

# How to Hook a Husband

Sarah Harvey



*Also by Sarah Harvey*  
Misbehaving

# Contents

Chapter One – Spring 2000	1
Chapter Two	13
Chapter Three	57
Chapter Four	99
Chapter Five	131
Chapter Six	155
Chapter Seven	179
Chapter Eight	212
Chapter Nine	242
Chapter Ten	267
About the Author	345

*To Terry, always*

## Chapter One – Spring 2000

If men and women were made to be together, then why are we so bloody incompatible? Sure, the body parts slot together quite pleasantly, but as for emotions . . . it's like mixing chemicals in the school lab. Two little anonymous vials of liquid, quite innocuous when separate, but put them together and – BANG! Nuclear fallout of the highest level.

But, as always, the human race is so damn insistent that the things that are bad for us are the things we can't live without. Along with chocolate, alcohol, money, clothes, cars, careers and other status symbols, sex and the opposite sex comes pretty high on the list of 'I want it and I want it NOW', regardless of the damage it can do to the fine and delicate complexity that is the 'being' part of human being.

Hence the inbuilt urge to find our soul mate, that mythical creature who will suddenly make our incomplete lives so fulfilled. And if the concept of commitment is so outdated, then why do so many people still feel the urge to find 'The One'? Not only to find that One, but to meet it, mate it, marry it (OK, so the last two shouldn't necessarily be in that order, but hey, it's the twenty-first century now), and then spend a happy decline in a pair of matching incontinence knickers.

I can still remember opening the pale blue airmail envelope – number seventy-nine, if I recall correctly – that announced my best friend was getting married. Nix had been writing to me once a week since I'd left England nearly two years previously, numbering each envelope in her neat hand so that I'd know what order to open them in when they finally caught up with me after chasing me and my backpack throughout Thailand and Australia.

*Dear Belle*

*Guess what? I'm getting married!*

Those three fateful words. Big, bold and scrawled across almost an entire sheet of A4.

They carried such a weight of dreams and expectations, practically floated across the ocean to me on a wave of pure excitement. Nicky could have saved her stamps and flown them to me on an air kiss, an ecstatic exhalation of breath.

Shame it turned out to be a bright bubble of short-lived bliss, prematurely popped by a pompous little prick.

Kula Shaker throbbing in my ears.

Kevin Costner dancing across my eyeballs, temporarily sans wolves and even more delightfully sans clothes, his tanned, toned bottom covered by little more than a flap of leather, which fortunately doesn't appear to be that wind-resistant.

Large vodka and Coke in right hand.

Latest Jilly Cooper and an extremely large bar of Cadbury's finest on the little white plastic tray in front of me.

Extremely tasty guy in chair across aisle to right, eyeing up my long brown legs with extremely flattering regularity.

Who said long-distance flights were hell? This could almost be my idea of complete heaven. I've got all of the things I adore: music, movies, men, booze, books and chocolate, all together at once in the same place.

I give a happy sigh and, breaking another four squares off my bar of Dairy Milk, cram them greedily into my mouth.

The only thing lacking is a lovely squashy sofa to curl up on instead of the regulation not-enough-leg-room so recline-onto-the-poor-sod-behind-you aeroplane seat, a nice squishy duvet to snuggle under, and my best mate Nicky to share the moment.

But who's complaining? Certainly not me.

## HOW TO HOOK A HUSBAND

Gorgeous Nix, my bestest buddy in the whole wide world, pal for nearly fifteen years, partner in rather a lot of juvenile crimes, and one of the few people I had a problem leaving behind when I sodded off to the other side of the world, is now waiting however many feet below me. It's weird, I haven't seen her for nearly two years, and now I'm going to see her again in exactly . . . I look at my watch . . . twenty minutes, give or take customs and baggage claim.

Plus I certainly have no complaints about my current mode of transport; after some of the places I've stayed in recently, this plane is the Hilton. Not that I'd get into the Hilton dressed in frayed, cut-off denims bleached almost white by the sun, totally wrecked Reeboks and a faded handkerchief of material masquerading as a halter-neck top.

I'm surprised they even let me on the plane from the look of disdain the stewardess threw me when I reached the top of the boarding steps. But what do you expect after twenty months staggering round Thailand and Australia with a backpack filled with only the barest of bare essentials?

I can't look that bad, though. He across the aisle of the sexy profile, and the even sexier legs, is casting his eyes sideways yet again.

It's a mutual leg appreciation society.

I cast another surreptitious glance back.

He's far more brazen than me. He's waiting and, catching my eye, winks heavily. His face looks even better from the front than it did from the side. Masculine, suntanned, with a light smattering of five o'clock shadow that suits him in a sexy, macho kind of way, rather than pretentious, posing pop star fashion.

I wonder what his name is?

I think he'd have a strong name to go with the strong face, something short but sassy like Sam – no, too bisexual. Rex? No, sounds like a dog. Adam? Yeah, Adam suits him, very earthy. Adam, the first man. Well, he wouldn't quite be that as far as I'm concerned . . . Although I did manage to travel round the East without getting into any close encounters of the torrid kind with members of the opposite

sex. I'm not really into one-night stands, and when you're travelling, a long-term relationship isn't exactly a viable thing. Not that I really want a long-term relationship either . . .

It's nice to flirt, though.

I turn down the volume on my headset and look back over to Sexy Knees, ready to immerse myself in a fun, flirty game of eyeball ping-pong.

Unfortunately somebody has stepped into my spot, casting her very svelte shadow and own form of acid rain over my parade, and is brazenly batting her eyelashes at him as we speak. I'm peeved to see the stunning and immaculate air hostess, who gave me the evil eye when I boarded for looking like a refugee from Bondi Beach, smile coquettishly at *my* handsome stranger as she leans in far more closely than she actually needs to, to pour him a glass of champagne. I bet she didn't glance in disgust at his faded shorts as he got on the plane. She probably drooled over his strong muscular legs like I did when I first saw him.

Now if this were a movie, she'd be pouring me the champagne, sent over by him with his compliments, undying devotion, and home telephone number. Instead, he's gazing back into her cobalt-blue eyes and smiling idiotically like all of his brain cells have just fallen down comatose in a total lovesick swoon, with their little brain cell hands on their little brain cell hearts.

I am a forgotten moment, a fifty-second fantasy, a past flirt.

And they say women are fickle!

Nicky and I decided long ago that man's best friend is the dog because they relate so well on an emotional level. Basically the dog lives his life the way a man would like to: eating, sleeping, farting loudly without shame and often without reprimand, and best of all shagging indiscriminately and not feeling obliged to wear a condom, stay the night, or call you afterwards.

Sod having to go through the pain-in-the-arse ritual of taking you out to dinner, wining, dining, romancing and pretending to



be genuinely interested in your intellect before they can get to the goodies. I'm sure if a man could get away with wandering over, sticking his nose in your crotch, then humping your leg without permission, he would.

Nicky and I have our own man scale. It's a bit like a slide rule, with most men we meet slipping well off the bottom, like the scaly serpents in a game of snakes and ladders. My fickle neighbour has just slid from 'potential sexy love object' to 'usual waste of space' level, which means he's still pretty high up there. The levels sink as low as a man will go. It's a bottomless pit.

Don't get me wrong, I do like men – rather a lot, actually. I just don't like what they sometimes become when: a) they've had a lot to drink and are out with mates, or b) they think they've got you completely ensnared by their charm, wit and general good looks, and therefore any further effort on their part to keep you happy is a waste of energy that could be far better expended lifting pint glasses and chatting up other women in order to convince themselves that they've still got *it*.

Having said all of this, my best mate Nicky, a usually sane, sensible and totally sorted woman, has decided to risk the ultimate. Throw herself off the emotional precipice of life. Sell herself into emotional and sock-washing slavery for the promise of a joint bank account and regular sex.

She's getting married.

I repeat this to myself mentally, just to see if it will sink in a bit more.

Nicky's getting married.

Nope, I'm afraid it still doesn't register properly. You see, we vowed we'd never do it, but in just over four weeks' time, she's going to don the sacrificial meringue and let herself be given by one man to another.

However, Nicky's so carried away with the whole thing that I've been swept along myself in the ever-building tidal wave that is

my best friend's wedding. I mean, horror of horrors, I've actually let her talk me into donning a pale peach ensemble and drifting churchwards after her. I've even cut short my trip to go back to London and join in the fun. The only reason I'm leaving behind sunny, laid-back Oz, the final leg of my grand tour – a final leg I haven't had much chance to stretch considering I'd only been there for just under a month – is to help Nix in the final run-up to the big day in my official role of Old Maid of Honour; well, that and the fact that I'd practically run out of money.

It was a case of getting a refund on my plane ticket to stay on, then working until I could afford another ticket back – if ever – or coming home and slipping into something silky and sail-like to be Nicky's chief bridesmaid. Strong friendship and sad finances weighed heavy, and so I said goodbye to sun, sea and sensational scenery, and jumped onto the next London-bound flight.

The pilot announces the beginning of our descent and as the plane tilts I look past the two snoozing passengers beside me and see the lights of London stretched out below. I feel a surge of excitement rush through my body. Hellooooo, baby.

No matter how amazing some of the places I've been to were, London is still home, still a nerve-tinglingly exciting metropolis, made even more welcoming by the fact that I know I haven't got to spend half the night lugging my backpack round the streets whilst I look for somewhere to stay that's within my budget (ten Australian dollars, a penknife and a packet of Chinese bubble gum), and that if I suddenly find that I'm desperate for a Mars Bar, a pizza or a packet of Tampax, salvation is only minutes away.

The first thing that hits me when I stagger off the plane, legs like jelly after being in the same position for over twenty-four hours, is how inadequate my beach clothes are for a rather inclement English spring.

Drizzle. I'd forgotten what it was like. It's a bit different from the sweating streets of Bangkok, where a quick downpour was the

equivalent of taking a shower in a hot waterfall. Somehow I manage to get through passport control without being asked to bend and brace, claim my rucksack and sad old tattered duffel bag from the luggage carousel, then fight my way past the other passengers wheeling trolleys piled with luggage, race out into the arrivals lounge, searching the sea of waiting faces for a familiar one.

I always feel really self-conscious wheeling out of customs and into the arrivals lounge, everybody standing there watching you, taxi drivers waving name cards, excited families waiting for homecoming relatives. Is this what it's like being a football player emerging from the tunnel out onto the pitch? All eyes on you, expectant and hopeful.

My sexy-knee'd neighbour from the plane wheels past me, his loose-wheeled airport trolley piled high with expensive leather luggage, a black canvas laptop case and duty-free bags overflowing with booze, fags and perfume. The next minute he's knocked flying as a stunning blonde, in a simplistically stunning Amanda Wakeley suit, with legs up to her tarantula eyelashes, launches herself into his arms.

'Tristan, darling, I've missed you so much.'

Tristan? Well, I was way out on the name front. Then again, my judgement was pretty warped in all areas as far as he was concerned, fickle flirty man.

'Did you miss me?' she pleads, long eyelashes fluttering like a moth against a window.

'You were on my mind every moment I was gone,' he purrs back.

Liar! Tristan takes a rapid snake descent to 'low-down dirty rat-bag' level on my man rating scale, just one rung above 'pond scum from Planet Dirt', and two rungs above the current lowest of the low 'stinking spawn of evil incarnate'.

It's funny, most of the men I met abroad got the same two ratings, the 'only has enough brain cells to appreciate sport, soft drugs and hard liquor' level, or 'would shag a sheep as long as it lit his cigarette afterwards'. I think I must have been socialising in the wrong circles.

I stand and stare straight through Nicky for about sixty seconds before the fact that she's jumping up and down and shouting my name at the top of her voice finally makes its way through to my jet-lagged brain.

'Annabelle! Belle! You're here . . . you're finally here! Oh my God, you look fabulous! Oh my God, I can't believe it's actually you!' she shrieks, rushing forward and throwing her arms round me.

I breathe in the familiar smell of Nicky – coconut shampoo, Fairy washing powder and the faint smell of Trésor put on the night before – before she releases me from her embrace and, holding me at arm's length, looks me up and down, her eyes shining with excitement and pleasure.

'Look at you! You're so skinny and so brown. And, my God, your hair's grown at least a foot. You look amazing, totally amazing . . .'

I gaze back at what I think is Nicky, my mouth set in what is more of a shocked false grin than a genuine smile. I really wish I could say the same, but I can't without lying, and you don't lie to your best friend, now do you?

'So do you.' I force the grin into something I hope looks a little more natural. OK, so it's a little porky, so as not to hurt her feelings. Surely this doesn't count? I mean, she does look great to me, I've missed her so much, but . . .

Nicky grimaces. 'Rubbish,' she replies, smiling weakly. 'I look dreadful and we both know it.'

Nix has always been incredibly pretty without realising it. Her eyes are the sort of brown-green of a conference pear, she has a little pointed chin and a sweet little pointed nose, which she hates because she says it makes her look like a pixie, but which everyone who meets her proclaims is totally adorable.

Now her dark golden-blond hair, usually styled into a sleek bob, looks like it's been subjected to a bad home cut, sticking out in different directions, as dry as a camel that's been eight days without so much as a sniff of an oasis.

She has a large red spot on her chin. You know, the kind that's so huge you can almost see it throbbing, like an aeroplane warning light, through the six layers of Max Factor super concealer she's shoved over the top.

She also must have put on over a stone since I last saw her.

'Comfort eating,' she explains, laughing drily, catching me gazing in amazement at the extra curves her once slender body is now sporting.

'It's funny, isn't it? You eat like a pig, you end up looking like one. By rights I should really look like a chocolate biscuit . . .' She shrugs and laughs weakly. 'Anyway, we can't stand here gassing, you must be totally knackered. Let's get you home – well, my place anyway, which, if it's all right with you, is going to be home for a while. Unless of course you want to go back to your mother's, which I'm sure you don't, seeing as how you haven't spoken to her in five months, and then you can fill me in on everything that's been happening. I want to hear every single gory story in minute detail . . .' She pauses and hugs me again, her eyes suddenly very sad. 'Oh, Belle, it's so good to see you again! You don't realise how much I've missed you.'

'I've missed you too, babe,' I reply, giving her new wobbly bits another amazed squeeze.

Comfort eating? Why should Nicky be comfort eating? Pre-wedding nerves, perhaps? She picks up my duffel bag and, clutching on to my arm with a dog-like grip, tows me out of the terminal and towards a nearby car park, chattering away inanely, holding on to me as though she never wants to let go, yet still strangely distant.

I know we haven't seen each other for nearly two years, but it's not that. Nicky and I have kept constantly in touch throughout – letters, telephone calls, enough post cards to start a minor collection.

There's definitely something wrong here.

On the second level of the multi-storey car park, we come to a halt next to a gleamingly posey green British racing MG.

'Is this yours?' I ask incredulously. 'What happened to Arnold?'

Arnold is, or rather was, Nicky's first love. A beaten-up old Austin Allegro that used to be more temperamental than a Hollywood A-list actress, but like Emily and Bagpuss, Nicky loved him.

'He's been imprisoned in one of the lock-ups near the flat for the past eighteen months,' she explains. 'I couldn't bear to part with him completely, but he didn't quite fit with the new image. Then again, neither do I anymore, do I?'

There's that pathetic little forced laugh again.

I'm starting to get worried now.

This isn't the Nicky I know and love. The infectiously happy, sunny, funny girl who's been Nicola Louise Chase for the past twenty-five years.

And she hasn't mentioned the wedding once either, which, following our communications over the last few months that have been *full* of the impending nuptials, is extremely odd.

Nicky pushes the locking device on her key ring, the car's indicators beep twice and the door locks automatically open. She helps me put my tattered bags into the boot, all the time not quite able to meet my eye, and then we both get into the car.

I decide to take a calculated risk.

'Don't tell me, we're going straight to the dressmakers so you can fit me up in something peach and frightfully frou-frou?' I ask as she fires the engine into life.

I realise I've struck with the first arrow as Nicky's face crumples like a Coke can being run over by the wheel of a car.

'Nicky, what's the matter?'

'Nothing . . . oh, everything!' She finally gives in to the tears and collapses in a heap against the leather steering wheel. 'Everything . . . everything's the matter. It's all gone completely and hopelessly wrong, Belle.'

She leans back in her seat again, groping behind her for her handbag. I carefully reach past her and turn the keys in the ignition so that the car engine cuts and dies.

Pulling a handkerchief out of the bag, Nicky wipes frantically at the tears now streaming from her eyes. It's obviously had several outings today already; the white linen is stained with dark brown mascara and the odd streak of lipstick.

'Oh, Belle, I don't know what to do. I haven't been able to talk to anybody about it. I mean, I tried to talk to my mother, but she just thought I was totally mad even to think it. And I wanted to talk to you, but you were so far away, and I didn't want to worry you in case it was nothing . . .'

She reaches out and clutches my hand. Her own is cold, the nails ragged and bitten. I squeeze it hard.

'What's going on, Nix?' I ask gently.

Nicky stops snivelling into her hankie and looks up at me, her huge eyes wet and sorrowful. 'Richard . . .' She coughs. He's seeing someone else.'

Richard. The husband-to-be. Mr Perfect, according to Nicky's letters, Mr Too Good To Be True.

'He's what? Are you sure?'

'Yes . . . No . . . Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure about anything anymore.'

She turns to me again, tears and mascara pouring down her cheeks.

'Well, something must have happened to make you think it. Has he said anything? Changed in any way?'

She blows her nose loudly on the already sodden handkerchief, and nods.

'He's suddenly started being very evasive. You know – breaking dates, going out without explanation, going for a drink with "friends" but always managing not to state who, working late at the office, but not answering his phone if I call. I don't know, maybe it's me jumping the gun, but he's never been like this before. I don't know what to do, Belle. Maybe I'm overreacting. You know, pre-wedding jitters. I mean, I really hope that's all it is. That's what my mother put it down to . . .'

‘Don’t worry, Nix,’ I reply, hugging her again. ‘Your mother’s probably right. Apparently on top of moving house and divorce, getting married is actually one of the greatest causes of stress. Oh, and death as well. Somebody else’s, obviously, because it’s too late to get stressed out about your own after the fact, isn’t it? Although of course in this case, death could help *relieve* stress. I mean, I’d be more than happy to *murder* Richard for you if you think that would help . . .’

I’m rewarded with a glimmer of a smile.

‘But whatever it is, babe, we’ll sort it out, I promise you. One way or another, we’ll sort it out.’

Nicky reaches over and wraps me in a hug.

‘Thanks, Belle. I knew you’d make things better. You can’t believe how bloody glad I am you’re back.’

I squeeze her affectionately, protective instincts rearing like a mummy marmoset spotting prowling predators. *She* may be pleased I’m back, but I can tell you something: if Richard *is* leading her up the garden path into the tangled briars of treachery, instead of up the aisle wreathed in sweet-smelling bowers of happiness, then he’ll wish I’d stayed more than a continent away. You see, if I find out that he *is* doing the dirty on someone who could quite possibly be one of the sweetest, nicest people inside the M25, then I won’t just murder him – I will murder him slowly, brutally, and extremely painfully.



## Chapter Two

Nicky takes me back to the flat in Limehouse that has been her home for the past two months. It's part of a huge old Docklands warehouse that has been converted to form three floors of split-level, original-pillared, huge-windowed, stonewalled luxury, in an area that's only just far enough on the wrong side of fashionable to still be vaguely affordable.

Nicky's flat is on the second floor, accessed by a steep flight of stone stairs or a pretty swish new lift, which we pile into, my shoes and rucksack depositing little piles of sand on the polished floor.

Despite being upset, Nicky still manages to open the front door to her apartment with a small flourish of justifiable pride.

The new image includes not only a sports car but an apartment to die for. I step through the door into a sort of reception area with another door off to the right leading into a cloakroom. Three steps then go down into the main part of the space, a huge split-level sitting room with wooden floors and brick walls.

The far wall is made up almost entirely of glass and leads out onto what is not quite a roof garden, but certainly much better than a mere balcony, with a few glossy-looking plants in fat terracotta pots, a wooden slatted table and chairs, a matching sun lounger, and even a barbecue against the right-hand wall.

In fact, there seems to be more furniture outside than inside, although the few things she has in the sitting room are very tasteful.

Nicky's always been the sort of person to buy quality rather than quantity. If we were both sent shopping with one hundred pounds, she'd come back with one pair of trousers that would fit like a dream and last her for years, whereas I'd come back with bags full of trash

that would last about two washes before bagging, fraying or fading until it resembled an old dishcloth.

In the centre of the room is a huge Turkish rug I recognise as having been purloined from her parents' dining room, upon which sit two squishy cream sofas set at right angles to each other, with a curvaceous Conran coffee table centred between them.

There's an extensive shelving unit against the right-hand wall, between the far wall and the door that leads into the kitchen. One of those high-tech, high-fashion things, made of beechwood and shaped Perspex, that houses a select assortment of objets d'art, an expensive stereo and a small television set.

It's the sort of apartment you see nestled between the covers of *Hello!* as the London residence of some up-and-coming young starlet. The whole place just screams Expensive. Thank goodness I didn't bring back that didgeridoo. Apart from the problem of lugging it back halfway across the world, it really wouldn't have gone with the ambience; although whilst the ethnic fertility carving I settled on will fit in far better with the decor, it hardly seems appropriate at the moment.

Then again, perhaps I shouldn't think so negatively.

Like she said, Nicky may just be having a bout of pre-wedding nerves, perhaps a panic attack brought on by her own fear that maybe, just maybe, she's not doing the right thing. Richard seeing someone else would really give her the only excuse she could possibly find for pulling out herself at this late hour. What's it called? Projection, I think. That's it: projection of one's own fears onto someone else.

Maybe Nicky's like me, not quite ready to take on the outward trappings of adulthood: masochistic matrimony, motherhood and massive mortgages. And believe me, this place must have one *massive* mortgage.

'Nix, I know you're doing pretty well, but how on earth can you afford a place like this?' I ask, looking round incredulously.

'I can't,' she admits. 'I'm afraid I had to have a lot of help and a rather large mortgage. The down payment was a sort of enormous wedding present from Mum and Dad. I think they were just so amazingly pleased to be rid of me – well, let's just say amazed – that they were quite easy to talk round. Besides, they're both madly in love with Richard. He's the son they always wanted but never had.'

'What about Toby?' I ask, referring to Nicky's pain of a younger brother.

'Exactly. Richard's the son they always wanted but never had. You know, obedient instead of belligerent, showers regularly, works for a living . . .'

'So Toby's still a total reprobate, then?'

'No, that's far too polite. He's still a complete arsehole.'

A small corridor runs to the kitchen. Three doors lead off it. Nicky leads me along, opening the first door on the right.

'This is your room,' she announces, putting my duffel bag on the bed.

There's no window, but above the king-size bed is a huge skylight.

Nicky follows my gaze. 'Sorry you haven't got a view, but you can lie and look at the stars.' She smiles. 'I thought it might help assuage your wanderlust. With no scenery, just the night sky above you, you could be absolutely anywhere in the world. Your bathroom's through there.' She gestures to what I thought was a wardrobe door.

'You mean, I get my own bathroom?'

'Sure.' She grins. 'You do remember how to use a bathroom, don't you?'

'Well, I got so used to peeing in holes in the floor or behind bushes, you'll probably get up in the morning and find me squatting behind a pot plant on the balcony,' I joke, opening the door and peering into what is probably the most immaculate bathroom I've seen in over eighteen months. It's not a huge room, but it's been cleverly split into two, with the bath hidden behind a dividing

wall, a shower cubicle set against the side nearest the door, and a loo and wash-hand basin squeezed into the remaining space. It's all pure white with chrome fittings, and it's the first loo I've been in recently where I haven't had to hold my breath whilst I take a leak for fear of inhaling a stench far worse than the clean tangy smell of lemon Jif.

'What, no bidet?' I mock, gazing round in awe. 'This place is amazing. It's some wedding present! I thought when you married you got things like towels and teasmades and five identical toasters . . .'

At least I would. My mother would give me money. She always gives me money – birthdays, Christmas, you name it. No card, just a small brown envelope with a cheque inside. Normally decent in size, but no way near enough to buy a flat. And as for my wandering star of a father . . . a postcard, if I'm lucky, from somewhere wildly exotic, which would arrive at least two weeks late and owe postage.

'If you don't get married, do you have to give it back?' Why is my humour always so subtle and well timed? I take my foot out of my mouth and follow Nicky back through to the sitting room, where a bottle of wine and two glasses are waiting on the coffee table.

'If I don't get married, I'm not giving anything back.'

'That's a good idea. Keep it all, sort of like a consolation prize. Ditch the man, keep the gifts.'

'Well, why should I have an empty flat as well as an empty life?' Nicky slumps down on the sofa, her bottom lip trembling like a terrified Border collie's. 'And I don't care if I have to work every hour that God sends, I'm going to keep this place with or without Richard.'

'It probably won't come to that, babe.'

I sit down next to her and pat her hand like a nanny trying to comfort a child.

'I'm sure everything's going to be just fine. It's got to be,' I joke gently, 'because no way am I going to stay with my mother, not even if she'd have me.'

'We might both end up on her doorstep begging for a room for the night.' Nicky laughs drily.

'Now *that* really would be a last resort. I'd rather rough it.'

'Oh yeah?' Nicky raises her eyebrows. 'I know you've done some slumming in your time, but I can just see the two of us living in an empty gift box under the Embankment.'

'At least it would be a posh box,' I joke.

In one corner of the room lies a heap of already opened presents. Harrods, Harvey Nicks, Conran, Selfridges . . . The respective rellies have really gone to town.

'Aren't you supposed to open the presents *after* the wedding?'

Nicky shrugs and manages a small smile. 'You know me.'

She was always the sort of child who hunts desperately to find their presents before Christmas Day, despite the fact that they'll have no surprises whatsoever on the actual morning. If you buried them in the back garden she'd still manage to unearth them, like a pig rooting for truffles.

'Besides,' Nicky continues, 'it means I can get my thank-you notes done beforehand and just relax and enjoy the honeymoon.'

Her face is suddenly stricken. 'That's if there *is* a honeymoon.'

'Well, if Richard doesn't go, can I come?' Whoops, there I go again, another size five deck shoe stuffed between my sunburnt lips.

Fortunately Nicky actually laughs.

'I would have thought you'd had enough of a holiday already!'

'You sound like my mother. That wasn't a holiday, it was a *life experience*,' I mock.

There's a collection of framed photographs on the shelving unit. Several of Nicky and me at various stages of our lives: graduation, parties, a pony-trekking holiday in Wales when we were about twelve. There's one of her younger brother Toby in a green rugby shirt, swaying towards the camera with mud in his curly brown hair, a lairy grin on his face and a pint glass in his right hand; another of her parents looking very formal, posed next to the huge

carved stone fireplace in the drawing room of their house in Kent; and taking pride of place on a central shelf is a beechwood-framed photograph of a handsome blond man relaxing in a wooden slatted sun lounger, next to a shimmering pale blue swimming pool. He hasn't taken off his Ray-Bans for the photograph so I can't see what his eyes are like, but his jawbone is square and finely chiselled, and his mouth is curled into what I perceive to be a rather arrogant smile.

'Is that him?'

Nicky nods.

'Yep. That's Richard.'

'He's very good-looking.'

'Isn't he just?' she agrees with just a trace of bitterness evident in her voice.

'If you like that sort of thing,' I add slowly.

'I knew you'd say that.' Nicky's face breaks into a feeble smile. 'He's too perfect for you, isn't he? Hasn't got that element of rough and ready you usually go for.'

'Makes me sound like I normally go for cement-dust-covered brickies with fewer brain cells than there are Smarties in a fun-size pack!'

'Don't worry, I know you're a little more discerning than that . . . just.'

'Cheers, Nick. When was it taken, then?'

'About ten months ago, early last summer, a couple of months after we first met. We were at a house party in Henley . . .'

'Oh, I say, we are going up in the world, aren't we? No, sorry, I forgot, you're already up there. House parties in Henley are just a sideways move for you, aren't they? Whereas for me they're about as far distant as an invite to a private party at Buck Palace.'

'Idiot!' she replies fondly.

Hauling my travel-weary butt off the sofa, I go over and take the photograph from the shelf and look more closely at it.

I'm probably biased from the state I've just discovered my best friend in, but I don't think I like the look of him very much. He looks arrogant and far too self-confident.

All I'd seen before was a blurred snapshot that had been bent so many times by so many different postmen it was hard to make out anything other than the fact that it was Nicky in a big hat, at some garden party or other, holding hands with a man with blond hair and large crease through the middle of his face.

I think I prefer him with a crease through his face. He looks far less smug.

As if on cue, the telephone rings. Nicky dives on the receiver like a hungry bird being thrown a piece of bread.

'Hello?' Her voice softens and lowers.

'Oh – hi, you.'

I assume from the seductive tone and the way her shoulders instantly unknot a little that the caller is Richard.

Sixty seconds into the call, however, Nicky's voice changes back from soft and seductive to broken and upset, full-throated with the threat of further tears, and the muscles in her shoulders return to fully knotted pretzel.

'Oh, right . . . Do you absolutely have to? . . . OK, if it's as important as you say . . .'

There's a pause for a moment whilst she tries to recover her composure.

'I love you,' she says softly, but even I can hear the soft whirring tone that indicates Richard has already hung up.

She looks over at me, eyes heavy and sad, and shakes her head despondently.

'He was supposed to be coming round tonight but he's just cancelled on me.' She sighs heavily and shakes her head again as though trying to dislodge the heavy wave of gloom that's visibly descended. 'That's the second time this week. He said he's got to take some clients out to dinner . . . Last-minute thing, you know

the score, terribly sorry, Nicola,' she mimics, the words catching against the swell of disappointment that's building in the back of her mouth. That 'I've just swallowed a hard-boiled sweet and it's got stuck' kind of feeling that hits when you're fighting back eyeball-and-heart-soaking misery.

She buries her face in her hands, unable to stop the big salty tears spilling through her fingers. 'This is driving me totally crazy. I just need to know, Belle. No matter how bad the truth is, it can't be worse than this.'

'Well, we'll just have to find out the truth then, won't we?' I state firmly, sitting down next to her and pouring her a large glass of chilled wine.

'What do you mean?' Nicky looks up at me between splayed fingers.

'Does Richard know what I look like?'

'Well, he's seen photographs but I doubt if he'd recognise you from those,' she replies, a bemused expression replacing the sad one.

'That's one good thing. Have you got any warm clothes I can borrow?'

'Sure, but . . .'

'Nothing good, just something a bit cosier than the three pairs of shorts and two bikinis that are currently my sole material possessions.'

I pour a mouthful of wine down her throat for medicinal purposes, then, hauling Nicky off the sofa, usher her in the direction of her bedroom, where, after a bit of a hunt through the designer suits, we manage to find a skinny-rib T-shirt, a chunky sweater and a pair of jeans.

'You may as well have these, I grew out of them fourteen pounds ago. I've moved on to fatty-rib T-shirts now,' she jokes weakly. 'Perhaps I should take a trip abroad?' Nicky looks a little green as I slip effortlessly into one of her discarded size ten pair of jeans.



‘Yeah, it’s amazing what poverty and near starvation do for your figure.’

Her tear-filled eyes widen. ‘Was it that bad?’

‘Bad? It was incredible.’

‘So why come back?’

‘Why do you think, you daft old bat?’ I reply, hugging her. ‘Right, now I need the keys to your car.’

I laugh at Nicky’s instantly horrified expression.

‘Not your new one, silly. I wouldn’t trust me in it, let alone expect you to! I meant Arnold. Is he still in legal working order?’

‘Just. I think he’s got about two months’ tax and two hundred miles left in him.’

‘Well, I need the keys to Arnold and directions to Richard’s place.’

‘But why?’ she repeats, her pale face still puzzled. ‘Belle, what are you up to?’

‘Well, if you really want to know the truth,’ I reply, pulling on my dusty Cats and a borrowed Gore-Tex of Nicky’s, and heading towards the door before the lure of that lovely double bed in the guest room becomes too much for me, ‘I’m going to make damn sure I find it out for you.’

This time only two days ago I was on a beach, basking cat-like and contented in the sunshine, azure-blue waves crashing on the shore-line, good book in right hand, cold beer in left hand, a plethora of assorted wet-suited, muscular male bodies bounding round in the surf nearby, bare pectorals glistening with sea spray.

Heaven on earth.

And I gave it all up to come back to this? A night spent sitting outside a house in Chelsea, cooped up in a rusting Austin Allegro with no sound system, a broken seat spring up my bum, sipping from a thermos of rapidly cooling black coffee to stave off the jet lag whilst the rain drums a metallic tattoo on the roof and leaks in

through the windows to soak the already rotting, stinking carpets. Great. And all for what?

To watch my best mate's fiancé arrive home very late, but very much alone.

So much for my detective work so far.

I've been sitting here for five hours and all I get to see is 'Richard the impeccable' pay the cab driver and sprint indoors with his briefcase over his head to shield his perfect hair from the driving rain.

I reach inside my bag and, pulling out Nicky's mobile phone, key in her home number.

'Hello?' mumbles a sleepy voice.

'The cuckoo has landed.'

'You what?'

'I said, the bloody cuckoo has landed!'

'Who is this?'

Oh, shit. Wrong number. I rapidly kill the call and, suppressing some pretty inappropriate laughter, redial.

'Hello?'

This voice sounds more familiar.

'Nicky? Is that you?'

'Of course it's me!' she whispers urgently. 'What's happening?'

'The potential bastard's back.'

'And?'

'Well, he was alone. No two-timing totty hanging off his arm or hiding out in his underpants.'

'And?' she repeats, the tone of her voice indicating that the desire to know is having a good old-fashioned fist fight with the hide-your-head-in-the-sand-like-an-ostrich option.

'And nothing. He arrived back in a taxi about twenty seconds ago, paid the driver, and ran into the house. Can I come back now?'

'Perhaps you should wait and see if she turns up there?'

‘Nicky! It’s two o’clock in the morning, I’ve had about two hours’ sleep in the past twenty-four hours, and besides, we don’t know if there *is* actually a She, do we? I could sit outside his house until he goes to work in the morning and I might see nothing more suspicious than the milkman delivering a pint of gold top and some full-fat yoghurt instead of semi-skimmed and fruit juice.’

‘But Belle!’ she cries. ‘Like you said, it’s two o’clock. Where the hell’s he been until now?’

‘I don’t know, Nix, and short of mugging the taxi driver, I don’t know how I can find out. Look, there’s nothing more I can do tonight. This car’s so damp my whole body’s taken on the texture of an old prune. Put the kettle on, I’ll be home in twenty minutes.’

‘But if you stay there, you might catch him at it.’

‘Nicky, trust me, if I stay here, the only thing I’m going to catch is pneumonia.’

I stagger through the security door of Nicky’s apartment building and, legs buckling under me, crawl slit-eyed into the lift. She’s already waiting by the time it smoothly swishes its way up to the second floor. She’s hanging on to the door frame and watching out for me, face pale with sick anticipation, hair greasy at the roots and scraped back into a ponytail, nails bitten to a ragged edge, just like her nerves.

‘Belle! Thank God you’re back!’ She ushers me inside. ‘Tell me everything . . . What did you see?’

‘Only what I told you – he came home just before I phoned you, and he was definitely alone.’

‘What was he wearing?’

‘Clothes,’ I mutter wearily, kicking off my boots without bothering to unlace them.

‘What sort of clothes?’ she wails.

‘Er . . . work clothes, I think. Trousers . . . obviously . . . a suit of some sort? I don’t know, Nick. I’m sorry, it was pretty dark.’

‘Well, if it was dark you might have missed something important.’

‘Trust me, I may not have been able to see exactly who tailored his suit, but I could easily make out the fact that he was on his own. Oh, and he was still carrying a briefcase, so unless he’d been dancing round it in some disco, I’d say it was very possible tonight’s business dinner was a real one.’

Heading into the room, I pull off my borrowed gloves and rub my blue hands to try and reintroduce some circulation.

Following, Nicky looks at my ice-pop fingers, and her already stricken face clouds with guilt.

‘You’re freezing!’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

She takes my cold hands between her own warm ones and begins to rub absentmindedly.

‘Sorry, Belle.’ The apology’s abstracted, her mind obviously elsewhere and working overtime. ‘Maybe dinner went on for longer than expected,’ she says, lips setting in an ‘I’m determined to be sensible about this’ fashion.

‘Maybe.’

‘Or perhaps he called in to see his parents afterwards, to discuss the wedding or something.’

‘That’s possible.’ I nod encouragingly. ‘There’s probably a perfectly logical explanation for his being so late.’

‘I can’t stand it, Belle!’ Nix wails, letting go of my hands and slumping down on the closest sofa, head in hands. ‘I’m turning into Paranoia Woman. Pull on a pair of underpants over my jeans with a big P on the front and that’s me. I don’t just check his shirt collars for lipstick and perfume – do you know what else I do? Do you know what I’ve been reduced to?’

I don’t, but I have a feeling she’s going to tell me.

‘I sniff his underpants,’ she confides, hiding her eyes behind her fingers in acute embarrassment.

I smile very slowly, hoping that it manages to look like a wry, sympathetic smile instead of a prelude to a fit of hysterical laughter.

‘Well . . . that’s not so bad. Some people are into that sort of thing – you mustn’t feel totally weird. I mean, it’s better than having a fetish about drinking your evening cocoa from his cricket box or something.’

‘No!’ she howls. ‘I don’t mean for pleasure . . . I mean for evidence.’

‘What sort of evidence?’

‘Well, you know . . .’ She frowns.

‘I do?’

‘Don’t be obtuse, Belle, of course you know what I mean. You know . . . the scent of a woman, that sort of thing.’

‘Really?’

‘Really,’ she admits sadly. ‘I go round to his house when I know he’s out, let myself in and rifle through his underwear.’

I’m fighting very hard to suppress a smile which is steadily blossoming into a pretty cheesy grin.

‘It’s not funny,’ Nicky mutters sulkily, ‘it’s totally sad. And what’s worse, he even caught me at it once.’

‘He didn’t!’

‘He bloody did.’ She goes crimson at the memory. ‘He caught me pants-handed, face-down in the linen basket, pair of boxers in one hand, pair of Ys in the other, and my nose buried in his best pair of Calvins.’

Picking up a goldfish bowl-sized wine glass from the coffee table, she takes a huge gulp of Frascati and shakes her head.

‘What did you do?’

‘Apart from having an instant heart attack when he opened the door? Told him I thought it would be a nice surprise if I did his laundry, as he’d obviously been so busy at work recently.’

‘The underpants fairy,’ I giggle. ‘Go to work with tacky trollies, then come home and find some little nymph has whisked in and washed them for you. Er . . . did he ask why you were doing a pre-wash with your tongue, snorting the skid marks, so to speak?’

‘Belle!’ Nix cringes audibly.

‘Well, did you find any?’

‘Find any what?’

‘Evidence. You know: long blonde hairs, the lingering smell of scampi fries?’

‘Annabelle!’ Nicky pulls a shocked face at me. ‘I honestly don’t know if spending over twenty months roughing it was any good for you.’

‘Now you sound like my mother,’ I sigh. ‘So, if you didn’t find anything incriminating in the pants department, what makes you think he’s seeing someone else anyway?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ She frowns. ‘Apart from the cancelled dates, I’ve just got this terrible feeling something’s wrong.’

‘So it’s fact-based then,’ I reply sarcastically.

‘No, more gut-based. I’ve seen what the guys at work are like when they’re playing round: all the lies and pretending to be working late when they’re actually entertaining one of the secretaries from floor three to an evening of unbridled passion in the stationery cupboard.’

‘Sex, lies and sticky tape, a story of lust up against the filing cabinet?’ I joke.

Nicky laughs weakly.

‘Please don’t make fun of me, Belle. I know I’m acting like I’m a few supermodels short of a fashion show at the moment, but I really need to know the truth, because even if it is all in my imagination, I’m going to ruin the relationship anyway by being so bloody paranoid about it all.’

She buries her face in her hands again, but I can still see the tears trickling over her fingers.

‘I feel like I’m going crazy, Belle,’ she sobs. ‘You’ve got to help me.’

Nicky has always been the bright one, the focused one, always knowing where she’s at and where she’s going.

I’ve been the dreamer, with the lounge-in-the-sunshine mentality, always following my heart instead of my head.

Now here she is, green eyes brimming with sadness, underlined by bruised purple shadows, slumped on the sofa in her beautiful flat, surrounded by the material evidence of her overwhelming success, and completely and totally knocked for six by a member of the opposite sex.

Looking up again she reaches for the wine bottle on the coffee table, a different one from the bottle that was there when I left the flat, and tips it glass-wards. She is rewarded with a mere trickle.

‘Whoops! Empty.’ She forces a false smile and, getting up rather unsteadily, heads in the direction of the tray of spirit bottles on one of the unit shelves.

‘Just have to hit the hard stuff.’

This can’t be vibrant, confident, totally in control Nicola Chase – pale, drawn, on the verge of tears, and heading for the brandy at three o’clock in the morning.

For the first time in our lives she needs me to be the strong one, to take control. Taking her by the shoulders, I steer her away from the drinks tray and back onto one of the sofas.

The wedding is just over four weeks away.

You can do a lot in four weeks.

I perch on the edge of the coffee table opposite and, taking Nicky’s shaking hands, make her look at me.

‘Look, Nix, I’m your best friend, OK? You’ve always looked out for me, now it’s my turn to look out for you. I may not have discovered anything tonight, but trust me, if something is going on I’m going to find out for you. For the next twenty-one days I’m going to eat, sleep and breathe Richard Ackerman. Whatever it takes, if I have to bloody follow him everywhere he goes – although I may draw a line at following him into the Gents – I’ll find out the truth for you, I promise.’

‘Oh, Belle.’ She looks up at me, huge eyes hopeful. ‘You’d do that for me?’

I nod determinedly.

'I could be the new James Bond,' I joke. 'In drag.'

'Well, I can't be Blofeld,' Nicky sniffs, managing a smile. 'I'm allergic to cats.'

I shake my head. 'He's the baddy anyway. Richard has to be the baddy.'

'I thought the baddy was called Oddjob?'

'He was the small one.'

'Well, that's definitely Richard then.' Nicky sniggers into a man-size tissue.

'OK, so Richard can be a mixture of the two.'

'What – BlowJob?' she shrieks. 'Well, that would certainly be appropriate.'

'Yeah, and you can be Miss Funny Fanny,' I giggle.

'Thanks a lot, Belle!'

Nicky stops laughing through her tears and squeezes my hands hard.

'No, I mean that. Thanks, Belle.'

'Anything for you, babe,' I tell her. 'Besides, I'm quite looking forward to becoming Richard's own personal Cato, his second shadow, sliding in and out of doorways, tailing him wherever he goes. I suppose it could be kind of exciting really ...'

Blimey, Richard's a boring bastard!

He eats lunch at the same restaurant every day except Wednesdays, when for some inexplicable reason he never re-emerges from the building until it's time to go home. Apart from the first night that I watched outside his rented Victorian terrace, he always leaves work at seven o'clock on the dot, and arrives home by taxi forty minutes later – depending on the traffic, of course.

He wears a different suit every day of the week, but after almost two weeks of Richard-watching I realise he wears the same suit on the same day, like he's got a Monday suit, a Tuesday suit and so on, and for some reason Friday is always Armani day.