings with you.*

I don't want to rush anything, as we both know where our love is

*coming from. Please do accept this necklace along with this ring.
The day you'll put that ring on, I'll know you'll be forever mine.
I will wait a day, a month, a year, and a decade for you all because I
know that the love I'll get will be immensurable. Thank you for making
me who I am today. I love you so much. Sonny x*

My heart was melting. Again, I heard someone knocking at my door.

“Sonny, Sonny, Sonny!!!”

I opened the door. “You’re really going to... ” My heart almost jumped out of my body.

"Is it your new greeting?" said that sexy deep voice, which was Cassius's.

"Oh... Hi." I froze a few seconds.

"Can we talk? Inside?"

I opened the door, hoping that Sonny hadn't left anything compromising. But then, I realised that I wasn't doing anything bad. I wasn't with Cassius anymore.

"How are you?"

"Fine, you?"

"Not well."

"Sorry to hear this."

"I am sorry."

"It's okay, Cassius. You don't need to be sorry."

I wanted him out of my place ASAP.

"No, I need to apologise and explain..."

"Seriously, Cassius. I am fine; you don't need to..."

"Can I at least speak? Are you going to let me talk to you?" He shouted.

"No, I am not!!!" I shouted back and added, "Are you kidding me, Cassius? You are coming here to shout at me like this! It's been more than three months now. What do you want?"

He looked at me challenged and yelled back, "I want you! I

want you back, Velvet!!”

“Excuse me?!?!? Don’t Velvet me, please!!!! Three months later, Cassius? What? You’ve been fucking around and now you’re realising that your girlfriend wasn’t that bad after all?”

“Excuse me! Shut up and stop sulking like a spoiled child! What the hell are you talking about? I’ve been in Switzerland for three months! You cut me off, like six months were nothing to you! Stoop so low blocking my number like a teen. Really Valérie? We had a relationship!!! It wasn’t a fling! Does it mean anything to you? Was it that bad you can’t even give a shit? What did I do to deserve such a treatment? And I reckon, you are the one fucking around now. I’ve been thinking about you all the time? ALL THE TIME!!!! Whilst you HAVE BEEN fucking around...”

Tears rolled down my face. I didn’t have anything to say.

“Please don’t... Please don’t cry Velvet. I just want us to discuss calmly like adults.”

“You broke up with me Cassius!” I whined.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I was upset. I love you and I wanted to be with you, and I am ready to wait for you. I have been selfish. I didn’t realise that you were married before and you probably want to be careful this time. I was driven by my emotions. Let’s talk, give me a chance, and let’s have dinner...”

I didn’t know what to do, what to think, what to say; but my body, my skin, my heart were all shaking, all shivering, all responding to his call of love. I put aside my brain and accepted, stupidly saying, “We’re just having dinner, aren’t we?”

He smiled, “I get that is a yes.”

“Yes.”

I realised how weak I was for him... I just needed to see him to want him. His posture, his energy, I was lecherous for him and literally crawling.

"Great, how's Thursday for you?"

Sonny was coming back Thursday. I clearly couldn't do this to him.

"Wednesday will work better."

"Pencilled! Zuma?" he said, all smiling.

"Cool"

"Come on, give me a smile. Zuma is our place!"

I gave him a shy smile.

"Grand. Don't be late. Can't wait. Still love you."

Cassius was gone but his Amouage perfume was still there. What did I agree to? And why? I thought.

Rainy dinner

The morning of that dinner, I wanted to cancel. I wasn't quite sure why I was having this dinner and my ladies weren't sure either.

Plus, when I heard myself lying to Sonny, I knew I was doing something wrong. I'd never lied to him. We never had any secret from each other. And I knew he knew I was lying.

I arrived at Zuma at 7pm with an Uber. I didn't want to have my driver to give me a judgmental or disapproving look whilst driving me there. When I announced myself to the host, I was

weirdly told that Cassius wasn't there yet. It was quite surprising, as he's never late and he arranged the dinner. Well, I asked for a glass of champagne and started working on my mobile, responding to emails. 20 minutes later, still no Cassius.

Now, I was getting aghast and called him, I went straight on the voicemail. Ten minutes later, I called again: voicemail. I left a voicemail.

45 minutes later, I decided to ask for the bill and called his office. His new assistant picked up and responded that he wouldn't take any call this afternoon.

"Are you joking me???? I have been waiting for 45 minutes for him and you're telling me that he's at the office working and doesn't want to be bothered! Put him on the phone now!" I shouted. "Or I swear to god, you won't have a job anymore by tomorrow!" This whole situation made me physically sick with fury.

The assistant put me on hold. When she came back to me she just said, "I am sorry, Miss Duval, Cassius is on his way to you."

"Since when?"

"Well, ..." she hesitated.

I hang up on her; I paid the bill and called a Gett. I needed to calm down, I was mega upset, I asked for a cigarette to a stranger and smoked it behind the building.

I was so upset, so sad, and so disappointed. I started crying, tears enveloping my face, quickly hidden in the sky's tears. It was pouring. I didn't care, I stayed under the rain crying.

"You're smoking?????" said Cassius, disgusted.

Like a kid, I quickly threw the cigarette away, shouting, "What is happening with you? Is it payback time or something? Did you want to prove something here? What the hell?" I yelled with the highest pitched voice I had ever had.

"Please Valérie. I am sorry, I didn't see..."

"I am so done with you..." I interrupted.

Cassius went on his knees his deep green doe-eyed stared and begged me to forgive him and to dine with him. I went on my knees as well and hugged him in elation. We stayed like this for a few minutes, all quiet without a word being said.

Next thing I knew, I was at his place drying up my clothes. I had now removed my white Alaïa body con dress for a velvet robe.

Cassius ordered some Chinese and we had both calmed down by then, and were laughing at the few pictures of us that Cassius had kept on his phone.

"Wow, I never realised we had so much pictures."

"I know! Did you keep any?"

"Yes, of course I have. Why would I ever have thought of deleting them?"

He smiled. A silence invaded the room.

I looked at him and confessed, "I thought I would never come back here again."

"Don't... Please, it was a horrible misunderstanding," he whispered. I approached my face more and more. Cassius's skin brushed mine and I lost control, I couldn't help but kiss him.

But Cassius stopped me. "Valérie... What are we? I can't have you kissing me and giving me false hopes. You need to tell me what you want."

This was the big problem now. What did I want?
"I don't know."

"You need to know, and the sooner the better."

My body wanted him so much but Cassius was right. I needed to calm down but knowing we were both naked under those bathrobes didn't help. So, whilst Cassius went to the bathroom, I put my dress back on.

Cassius came back to the living room, "Oh, you're dressed!"

"Well, yes... I will be leaving soon."

He made a rueful smile, "Okay."

"There you go! Chocolate fondant and vanilla and almond ice cream for Madame!"

"Thank you!"

"Thanks Snowflakes of Kensington!"

Cassius didn't let me have my ice cream alone. He fed me. I was slightly confused but appreciated the romance. Then, he put ice cream all around my lips and he started licking it.

"What are you doing, Cassius?"

"I am feeding myself on your lips," he said with the sexiest tone of voice ever.

Again, Cassius put some ice cream on my lips and this time kissed me hard. Big time! I wanted him and he clearly wanted me now. I didn't even have the time to say anything, then he was kissing me, more and more, everywhere and anywhere. The next thing I recalled was his penis penetrating me.

"Cassius? Cassius? What are you doing?"

I was now cheating on Sonny ... My heart was a mess.

"I love you. I missed you."

"Stop it."

"What?"

"Stop it! now."

"Why?"

"What the hell is going on with you????"

Cassius looked at me like I'd just woken him up.

"Have you noticed this necklace? I am seeing someone. You made me come here! You first rejecting me! Then, you're kissing me and sexing me up! What the hell!??? What is it you want? All this..."

"Listen, the only reason..."

"Stop it! I don't want to know anything right now! I don't know why I came here! And what I was expecting."

"Valérie, please listen..."

"There's no Valérie, Cassius... I feel bad, very bad... All this is

bad... I am hurting someone who doesn't deserve it."

Cassius looked at me like he couldn't care less, "So, what? You're giving up on us for a stranger... Really???"

"Good bye Cassius," I banged the door.

I grabbed a cab.

"Are you okay?" asked the driver.

"I am fine. Thanks. Please drop me here, I need to walk a little."

The cab dropped me like three blocks away and I walked in Louboutin. It was not raining anymore but I opened my umbrella to hide from the wind. When I reached my building, opened the main door, Sonny was waiting for me with a rose bouquet on my stairs. I couldn't even feel guiltier.

He looked at me with a disappointing look but nonetheless, took me in his arms. He was trying his best to keep a face, "I know you needed a closure..."

We went back at mine and made love all night. My heart was really in a messy place.

Chapter Five - The Choice

How did I manage to turn a seemingly promising romantic life into a soap opera?

I felt bad... So, bad... I was sick, I ate, I puked, I ate, I puked. I tried to work a little. I was smoking like a chimney to stop the puking. Thank god we're talking electronic cigarettes.

I mused on everything. All those dates, all those men who made me who I am today. All those mistakes I made through the last years. I was walking in a circle around my flat. It'd been the same thing for a week.

Cassius? Sonny? Cassius? Sonny? What if I made a mistake? It'd been a very emotional week. I knew I lost him forever.

I sat on the floor, back on my main door, and got lost in my thoughts. A few minutes later, I felt like someone was behind my door. I tried to listen. I felt like the person was listening too.

Then, my door opened ... At first, I was aiming for a knife but that smell, I knew that smell... He still had the keys.

"Hi," I said with a shy voice.

"Hi; you're here?"

"I live here." I smiled, glad to see him. Wow, even in his stubble-shaved face he still looked amazingly hot.

"Well, I am so sorry, I wasn't expecting you here. For some reason, I was just... I didn't come to fight, neither to argue or

anything... I just wanted to feel... I just wanted to sit and feel U.S. for the last time..."

I knew what he wanted to do. I froze looking at his handsome face.

"May I come in, I swear, I won't bother you, I won't speak... I would like to feel... And I'll leave."

His words barely made sense to me but I wanted to look at him anyway. So, I opened the door, more puzzled than ever but also disappointed. I thought he wanted me back...

Cassius firstly looked at my view for a few minutes. Then he sat on my sofa without saying a word. I sat in front of him waiting for him to talk.

Well, this had become the most embarrassing moment in my life. Cassius stared at me silently, analysing all my body, my face, my imperfections, my features, with a look to melt Iceland.

It was intense. His energy was enveloping my body and pulling me towards him but I couldn't move, I couldn't say a word; I was just hypnotised. This guy had such an effect on me. But, I didn't know why he was here and I couldn't move. I needed a sign.

Cassius finally broke the silence, came to me, and asked with a voice full of tears: "I lost, didn't I?"

I murmured and smiled, "I picked you, Cassius."

He looked at me with his intense piercing green eyes full of hope. "What?"

I took his head between my hands and repeated, "I chose you Cassius; you're the man of my life."

He stared at me his eyes full of love. I felt contentment seep all through his body, and he started kissing me all over. "I love you so much, Valérie."

Love isn't safe. I took a risk breaking up with my best friend.

Love is not logical. Love is not fair. I feared and I doubted myself.

Love is not explainable.

Love is scarily intense, intensively magical, and magically sexy.

I had all this with Cassius and I wanted him for the rest of my life. I couldn't forget the feeling I had when I first saw him at Zuma. I knew it was him, as I guessed our lives through his eyes and I never ever stopped dreaming about him.

A New Chapter

Cassius and I were back together for three weeks when we decided to go on our first holiday together. I didn't really stay at his place yet, as he travelled to Geneva and New York.

I couldn't wait to have these holidays, as we hadn't had sex since our reunion and I was starting to be very frustrated.

We decided to go in Italy, warm, cultural, and relaxing. Yachting and boating from Cap Ferrat, France to Portofino, Italy. We were both very enthusiastic and couldn't wait.

Cassius and I still got on well. We had this amazing connection where we both knew when one of us wasn't well or was upset.

We had fun, we laughed, we danced, we romanced the holiday, we drank, zero downside but *his refusal* to have sex with me.

And I couldn't comprehend why he was acting this way.

I didn't want to ruin our first holiday together. So, I decided to talk about it after the holiday but before moving in with him, as clearly, I wasn't in search of a platonic relationship. And, I needed to consult the ladies before I moved in.

"Are you kidding? Why? You should have spoken to him during the holiday. You're going to be ruining your whole life!!!" said Bianca dramatically.

"Well, Val, maybe it's payback for Sonny?"

"That's what I thought! Oh, my God!!!! How long for? Do you think?"

"He's a jerk! If he acts this way... then don't move in with him... You can't afford to live with a second sexually-confused-man."

"If Cassius wants to punish you, it will probably be half of the time you spent with Sonny."

"What???? An additional month??? I can't do this."

"You clearly can't do this!"

"Maybe he thinks I am soiled by Sonny. Knowing that I have made love with another man is probably a below-the-belt deflation for him. I don't know how I would have reacted if I knew he had slept with another woman. I can't move in with him without talking about it."

"Soiled? Come on? You're not a virgin, either!!!" prompted Bianca.

"When are you moving in?" worried Camellia.

"Tomorrow, and what if he's waiting for me to say I love you?"

"I wouldn't move in at all. I would go right now and talk. He's emotionally blackmailing you... This is manipulative and evil. You can't be with such a man," advised Bianca.

"Oh my... Cassius is not evil..." defended Camellia.

"Good luck beauty! Your choice..." said Bianca, rolling her eyes.

I woke up sick that morning. I loved Cassius so much, he was the best sex I had ever had, and now I against all my will, had to go back to drama stage again. Why was he doing this to me?

I stayed at home all day and didn't even reply to his text. < I can't wait to have you here. You won't ever want to go back to yours. Everything's ready for your wellbeing. > Ending the text with a smiling emoji.

Well, I wanted to reply, my wellbeing includes a minimum of sex. Can we agree and put this on a contract?

When I arrived at Cassius's, he welcomed me with a very big and warm hug and a kiss on my forehead. I thought, this is getting worse. Now, I didn't even have a proper kiss.

"Come, have a look at this," Cassius said enthusiastically.

His housekeeper took my suitcase but I asked her not to tidy up my stuff yet in a low voice. She looked at me confused and asked loudly, "Are you not staying for two weeks?"

God! I thought.

"I will do it myself. "

No, no, Madame, it's my job. You take care of Mister, me take care of housekeeping." I blushed at the sound of those words. Well, so be it.

I followed Cassius into his kitchen and went straight on. "Cassius, can we talk?"

"No, I don't want to talk." He looked at me with such intensity that I felt like he was killing me with his eyes.

"I think we should."

He came towards me and started unbuttoning my dress.

"I am so not in the mood for talking right now," he said, getting rid of my G-string.

"Matilda! You're off," he shouted, caressing my crotch.

"You sure Mister? Not finish yet."

"I am sure Matilda; I urgently need to take care of Madame."

By the sound of it, Matilda ran home as fast as she could.

We had sex all night. I never knew why Cassius was on strike but I didn't care. I had the whole of him now.

One very sunny morning, I woke up around 6am with Stevie Wonder in my mind... I was happy... I was in love. I loved him! I started to shout and jump all around, I love you Cassius! I love you! I love him! I had to tell him! I called a cab!

Cassius's concierge looked at me incredulously and I realised

that I was on my Jimmy Choo and pyjamas... Shit! Never mind!

I knocked on Cassius's door... He opened the door with that boyish hairdo and a baby awakened look. He was drop dead gorgeous still.

"Velvet?" he said, all smiling. "I hung up with you three hours ago..."

I put Stevie Wonder on my phone and I started to sing, "I've just come to say I love you, I just came to say how much I care for you... I've just come to say I love you and I mean it from the bottom of my heart."

Cassius was smiling. I stopped singing (very badly) and I added without music, without any help, without shame, "I love you Cassius. I always did."

"Say it again," he demanded.

"I love you."

"Again."

"I love you."

"Again."

"I love you."

"Again, again, again..."

"I love you, I love you, I love you..."

"You own me billions of these," he smiled.

"I love you, times ten billion."

He lifted me up and we made love in the kitchen.

So, U.S.!

Chapter Six - The Wedding

The church was magnificent! We had a breath-taking entrance accompanied by a live orchestra playing Thinking Out Loud by Ed Sheeran, one of Camellia's favourite songs. I tried my best not to cry. I was walking down the aisle with one of the groomsmen, just behind Camellia and her dad. Camellia insisted on having me just behind her in case she fainted.

Well, my dearest friend was doing well and looked amazing in her Vera Wang wedding dress. I was one of the happiest Maid of Honour and Bridesmaid in the world; my dress was amazing and the whole outfit was accessorised with class. Cassius was seated at the front row within the ribbon (of course), looking at me lovingly, and so sexy in his navy tux.

I stood behind her when she shared her vows and shared her first kiss as a married wife. Camellia was beautiful and managed to keep all her composure, to my biggest surprise.

This wedding was full of love. I was introduced to Camellia's family members I had never met. We made a few pictures in the beautiful castle's surroundings. The scenery was breath-taking and the weather magnificent.

It was truly a wonderful wedding. Camellia and Michael were so blissfully happy, sitting together, holding hands, smiling round at their families, at kind fathers, pleased mothers, and with everybody smiling back at them.

The love and complicity between Michael and Camellia was contagious. Cassius and I were so inspired by the whole wedding. I was all overly emotional upon my speech and toast.

I was not sure if Cassius's presence was the case but this whole wedding situation made me realise how much I'd changed since I moved to London. I was a completely different person and I realised that I was the person I wanted to be, surrounded by the friends I would have picked myself. I was blessed and in love.

Even Bianca was enthralled. "Look at you guys; you make me want to be in a relationship." Cassius loved my friends. He had met my sisters by then and we were all having fun in Paris once a month. We'd even planned a family holiday in Africa. I just couldn't wait.

Camellia's party was like her. Catholic: very. Chic: Very, very... And very organised: zero Faux-pas during the evening. Her wedding was immaculate.

The ambiance was amazing, everybody was talking to each other, and the orchestra was fabulous.

We were blessed to have two mega Italian VIPs, Laura Pausini and Andrea Bocelli. They were both amazing; they set a mood for love, signing autographs after the show.

We danced until 6am. Camellia was so happy. "See Valérie... This year has been amazing and I am sure, I will be soon dancing at your wedding." I smiled. Camellia was clearly drunk and overjoyed by all the smiles and feeling of contentment everyone had that day. Everyone loved Camellia's wedding.

At 8am, Cassius and I were still talking to the point that Bianca had to knock at our door to have our mouths shut. Awkward because we were not only talking...

I woke up in the afternoon around 2pm just to realise that Cassius was gone. He left a note for me with a beautiful red dress signed Karl Lagerfeld. "Let's have a romantic brunch just the two of us. Car is waiting outside. Love you."

So, sweet... I wanted to congratulate Camellia again first and started exploring the castle. "Camellia! Camellia!"

"She's away, Madame," said one of the cleaners. "With husband somewhere!"

"Okay, okay. Thanks." Well, I was surprised, as I wasn't sure this was planned.

I headed toward Bianca's room. Her room was locked with a big written sign. Do not disturb until at least 7pm! Couldn't sleep until late. I decided not to bother her, as it was an open complaint against me.

I went back into my room and started to get ready.

I got dressed up and suddenly said to myself, am I not a bit dressed up for a lunch? I sensed something was happening. I smiled; after all we were in Italy.

A driver was waiting for me outside. He politely opened the door for me and started driving toward the unknown.

20 minutes later, I was at Villa Porticciolo, a restaurant with a splendid view over the Ligurian sea. Cassius was waiting for me outside.

"Did you even sleep?" I laughed.

"I certainly did."

"Okay, why am I dressed like this?"

"We're in Italy, young lady. Who knows where we're going to end up tonight?" he winked.

He took my hand and led me inside the restaurant.

He pulled my chair at the best table we could possibly have there. It was so romantic. The restaurant was very cosy, the lightings set with candles everywhere. The atmosphere was magical; even Cassius looked magical.

I felt a panic attack; I couldn't breathe properly. I excused myself and ran to the ladies. I had a quick rest, put myself together, looked at the mirror, and just said to myself: I am ready for this.

When I came back to the restaurant, Cassius was standing up and our song was playing. He smiled.

"Miss Duval, would you come and dance with me?" I blushed purple and flashed a one million dollar smile. We started dancing, Cassius firmly holding me against his body. It was so romantic. I couldn't stop smiling.

Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong were singing, *"I am in heaven, I am heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I seem to find the happiness I seek. When we are together dancing cheek to cheek."* This is how I felt ...

I looked at Cassius and my heart purely melted in his body. He caressed my face with his shaky hands and I knew him so well feeling his nervousness.

Cassius bent on his knees, "Dear Valérie Duval... My best friend, my lover, my partner in crime, my cheeky smile, would you marry me?"

I froze for a second, lost in his green eyes, and I replied, "Of course I would!" I suddenly heard people drumming their feet on the floor and slapping their hands. My sisters came to me and I realised that people were coming towards us from all over

the restaurant, congratulating us.

Oh my! My sisters were here! Camellia, Bianca... God Stephanie from Celest Connections too... Everybody was there. I didn't realise that I was also crying. Oh my...

How Many Dates Does it Take to Find the One? How Many men? How many fucks? How many slaps on the face? And how many lies?

It's been four years since my divorce, three years of online dating, where I chatted with 333 men online, I ghosted five men, been benched twice, I was cat fished once, I had passionate Textlationship, Skylationship, and phonelationship. I had 100 dates, I dated 56 different men, and slept with... Well... You know. I've dated a lot of great guys, not so great guys, a drug dealer, probably a thief or two, two or three schizophrenics, possibly one or two sociopaths, and perhaps a murderer.

A man broke up with me because I was smoking. Fair enough!

Another man, because I was French. Well, I guess we have a reputation.

Another one because I was always away on weekends, thinking I wasn't working hard enough.

I texted a date a text aimed at Bianca, saying, < This idiot is late. > And had the polite reply, "Well, the idiot is going home now. Adieu beautiful."

I learned so much. The more I dated, the more I knew what I was looking for, and the less I was making mistakes. I was dating less but my dates were more substantial and relationship minded.

Then, my heart picked Cassius. I smiled for his love. I loved him for his smile. I cried for his touches. His touches made my cry of pleasure. We could talk for hours and hours at night and still have things to say to each other the following day. He is my brother, my husband, my lover, and my best friend. And we were now writing our story together.

We were starting a whole new book. Bye for now. Next book?

MEET VALÉRIE DUVAL

Meet Valérie Duval

Hello. My name is Cassius Daniels and I'm going to tell you my version of our story.

After a somewhat tense conference call in my lawyer's office in Chelsea, we really needed a drink and a big meal to soothe the loss of a million pounds from a dodgy deal. Still upset by the loss, we were awaiting the lift when I first heard that infectious laugh: it was the first smile we had that day. What a peculiar laugh! Before falling in love with Velvet, I fell in love with that laugh – it cheered us up! And before the lift door opened, I wondered what sort of woman owned such a laugh.

Alistair and I glanced at each other in amusement, saluting Stephanie who had been trying for years to get us into her rather exclusive dating agency. This beautiful brown girl was still giggling politely. I took a quick look. She oozed finesse – her clothes, her perfume, and the shy giggling. On first glance, I liked her; by the second one I was in love with her. Her dark, mid-length, wavy hair; brown, intense almond eyes; full lips; dark golden skin; slim body; athletic legs; graceful poise. Evidently, a lady. I stared. I wanted her to look at me back; she knew I was looking, but for some reason she didn't look back. I concluded she must be shy.

We arrived on the ground floor. Only then did she finally look at me! I gave her my biggest smile, thinking she would ask for my number... But she didn't. She just smiled back and ran off towards her car, stabbing me in the heart.

Well, I simply had to call Stephanie that afternoon to get her

phone number. I wanted that girl – and nobody would prevent me from having her. Plus, I could be pretty sure she was single, as she'd probably just joined Celest Connections.

The Calls

"Stephanie, Cassius Daniels here."

"Oh, hi Cassius! How are you? Have you *finally* decided to join Celest Connections?" she said enthusiastically.

"I want that girl who was in the lift with you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The lady you were with this afternoon in the lift, Stephanie. The giggler. I want her..."

"Valérie?"

"Well, yes. I want a date with Valérie."

"But Cassius, you don't know her... She might not be compatible..."

"I want to get to know her. This is the entire point of a date, isn't it?"

"Well, Cassius... She didn't even look at you in the lift and she didn't mention you over lunch. When Valérie likes someone, she... Well, I don't think, she will..."

"Arrange that date tonight and I'll join your club. You'll have all the merit of this successful relationship. Tonight. Zuma. 7pm. Thanks a million, Stephanie. You're a star – quite the best matchmaker I have ever met. Goodbye."

Stephanie called me a few minutes later with the bad news.

"Valérie doesn't want to meet you, Cassius. I am *so* sorry. I really tried. She was really aghast by..."

"Give me her number."

"I can't do that, I am afraid. What if —"

"Stephanie," I interrupted her. "You're losing a client who's ready to sign right now for a date with Valérie. What a shame! I would have taken your highest level of membership..."

'For God's sake,' I thought, 'I hope she won't make me beg...'

I continued. "So her name is Valérie, and her number is 07... Stephanie? Are you still there?"

"I can't give you her family name. She will kill me, Cassius. This is against our —"

"07...? You know, Stephanie that this girl is for me! Now, don't be a bore... We're going to be your star couple. Can you imagine? We'll laugh at this in a couple of years."

"You haven't done the questionnaire, Cassius. Neither did Valérie."

"Really? That's even better. I'll pay for both memberships in that case. So her number is..."

"OK, OK. As neither of you are on our books yet I guess I'm not in breach of anything here. Her number is 07XXXXXX. Oh my... She'll kill me... Good luck getting that date! She's stubborn."

'Watch me!' was my thought, but I replied: "She will love this! Thank you, Stephanie. You're an angel!"

"I know... Again, good luck!"

I called Valérie.

"Allo?" she said in a very French sexy voice.

"Hello, Valérie. Shall we have that drink tonight?"

"Who's this?" she asked, amused.

"Your Celest Connections date! Sorry, Stephanie's just given me your number, telling me that you couldn't wait to hear from me," I said to embarrass her.

"Well, I am a bit tired as I—" I could tell she wasn't prepared so I jumped in, "Great! I'll see you tonight at Zuma. 7pm. Don't be late." I didn't give her time to add anything else. I hung up. God, I hoped she'd come. She was surely too polite to stand me up. She wouldn't do that. Would she...?

The Blind Date

I must be honest; I feared she wouldn't show until I actually saw her. I really tried my best not to betray how happy I was to see her. Valérie was late – but I was just glad she'd come.

I waved at her but decided to go over properly and welcome her. At first, it seemed she didn't recognise me... After all, she looked at me for barely a nanosecond, so I wouldn't have been surprised.

Valérie was magnificent in her warm orange Alexander McQueen dress. Hypnotised by her beauty, I could only say, "You're late," which I regretted as soon as I heard my own voice.

How idiotic was that? Thank God, it seemed she didn't hear or

understood. What I had meant to say was, “You’re beautiful...” but it stuck in my throat as her deep brown eyes absorbed all my self-confidence. I could merely add, “Would you follow me?”

I acted so strangely I wouldn’t have been at all surprised if she’d disappeared with someone else behind my back. I needed to regain my composure. I quickly turned around and she was still there smiling. Her smile comforted me.

I pulled out her chair and she sat with perfect posture, radiating that elegance only the French can exude. I finally managed to pull myself together and asked what she wanted to drink.

I ordered the drinks and our date began. Her eyes were making love to me. I felt drawn by her. I felt like I’d known her forever and we were just catching up.

I wanted her so badly it was painful. But I had to be patient with her and go slowly.

After our date, I put her in a taxi and ignored her plea to kiss. I resolved that, for a month, I would ignore her demands to sex up her brain. I wanted to connect with her at the deepest level – knowing all her fears, her hopes, her secrets – before teaching her meaningful and mind-shattering sex. She would become addicted to me. Then I would marry her in Paris – or wherever she likes. I knew that evening she would be mine forever. I couldn’t wait to explore her.

The Ivy

Valérie occupied my mind all week, and I was still mesmerised a week later by her words, her attitude, and her smell.

I chose for us to dine at the Ivy. I thought it would be Valérie’s style: chic, romantic but quintessentially British – with a French

touch of foie gras.

She arrived right on time; I was waiting for her with a bottle of the restaurant's best champagne. I kissed her on the cheek and was on the best gentleman's behaviour I thought she deserved.

Valérie was drop-dead gorgeous. I was hoping she didn't see *Mini Me* reacting to that cleavage I stared at a second too long. I asked her how her week had been and a few questions about her. As she spoke, I admired her: so beautiful and happy. Confident and stylish, yet she had something innocent and childish about her – like she had never had her heart broken, like she wasn't damaged in some way, like she had never had any problem in her life.

As she spoke, I stared at her lips and the way they moved. I was thinking of kissing and licking them and how they'd look fantastic on my ... No! I *had* to concentrate. My penis was hurting; balls were aching... I'm ashamed to admit now that I really wasn't listening as some seriously graphic scenes had invaded my brain...

The only way I found to get away from this annoyance before Valérie noticed was to talk about myself and stop looking at that cleavage: my career, culture, history and geopolitics, and how my trips helped me to understand more of the world and its people. Believe it or not, *Mini Me* and my eyes didn't care. God, it hurt so bad... I poured more and more champagne into my own glass as Valérie was annoyingly drinking slowly. Calm down, stupid penis!

Then, the urge! The restroom! I couldn't go... I wish I could quickly check if Valérie would notice the hard-on, but I knew she'd follow my eyes. And bang! I hit that bottle of red wine, spilling its contents on her expensive bodycon dress. *Now* it went soft...

The waiter came immediately to help us out, bringing all his equipment to try to make the stain disappear. No way! That stain liked Valérie as much as I did. Stuck! What an idiot I was. I looked at her, mortified. She put some cash on the table and left without looking back. I'd screwed up! I ran after her. I liked that girl – I couldn't let her go. And I begged her to stay. I was begging a woman for the first time in my life.

And she crushed me when she said, as if I were nothing, "Listen. This is fine. I'm tired and I should go home." I knew she meant: "You annoyed me all evening, you stupid pervert. I don't want to see you again. I am gone forever. I won't be taking your call even in another life."

I couldn't believe I'd screwed this date up! I *knew* Valérie was for me. I had no doubt about it whatsoever. It was just a little misunderstanding and a bad date. I didn't know what to say now. I surely couldn't tell the truth. I only managed to say, "I can't let you pay for the dry cleaning. Please – at least let me take care of the dress."

But matters got worse. She wanted to get naked in the middle of the street and asked me to unzip her dress so I could get it. I suddenly felt mega stupid and could only squeak out a puzzled,

"Excuse me?" Why did I say *that*?

She responded, "Yes! You want to bring it to the dry cleaner. Take it now! I'll go home in lingerie. Or is it just your way to get to mine tonight?"

I was all out of responses. This woman was truly special. I had never been in this situation before and *Mini Me* put me in this predicament. I blushed. And that was that. She was gone. And it hurt.

Once home, I decided to give Valérie a call. I had nothing to lose. I was hoping from the bottom of my heart that she would

pick up. Our story wasn't meant to end like this.

Valérie picked up and asked if I was OK. I translated it in my mind as: "Is your penis feeling better? Did you have a wank?" I blushed and decided to approach the situation head-on. "I am not OK. I'm sorry. This evening was a catastrophe." She didn't respond. I didn't care and asked for another date. I could hear her smiling over the phone. This was cute.

I'm not sure I remember what I said next but she reassured me by saying, "You didn't need to impress me, Cassius." And so we arranged our next date. I was over the moon.

The Roof Garden

On our first date, I'd listened attentively to what Valérie said and how she said it. I think I'd asked the right questions, enough to know that she would like this gig called "A Night of Amy". It was an evening of classic songs from Amy Winehouse performed by a full live band.

This time, I was happy to see that she'd opted for a Dolce and Gabbana T-shirt, a pair of jeans and Converse. No *Mini Me* reaction. She looked amazing though. What is it with the French? Even with the simplest clothes, they look like a million dollars.

I wanted her to comprehend that I liked her and wanted more than just dates. So, I held her tiny waist, kissing her neck, her ears, her cheeks. This time, I didn't care if my penis reacted; I wanted to make things clear: I like you and I want you, but I want things to go slowly.

We left around 10pm, took a cab to head to Balans for a late dinner. We'd both liked the concert and I was proud of my choice of a date. I wanted to make the evening even more romantic so I stopped the cab in Piccadilly. We ran towards a pedicab, I lifted her up, and we romantically set off towards

Balans.

I had never felt more alive in my life. This lady was a firecracker! She made me laugh, made me question my life, and I am sure she could make me cry. She was a ball of energy, able to move mountains and melt the Arctic. She had no idea how wonderful she was. I really wondered how it was that she was still single.

I couldn't help but ask about her relationship history. I was surprised – but happy – to learn she was a divorcée, but I knew she would be a keeper. A wedding in Vegas? Does that even really count? And we had so much in common: I didn't know why Stephanie was reluctant to introduce her to me. Dinner over, I called a cab for her and kissed her on the cheek.

Date No.4

I *liked* this relationship. Date four took us more a few weeks to organise. We decided to meet in Washington, as were both Stateside. Valérie wanted to try the Blue Duck Tavern, so her wish was my command.

When she arrived, I was waiting for her in the hallway. My heart nearly jumped out of my body when she jumped on me like a kid. So much love... I could tell she was happy to see me. I kissed her and admitted, "I missed you, Miss Congo." She smiled and we walked to the chef's table.

I enjoyed this date overseas. We both had so much to say to each other. I had 30-something years of her life to catch up on... What I remember most about that night was that she excused herself to go to the bathroom and was gone for more than 20 minutes. When she came back, she looked so unwell and pale that I couldn't help but sense her fever. She was burning hot and, despite her saying she was OK, I sent her back to her hotel.

That was when I realised what Stephanie meant when she'd

said Valérie was stubborn. I had to *order* her to go back to her room.

“No, you’re not well. Let’s get the car for you. We’ll catch up in London. You have an early flight tomorrow anyway.” She insisted, but I didn’t care. Yet, I wanted to spend more time with her so I asked my driver to drop her. In the car, I took her face and put it on my lap (without any improper thoughts, you perverted reader!), caressing her hair, her lips, and her face. She looked so cute and innocent.

When we reached her hotel, I asked at reception for some tablets for a potential cold and I kissed her goodnight. I was already missing her.

The Real Kiss

Back in London, at our local: Aubaine, South Kensington.

When Valérie questioned me about my sexuality, I knew I needed to make a move. I’ll French kiss her. I’ll show her I like her. It was about time. She’ll never forget that first kiss.

After our brunch, we went bowling in All Star Lanes in Bayswater. We played against another couple and we won chiefly because I’d met a mega-competitive woman who hates to lose. We celebrated the win with a drink nearby, after which we started walking towards Chelsea.

I walked her home and, in front of her imposing building, I caressed her back. I took her head between my hands and I kissed her, my tongue deep into her mouth. A *real* French kiss! My penis reacted to it with the most painful hard-on I’ve ever had in my life. Before it got too obvious I said, “It’s getting late, Princess. I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

I wanted her. I wanted her right then. But I would make her wait just a little bit longer.

Her sexy lips obsessed me: soft, full, and sweet. I was aroused just by the thought of them and I couldn't wait to kiss her again. And this time, I would make love to her. She'd never have experienced such depth and intensity. She would beg me for more and I would be more than happy to give her more. That would be in London, at my place, where I would be able to smell her on my sheets for hours after she left. For now, I would have to put my penis between my legs and meet her in New York.

A Date in New York

I picked Valérie up at JFK. When I saw her face, she wore that welcoming smile that fills my heart with love.

I kissed her tenderly and held her hands as we walked to my car, ready to set out for the Standard hotel. We kissed passionately all the way there. When we arrived in my suite, I let her get ready while I went for a drink at the bar.

When I was back in the room, she was ready. This once very childish, candid face transformed into an elegant and poised lady. The type of woman I'd always dreamed about – a one-in-a-million I never thought I could obtain. I felt so blessed.

Over a few drinks at Le Bain, we learned more about each other's souls, talking about our families, friends, frenemies, careers, and a future for us. This lady was amazing; I wondered how she always said the right thing to me. She surely knew how to please a man: all her compliments filled my body with courage. I wanted to please her: she's the sort of woman you want to please. You want her approval, your want to move mountains for her. Finally, I was dating at another level.

Valérie and I headed for the Jean-Georges for a romantic meal. I couldn't wait to give Valérie her first present. We had been

dating for three months and it had been amazing, so I was very happy to hand over that beautiful necklace from Tiffany's. I wasn't trying to buy her love but when she first declined the gift, it broke my heart to the core. It was just a way to celebrate our first months together. And for an amazing person, I had bought an amazing gift. Her support, her love, her company were priceless. When she finally accepted, I felt like the proudest and wealthiest man on earth. We were a *team*.

After dinner, we decided to go back to the hotel. We had a few drinks again and retired to our suite at around 2am. Valérie showered first and headed to bed before I joined her. I felt like I'd known the woman for ages and I could read her all over. She wanted me so bad. 'You'll have to wait,' I said in my mind. I lay in the bed beside her, and took her slim body in my arms, kissing her neck, her back, and her ears passionately. The temperature in the room instantly rose at least 10 degrees. Yet I whispered, "There's plenty of time for this. Let's not rush it. I want the moment to be very special for both of us."

She fell asleep and I did a couple of minutes later.

Date No.6: Dining in

Back in London, I was in love and invited Valérie over for dinner. I suspected she'd jump me if I didn't have sex with that night. Since day one, her eyes had been begging either for a kiss or for my penis. I have to admit, I never stopped anticipating that night – how I would kiss her, undress her, and how she would growl at the feeling of me inside her.

When Valérie arrived, she looked absolutely divine – a short, fitted red dress, displaying a cleavage imploring for sex.

After staring at her for a few seconds, I managed to say, "Welcome to the most beautiful lady I ever met. I so glad you're here." I kissed her my thanks for her gift and I chemically

reacted to her sexy, soft and wet lips. She'd already won: I was boiling with excitement and my eyes were caressing her cleavage throughout our dinner. I so badly wanted to skip the romance but I had to make that night an amazing one for her – not simply another night of sex with a new boyfriend.

Let's bring Paris to London.

After a glass of champagne and two bottles of wine, Valérie and I started dancing. I caressed her face, her neck, her perky breasts. This woman had the softest skin I had ever touched. She was like a piece of velvet. She'd be my Velvet from now on.

Velvet smiled and added, "Thank you, Cassius. I sincerely like all this. I am really grateful for all the experiences and feelings this relationship has procured in me. I genuinely appreciate the way you treat me and respect me, and the feelings I have now. I haven't felt this way for a very long time. I like you for this. I am loving all this too much, you have no idea."

I was so glad. After an intense stare at each other, Velvet finally murmured, "I want you, Cassius. I want the whole of you, right now..."

Her words resonated within me, shaking up my whole body. We made love all night. It was so good it hurt. Velvet cried and I caressed and kissed her tears. We cried because I surrendered to her. We were in love. That night was a night of pure love...

... *And* the best sex I ever had: intense, powerful, fusional. We had found the most intense chemistry... That night, I knew I'd marry this gorgeous creature, keep her for the rest of my life and make her the happiest woman on earth.

The Untimely Break-Up

I decided to spend more time in London. We needed to create

our bubble, our circle; fine-tune our team. I didn't want to have Velvet slip through my hands because she had met a more available man than me.

That Wednesday was a beautiful day. It started with a quick call to Velvet, which put a smile on my face until I bumped into her and that guy on my way out of Cecconi's restaurant in Mayfair.

When I reached Velvet's table, I could read that she wasn't comfortable. I forced the introductions just because I realised she didn't want to introduce me to her friend. At least, that's what I thought he was at first...

When she explained that the guy was her future ex, I was jealous. He was hot, fit, dark, and obviously successful. I didn't like how he looked down on me, so I told her off. I wanted her to feel as much pain as I was feeling that day, if not more. Yes, I was harsh and selfish. I demanded she break up with him immediately. She did. Since then, I knew she cared for me more than anyone else.

The Magic

Valérie and I were both travelling around the globe; we were now in a relationship and shared some magical moments together.

Often we were talked to each other until the sun came up; we couldn't stop talking and always had something to talk about.

I remembered when we exchanged our keys. At first it was by convenience, but it became so much more than that. It was a romantic routine. When she wasn't in London, I would stay at hers: smelling her clothes, feeling her presence at her flat, and laying in her sheets... I got to know her better, too, through her perfumes, her books, and her music.

The Misunderstanding

Weeks apart without seeing each other or talking like we usually did, was a challenge. I hated Valérie's time in Paris. I was missing her like crazy and realised she had become a big part of my life. She wasn't just my girlfriend but also my best friend. She managed so well without talking to me for two weeks that my dependence on her started to worry me. She was not as adamant to see me after her trip as I was. So, I started questioning her feelings for me. What did she want? I wasn't even sure she loved me, as she'd never said the words.

As soon as I knew she reached English soil with the Eurostar, I called her. I needed to hear her voice. I knew her well enough to know if something was wrong. She sounded well but when she rejected my offer to pick her up, I was hurt. But I didn't care. I had to see her. I wanted to talk to her, to hear her voice, and define where we were going together.

At St Pancras station, I was relieved: Valérie jumped on me and I was filled with so much love, I wondered why I'd questioned anything. We kissed passionately before heading for mine where I lit up the place romantically.

She took a bath alone and we had dinner. I was a little disappointed as I thought these weeks apart would have made her realise that she loved me. But... Nothing. She was just happy to see me. We made love that night, but I decided to stop being her lover and start becoming her boyfriend. And make things clear.

I didn't sleep well that night. In truth, I didn't sleep at all. I watched Valérie sleeping. She was so serene. I decided to leave the bed at around 5am, and went to the gym to calm the fire in me. I wanted to wake her up and talk. I wanted to know: did she love me or not?

When Valérie reached the kitchen, I questioned her almost

immediately. Her responses made my heart bleed. I was anxious, nervous, and when she refused to live with me – and more so refused to introduce me to her family, pretending that we were not serious – I lost my mind. I went ballistic. What was I for her? Another experience? She had to move in or move out of my life. I had to give her that ultimatum. I can't entirely recall what was said that morning but we were certainly mean to each other.

What had I done for her to think I wasn't serious about us? I thought I'd made myself clear from the beginning and I thought she knew this. And it hurt to the fullest when she admitted being forced into the relationship, which I'd always thought she wanted as much as me. Am I a pusher?

But Valérie just walked away. She stopped communicating and this really pissed me off. I tried to reason with her but she just walked away, challenging me by the eye and banging the door, yelling, "Voilà, I am gone!"

My heart was a mess and my feelings were confused. Were we done? *Really?* She'd come back, I told myself. I'm sure she will...

The Dark Side of my Life

When Valérie broke up with me, I went into social hibernation. How was I supposed to function with daily reminders of her all over London? Everybody was asking after her, even during business functions.

My lifestyle: get as far as I could from London. And NYC. And Washington. And Miami... Well, every place and hotel I'd been out with her, really. I went into exile in Switzerland: I couldn't get more neutral than that.

But after a few weeks, I became aggressive, resentful and jealous of all the romance going on around me. I wasn't myself anymore. I decided it was therefore time to call Valérie and talk.

Once, twice, three times, four times: no response. I tried and retried, but I never managed to get through.

I was evil with everyone. I had no soul left. I was working 24/7, I was sleeping at the office, my beard had grown. I have never worked that hard in my life; I have never drunken that much in my life; I have never smoked (*not cigarettes...*) that much in my life. I fell into my own trick, drowning in my own emotions, suffocating myself with my resentment. I lost all touch with time and reality.

Months later, I decided to go back to London for a serious talk with Valérie. I was ready to push her again, whatever she said. I prepared the right words to say. I knew exactly which day was perfect to stumble upon her – Sunday morning, hoping she wasn't on holiday.

That Sunday, I was nervous. A billion questions came into my mind. I kept changing what I was going to say. Should I use my keys? What if she really didn't love me? What if she was with a man in her room? What should I say? What if they were having sex? I had to stop thinking. I needed a glass of strong Scotch to gird my loins! I was in hell. After two hours of hesitation, I finally decided to go over to her place. The weather was amazing, the birds were singing: this was going to be an amazing day! Valérie would come back to me. She was mine. And I was ready to be forceful again...

When I reached her building, I didn't need to use my keys as a man ran into me at the entrance, hurrying to his car. Striding upstairs, I reached Valérie's door. I knocked, and she opened, smiling and talking half-French. I didn't get what she meant and stupidly said, "Is this your new greeting?" She froze. I knew she didn't find it funny.

I broke this uncomfortable silence. "Can we talk?" She nodded but still wasn't moving, so I added, "Inside?"

She opened the door, checking her own flat as if she wanted to hide something.

"How are you?" I asked.

"OK, you?"

"Not well and I am sorry." I almost begged. That wasn't the tone I had hoped to convey.

"It's OK, Cassius. You don't need to be sorry," she said, uninterested, which rendered me aghast. She didn't want to let me talk. But there was no way she would escape this conversation this time. I raised my tone and asked her to let me speak. I worried internally; I wasn't seeing any love in her expression. I had lost her; at least, that's what I thought until she shouted back at me, "Are you kidding me, Cassius? You are coming here to shout at me like this! It's been more than three months now. What do you want?" She didn't let me answer: "Three months later, Cassius? What? You've been fucking around and now you're realising that your girlfriend wasn't that bad after all?"

I was relieved: I knew she loved me. She *loved* me! She was upset. She was jealous; she thought I had been seeing someone else. I still had a chance.

I barked back at her, "Excuse me! Shut up and stop sulking like a spoiled child! What on earth are you talking about? I've been in Switzerland for months! You cut me off as though our six-month relationship was nothing to you! You even stooped so low as to block my number like a teenager. *Really*, Valérie? We had a *relationship*! It wasn't a fling! Did it mean nothing to you? Was it so bad that you don't even give a damn? What did I do to deserve such treatment? I reckon *you* are the one who's been screwing around now. I've been thinking about you all the time.

ALL THE TIME! While *you* HAVE BEEN sleeping around..."

Tears rolled down her face. Valerie's slept with someone else but I didn't care. He was nothing. He's not even a tenth of *U.S.* She still loved me and her agreement to join me for dinner said it all. She would be mine forever and I didn't need to do much.

A rainy dinner

I was glad Velvet accepted my invitation to dinner. How did I ever doubt her feelings for me? Why did I need to be so demanding? I just needed to be patient. When things were right, she would eventually introduce me to her parents. I don't know why I pushed for so much formality. She was with me all the way in that relationship; Velvet was mine and never took a second look at anyone else. I figured the more I was falling for her, the more I felt insecure, as she wasn't as wordy as me in expressing her feelings. Everyone is different.

I was daydreaming of my life with Val when Betty pounded at my door, panicked. "Please sir, I know you said not to disturb, but Mrs Duval is going ballistic and wants to sack me. Please don't... Don't sack me... I didn't know what to do, she threatened me..."

"What?"

"She said, and I am quoting: 'He was supposed to be with me a billion years ago.'"

"It's a mistake..." I looked at my watch, which read 3.30pm. It's been 3.30 for ages, I thought. A tidal wave of panic engulfed my whole body. I asked Betty, worried, "What time is it?"

"It's half past seven —"

"Oh, no!"

"What should I say, sir?"

"Tell her I'm already gone. I daren't pick that fight."

I was in a fury. How could I ruin my first date back with the woman of my life? How could my watch stop on *that* day and not another one? I was aghast, I was panicking, and I was losing her.

I arrived at Zuma, but Valérie was gone. It started to rain. I checked the ladies in despair and nothing. I left the restaurant, not sure what to do or say to her. I don't know why something drove me to take a look around the building – but there she was. There she was with... a cigarette?

"You're smoking?!"

She couldn't care less. "What is happening with you? Is it payback time or something? Did you want to prove something here? What the hell?"

I broke my heart into pieces to see I had upset her so much.

"Please, Valérie. I'm sorry. I didn't see..." I can't recall what I said but I was desperate to have this dinner with her.

As it started to pour, we looked at each other, dripping wet. The next thing I knew, we were at mine ordering Thai and Velvet was drying her clothes, wearing the flimsiest of my bathrobes I could find. That's when the game started. The game of seduction. I had to convince her. I had to get her back.

"I thought I would never come back here again," said Velvet. My heart scrunched into a ball at the sound of those words, but soon sprang back as Valérie brought her angelic and innocent face closer. I rejected her, even though every fibre of my body

wanted her. "Valérie... What are we? You can't kiss me and give me false hopes. What do you want?" As soon as she said, "I don't know," I realised I should have let her kiss me. It would have helped. 'What a loser,' I thought.

I needed to calm down. I was horny for her, and my body was hurting. I went to the bathroom, splashed cold water over my face, sprayed on some more *Amouage* to have another chance with her, but when I went back to the dining room, I discovered Velvet had put her dress back on. I was livid. I was definitely a loser. Why did I try to play a game while I wanted her so badly?

I was serving dessert and Velvet hadn't tried to kiss me again. I was boiling inside. I needed a kiss. She wouldn't be able to resist. She would know I was hers, she was mine, and we are U.S. She needed to remember our kisses, how intense they were. Velvet would have no doubt about *U.S* anymore.

One last, tentative attempt: romance. She loves romance. I fed her ice cream, put some all around her lips and I started licking them.

I knew Velvet was confused, but I didn't care. I wanted her back big time. I had just that night to convince her and I'd already spoiled it. I kissed her. I kissed her passionately. She wanted me; she was saying things I can't even recall – I'm not sure I actually listened. I could only say, "I love you. I miss you." But Velvet didn't care. She stopped me. I was now confused.

She spoke about the guy she was seeing, but I couldn't care less and replied distraught, "So, what? You're giving up on us for a stranger... *Really?*"

Velvet didn't even reply and was gone. What had I done wrong? I was now lost.

Her Choice

I decided to let her come back to me when was ready. In truth, I decided to go back to her in ten days if I hadn't heard back from her by then.

I trusted she was intelligent enough to figure out that I was *The One* and her "friend" was nothing more than an adventure.

Two days later: nothing. Five days later: still nothing. One week later: *rien*. Nine days later: *toujours rien*. I was nervous. I was upset, aggressive, and full of love to give. A dormant volcano about to erupt. I couldn't believe I had failed. No, I didn't fail: I had lost. I had lost her. She was somebody else's. How did he even manage it in such a short time?

I didn't care. I was going to see her and try once again. Sunday morning – early, like usual. I'd use my keys and wouldn't care if he were there. She was mine and I would talk to her. She wouldn't push me back. She wouldn't do this. She loved me – and she still loves me.

I stood in front of her building for a while. What would I say to her? What would I say to him if he were there? I felt overwhelmed. I tried to prepare but instantly dismissed every option that came to mind for obtuseness.

How did I manage to turn a seemingly promising romantic life into a complete mess? Actions speak louder than words... I should have known that Velvet had always loved me.

As I put her keys in the door, I felt sick. My heart was pounding like it never had. I wasn't at all certain Velvet loved me. After all, she was already with someone else and I wasn't.

So, maybe Velvet wasn't really in love with me at least not as I wanted her to be. I paused before opening her flat door. For some reason, I sensed she was standing on just the other side. I could feel her presence, which made me nervous. I tried to

listen. Radio silence. I waited two full minutes before turning the key to open her door – and sure enough she was there, as if she had been waiting for me. I said, surprised, “You’re here?”

“I live here,” Velvet smiled, looking at me like she was seeing me for the first time. My heart sank; I simply didn’t know what to say. I was glad but felt terrified, and a losing feeling swept through my body. I can’t recall what I said, but it was certainly not smart as she put on a disappointed face. God, I wasn’t being good at all. I was overwhelmed by her presence and needed to think of something relevant to say. I certainly didn’t anticipate I would freeze at one look of her.

I sat on her sofa and looked at her, scrutinising all her little traits, her birthmarks, her beauty spots, her spots, her lips, her body... Like it was the last time... I was lost in her. I wanted her so bad. In equal parts, I was hypnotised and paralysed. I finally broke the silence and asked, “I lost you, didn’t I?”

Velvet replied with one of her most amazing comforting smiles: “I picked you, Cassius.” This filled my body with joy and love. I promised myself I would honour this lady for the rest of my life.

A New Chapter

Velvet and I took our first holiday together in Italy. It had been a simply amazing holiday. I was glad to discover Velvet and I still had this amazing connection where we could guess what the other was thinking. It was pure love, romance, and communication. I wanted us to reconnect as before – and we did so, successfully. I didn’t want to have sex with her; I just wanted us to reconnect and rebuild the deep relationship we had before.

And it worked. She was still the same Velvet, smiling, full of energy, caring, affectionate, and daring. She hadn’t changed. It comforted me to know she was still up my street and I couldn’t wait for us to move onto another chapter of our lives.

Excited by the prospect of her living her first three weeks at mine, I had no worries whatsoever. I knew we were a fantastic match and would get on well together. I knew we would have a fantastic household. We were a team. Yet she had her life, I had mine, and we had ours. *U.S* would function marvellously.

I couldn't wait for her to live with me. I knew she would never go back to hers, as I would do my absolute best to trap her at mine. But, all I was thinking right now was her body: her naked body. In my bed ASAFP.

When Velvet arrived, I stupidly welcomed her with a kiss on her forehead. Why did I do that? I'd dreamed of kissing her lips all day long. I tried to hide my embarrassment, trying to say something funny. But she wore the most serious look ever and asked, "Cassius, can we talk?"

I knew what Val wanted to say. I knew the lady. I ignored her request and unbuttoned her dress. We had sex all night.

A few weeks later, very early one morning, I heard someone knocking at my door. I knew it was Velvet, and when I saw her drop dead gorgeous self – hair unkempt, heels on, in the weirdest pyjamas I'd ever laid eyes on in my life – I couldn't help but smile. And Velvet started singing softly, and my heart exploded love throughout my body. It was so powerful and romantic and so Velvet: "I've just come to say I love you, I just came to say how much I care for you... I've just come to say I love you, and I mean it from the bottom of my heart."

She finished telling me with the deepest look of love she had ever had given me, "I love you, Cassius. I always did."

I needed to hear it more. I demanded, "Say it again."

"I love you," she said, her eyes full of love.

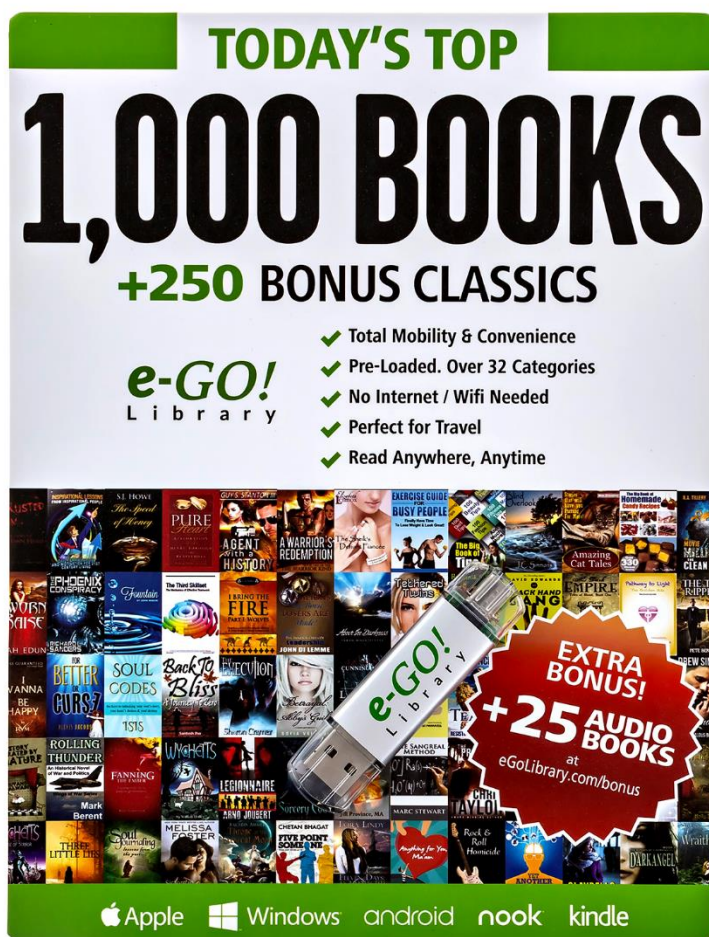
Oh God, I wanted so much of her... "Again."

"I love you," she said, with her biggest smile ever and the sexiest voice she could possibly produce. She ended, "I love you, times a billion!"

I lifted her up and we made love in the kitchen. I would propose to that girl, marry her, and keep her for the rest of my life. End of.

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