

The Good Girlfriend's Guide to Getting Even



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ZAFFRE



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*To Carlene Wright, fellow sporting widow and very good friend,
for the Blackpool darts weekend that left memories I'll never
forget (no matter how hard I try). Here's to the
next sporting trip our husbands drag us on.*





1

‘Ouch!’ I shout as my elbow whacks into the cubicle wall for the zillionth time, and I start muttering swear words like I’m Gordon Ramsay. Hiding in a cubicle in my work toilets and squeezing myself into a tight dress requires the acrobatic skills of a ninja. There seems to be an obstacle at every turn. One wrong hop when I’m putting my tights on and I’ll be plunging my foot into somewhere only a bath in Dettol would fix, but hop too far the other way and I risk poking an eye out on the door hook.

It’s a tricky minefield, and something I wouldn’t be doing if this wasn’t a true emergency, but my boyfriend Will and I are meeting my parents for dinner and I’m running late. I’d intended to nip to the gym en route to dinner to have a proper shower and change, but I’ve been swamped at work and left it too late.

I tried to tell my parents that a six o’clock dinner reservation midweek was a bad idea, but it’s my dad’s birthday and it was at his insistence. Knowing him, and his frugal ways, there will be some special offer for eating early.

I finally wrestle the zip up my back and make a break for freedom out of the cubicle to pop some make-up on, only to find a



woman standing at the sink washing her hands. No need for the extra blusher I'm about to apply; my cheeks automatically pink up in embarrassment at my swearing.

'Going somewhere nice, Lexi?' she asks, clearly trying not to laugh. She's one of the serious women who works in finance and I can never remember her name. She's probably my mum's age, all twin-set and pearls, and I'm guessing she's never had to do a quick change in the toilet. It's practically an impossible task worthy of *The Cube*.

'I'm off to dinner at Le Bistro.'

'Nice. Special occasion?'

'My dad's birthday.'

'Well, have a nice time,' she says, looking at me again and hiding what looks like a smirk.

I quickly glance down at myself, and can't see what she's smirking at. I think I've scrubbed up pretty well. I breathe a sigh of relief that I'm alone once more, and I focus on my face, slapping on my foundation defiantly.

I've discovered on many occasions that the fluorescent lighting in the toilets is not conducive to make-up application. When they designed the 1960s-style council building, with its minimal windows and abundance of strip lighting, they hadn't thought what that would mean for any girl trying to get ready in the windowless toilets. The lights are so bright it's like being on the telly, and it's very easy to overcompensate, which means that when you go back out into the real world, your office colleagues either mistake you for some type of hooker, or you look like your five-year-old niece applied your blusher.

Make-up done, I give myself a quick look in the mirror. I'm wearing a tight-fitting dress with a floaty lace overlay. I bought it in the sale last year and have been dying to find a reason to wear it ever since. I've perhaps put on a couple of pounds since I bought it, and while it might be a little snug, I think it still looks pretty good – no matter what the finance lady thinks.

At least my mum will be impressed that I'm wearing an actual dress and tights. If I'd turned up in what I wore to work this morning (frumpy black palazzo pants and a baggy, misshapen grey cardie), she probably would have sent me back home to change. The last time she met me from work she looked at my outfit and told me that it was no wonder I was thirty-one and unmarried if that's how I dressed.

I put a final coat of lippy on and rush out of the toilets. The only thing worse than having a dressing-down from my mum about my clothes, is her telling me off for being late.

'Oops, sorry,' I say as I turn a corner and bash straight into someone.

'Woah, there,' says Mike, a colleague who I sit next to. 'Where's the fire?'

I'm tempted to stop and talk to him as he's with the fit guy from the top, better known as the guy that works in the executives' department at the top of our building. He's all pin-striped suit and perfect hair, and every time I see him he has a strange effect on me.

I've never actually been this close to him, and I try to force myself to keep moving before I fall under the spell of his hypnotic eyes.

'Sorry, Mike. I'm off to dinner at Le Bistro,' I say, fluttering my eyelids at the fit guy from the top while trying to show him how sophisticated I am – like I'm the type of girl who goes to posh restaurants all the time.

'Uh, before you go . . .' he calls.

'Can't stop, I'm running really late.'

I give Mike a quick wave over my shoulder and hot step it out of the council offices. I feel a bit rude not stopping to hear what he's got to say, but I'm sure it was just a question about the audit we're about to have. We're all desperately trying to get all our ducks in a row before an inspector comes in to see what we do as a department, but it's already five past six and if I don't make it to the restaurant soon, not only will my mum tell me off, but she'll be left unchaperoned with Will. Any time she's alone with him she brings up the topic of him proposing.

I dump my work clothes in my car as I pass, before doing a quick jog, or rather totter in these heels, to the restaurant, which is just off the main high street.

I spot my family straight away as I walk past the window – it's hard not to when they're the only people in the restaurant. Will looks relieved as I race through the door and over to the table.

'I'm so sorry I'm late. Work is nuts at the moment,' I say, leaning over to give my dad a quick peck on the cheek and passing him his present. 'Happy Birthday.'

'Thanks, Lexi,' he says, smiling up at me.

I bend down to kiss my mother, too, and as she brushes my cheek with her lips she stops.

'What on earth do you look like?'

‘It’s a dress,’ I say, standing up straight and brushing it down. ‘I thought you’d be pleased that I made an effort to wear something that shows off my figure.’

‘It might have been nice if perhaps not quite so much of you was on display.’

I’m about to open my mouth to reply that this is the fashion, and lace is in, when Will gets up and stands behind me. Maybe now, after years of nodding along whenever my mother snipes at me, he’s decided to stand up for me and defend my wardrobe choice.

‘Lex, your skirt’s tucked into your tights at the back,’ he whispers.

I close my eyes and wish that I could disappear. When I open them a second later and see my mother still staring at me with pursed lips and a raised eyebrow, I realise that it hasn’t worked, so instead I try as best I can to pull the dress out from my tights as discreetly as possible. God love my boyfriend for trying to protect what little modesty I had left.

Needless to say my dress must have been in my tights since I came out of the cubicle. Thinking about it, I bet that was what Mike was going to tell me. He’s a good egg and I’m sure he wouldn’t have let me walk out like that. And while I’m not too embarrassed that he noticed – I’m guessing he saw worse at last year’s Christmas party when I drunkenly fell over and flashed our entire department – I am mortified that the fit guy from the top saw. Not to mention everyone on the high street as I walked here. I wonder if the finance lady saw my mistake as well and didn’t say anything – that’s almost against the code of sisterhood.



She's off my Christmas card list – well, she would be if I could ever remember her name. Thinking about it, maybe that's why she doesn't like me.

I clear my throat and move away from Will to sit down at the table. I place my napkin over my knees and try to act like I've got some dignity.

My parents go back to looking at their menus. 'You look lovely in the dress,' says Will, using his menu as a shield.

'Thanks. It's always a bit awkward doing the quick change in the loo.'

'Ah, well. At least it was empty in here.'

'Too bad the high street wasn't when I was on my way. Do you know, I even had a wolf whistle! I haven't been whistled at for years – I was well chuffed.'

'I'd whistle at you,' he says, winking.

I smile and I'm about to say something cheeky back when my mum coughs. I'd almost forgotten my parents were here.

Will and I lower our menus like naughty schoolchildren that have just been caught passing notes at the back of class.

'So, I bumped into Vanessa's mum yesterday in Sainsbury's. She's all excited about the big day.'

I feel my muscles starting to tense in preparation. It's as if I'm putting up a force field around myself.

'I'm sure she is,' I say, as if it's no big deal.

One of my childhood best friends, Vanessa, is getting married a week on Saturday. While I'm very excited that she's tying the knot, my mother seems to have taken it as a personal insult that she's dared to get married before me.



'I hadn't realised that they'd only been together for *four* years,' she says in a tone as if they'd only met last month.

'That set menu looks good,' I say, pointing at the handwritten chalk board mounted on the walls. 'I adore monkfish.'

My mother chooses to ignore me, and ploughs on like a steam roller.

'Her mum was saying that Vanessa's dress is from that little bridal boutique off Kimberly Lane.'

'Um, yes, I think it is,' I say, trying not to fuel the conversation.

'I see it when I'm on the way to Zumba. It looks magical. I always walk past it and hope that one day I'll be going in there,' she says longingly.

I sense Will getting fidgety next to me. If I'm uncomfortable with this topic of conversation, Mr Commitmentphobe is bound to be. You see, Will and I have been together for seven years and, despite us living together, he's yet to produce a small, sparkly ring. Not that I really care *that* much. In my mind, our joint mortgage is probably more binding and difficult to break than a marriage certificate, but it's a different story for my mum. It's not that she objects to us living in sin or anything. As far as I can tell, she needs me to get married so that she has something to write about in her Christmas letter. Last year, she apparently emailed everyone to tell them she was doing a charity donation in lieu of cards, which I think was because she was too embarrassed to write for yet another year that I was neither engaged nor married.

Sure enough, Will's now looking at his watch as if he wants to get home as quickly as possible and away from my interfering mother.



Luckily for both Will and me, the waitress comes over and takes our order. We've all decided to go for a set menu that includes main course and dessert, so at least we've shaved off twenty minutes by not having starters.

'So have you had a nice birthday, Dad?' I ask, well and truly shutting down the Vanessa conversation.

'I have thanks, love. I got an excellent book called *Match of My Life*.'

'Oh, great. From Mum?'

'No, he bought it for himself. I bought him a jumper from M&S.'

Dad gives me a weak smile. Thirty-five years of marriage and every year he gets an M&S jumper for his birthday.

'I've read that one,' says Will. 'It's really good. Have you seen the *Got Not Got* Southampton book? I was reading it thinking you'd like it.'

'Yes, I got that for Christmas. Great book. So many memories.'

I roll my eyes as Will and my dad get lost talking about different football books. The fact that they're both Southampton fans is the only thing they have in common, and therefore the only thing they ever talk to each other about. I always thought it would be nice to have a boyfriend that got on well with my dad, but when they spend hours discussing the percentages of possession in the last game, I realise that I should have been careful what I wished for.

My father thinks Will's the bee's knees, unlike my mother, who disapproves of him, largely for not yet allowing her to become mother of the bride. Of course, my father's impression





is based solely on the fact that Will has a Southampton Football Club season ticket. He could be the world's worst boyfriend, but as long as he went dutifully to every home game, then he'd still be OK. Luckily for me, he's actually a pretty good boyfriend, but still . . .

I try and tune out their conversation about the league table, and that of my mother, who's started telling me about her next-door-but-one neighbour whose daughter just had a baby. I'm sure you can imagine how she feels about grandchildren. Instead I use my time to daydream about the novel I'm writing.

We make it through to dessert without me tipping wine over my mum's head, much to my amazement. She was actually quite restrained, having got distracted by telling me all about the scandal of the stolen fridge magnets at her work (it was as riveting as it sounds). My dad and Will are sitting in silence since exhausting their talk about football somewhere between the main course and dessert. All in all, we're on the homeward straight, and bar a cup of coffee we'll be off back home – and it's only 7.30. Gotta love an early dinner.

As another waitress sets down our coffee I notice that Will's hands are shaking as he drops two sugar-lumps into his cup before stirring vigorously. He clatters the spoon so noisily against the china cup that even my dad looks over at him to see if everything's OK.

I know that dinner with my mother would put anyone on edge, but I'm sure he's jumpier than usual.





'Have you got your outfit sorted for the wedding next week, then?' asks my mother.

What was I saying about being on the homeward straight?

I burn my tongue as I try to finish my coffee in a bid to get away more quickly.

'Yes, all sorted. I'll take lots of photos and show you next time I see you.'

Can't wait for that meet-up. I must remember to leave Will at home.

'Ah, perfect. It'll be nice to have some copies of photos of you at a wedding, even if it isn't your own.'

I can feel Will's leg jiggling under the table and I'm just hoping that his coffee is decaf as he's clearly already got way too much nervous energy to add caffeine into the mix.

'Well, thanks for a lovely dinner,' I say, placing my cup down and looking expectantly at my dad for him to summon the bill.

'Yes, thank you,' says Will.

He glances at his wrist and looks in shock at the time, as if he hasn't been checking it every few minutes since we got here.

'The football's just kicked off,' he says, turning to my dad. 'Do you fancy going to the Swan round the corner to watch it?'

'Football? On a Tuesday?' I say, exasperated.

'Champions League,' says Will without missing a beat. 'Real Madrid vs Man City.'

So that's why he's been checking his watch all night. Not because he wanted to get away from my mother, but because he didn't want to miss the game. Honestly, him being that anxious and jumpy about two teams that he doesn't even support is just





typical. My boyfriend is so sports-obsessed that he'd watch tiddlywinks if Sky Sports broadcast it.

'Oh, I'd forgotten that was on,' says my dad.

Although he's a big Southampton fan, he's not as addicted to watching sport as Will is.

'We could go to the pub to watch it, and Lexi can take Jean back to ours for a cup of tea until we're finished.'

My mouth drops open.

'Um . . .' I stutter, as the house is definitely not tidy enough to have my mum over. I can't remember the last time I hoovered and I don't even know if I loaded last night's dinner plates into the dishwasher. 'Why can't we come to the pub too?'

I'm not a football fan, and I couldn't think of anything worse than going to the Swan to watch the game, but I feel a bit affronted that we're being farmed off like good little women to drink tea at home while the men go to the pub.

'Because you hate the Swan and you hate football. You'll be much more comfortable at home.'

Really? With my mum turning her nose up at the state of my house? But I can't say that out loud – I wouldn't want her to know how we really live in a pigsty.

'But . . .'

Will is glowering at me with a look so severe that I stop myself from saying anything else.

'Actually, Will, as kind as your offer is,' says my mother, 'I've booked tickets to the cinema for eight o'clock. That's why we're eating so early – it's not just because your dad is tight, Lexi.'

She laughs a little, and my dad even raises a smile.



'Thanks, Will. Some other time, yeah?' he says almost hopefully.

'OK,' says Will, looking crestfallen.

He obviously really wanted company to watch the game. He would usually go with his best mates Aaron and Tom, but they must be busy.

'I'll go with you,' I say, trying to plant an enthusiastic smile on my face.

He narrows his eyes as he looks at me.

'You don't have to.'

'No, I want to. You clearly really want to go and see it.'

'That settles it, then,' says my mother. 'Alan, get the bill, will you?'

My boyfriend smiles, and I see the anxiety fade away. All he wanted was someone to watch football with him. This way at least we can go and have a nice glass of wine together and shake off the dinner with my mother. It's not like I have to watch the football anyway as I've got my trusty Kindle in my bag – one of the many tools I have in my arsenal as a sporting widow. I'm always prepared for being on the sidelines of some sort of sporting activity.

2

‘Just think, this time next week you’ll be married,’ says wide-eyed Cara.

‘I know. It’s mad, isn’t it? I can’t believe it,’ says Vanessa.

Neither can I. It seems that nearly all my friends are getting married, and most of them met their significant others way after I met Will.

‘Maybe one of you two will catch the bouquet,’ she continues.

I smile politely. I don’t even bother trying to these days. What’s the point when I know I’m not going to be next. Will told me a few years ago that he’d ask me at the right time. I’ve since learnt that his definition of the right time is when Southampton win the Premiership. And I think they’ve got about as much chance of that happening as I have getting my novel published and it hitting the bestseller charts.

‘Not me,’ says Cara, ‘I stay away from those things. I’ve got too much exploring to do to be the next one down the aisle.’

‘Blimey, Cara, if you’re the next one down the aisle then my mum really will have kittens,’ I say laughing. ‘No offence.’

‘None taken,’ she says, giving me a little arm rub. ‘But I hear that Southampton are doing well this season. Maybe this year’s the year.’



'Now you sound like Will.' Ever since Leicester City won the league, he's been convinced that Southampton are going to do the same. 'No, but really, I'm fine not getting married. We practically are anyway – we live together, we bicker, we barely have sex. That's like marriage, right?'

Note to self, best not to make dismissive jokes about marriage to person tying the knot in five days' time. Vanessa is not pulling a happy face. She better hope the wind doesn't change or her super-expensive wedding photographer will be a complete waste of money.

'Of course, I'm sure not every marriage is like that,' I add hastily. 'Why don't I get us some more drinks in? I think we've got just about enough time before writing group.'

'Hey, I caught you,' says Will a little breathlessly. I look up and instantly feel bad that we were just joking about him. I hope he didn't hear.

'What are you doing here? Is everything OK?'

I'm suddenly fearful that he's the bearer of awful news. Maybe someone's died. Why else would he come all the way down here?

'Yes, it's fine. I just came to deliver this.'

He holds up my printed assignment for tonight's class. I'm sure I put it in my bag after dinner.

'Oh God, I can't believe I forgot that.'

'I know. I went to the kitchen to grab a beer and saw it on the table. I know how hard you worked on it, so I thought you'd be disappointed to have left it at home.'

'Thanks, honey,' I say, standing up to take it from him and giving him a kiss. It was really sweet of him to come all the way





here to drop it off. 'I'm surprised you came. Weren't you watching the football?'

'I was, but it's half-time. I should only miss five minutes or so.'

I smile – that's my boyfriend. Although missing five minutes is quite a serious sacrifice for Will.

'Well, thank you,' I say, still genuinely touched.

'Right, I best be off,' he says.

'Don't forget to wish Vanessa good luck. The next time you'll see her is on Saturday at the wedding.'

'Oh, um, yes. Of course. Good luck, Vanessa,' he says.

'Thanks, Will.'

He gives us a little wave and then dashes out of the pub back to his precious football.

'That was really sweet of him,' says Vanessa.

'I know, it was. I would have been gutted when I realised I'd left that at home. For once I'm actually happy with my work.'

'I can't wait to hear you read it out,' says Cara. 'Now, are we getting that other drink?'

Vanessa glances at her watch.

'I'm probably going to have to get going. I've still got orders of service to print off.'

'OK, thanks for coming down to see us. I can't wait to see you on Saturday. The next time we speak you'll be Mrs Vanessa Hancock,' I say, excited.

'I know,' she says, the smile reappearing on her face. 'I've clearly redeemed myself. 'I wish I could have had you girls as my bridesmaids, though. You know that, don't you?'





'We know,' I say, as I give her a kiss goodbye and wish her luck.

'I wish we were bloody bridesmaids, too,' says Cara as Vanessa heads out of the pub.

'Do you? All that standing around, and can you imagine how intense she's going to be the morning of the wedding? We'd have been sprinkling Prozac into her cornflakes.'

'Yeah, but do you know how much being a bridesmaid increases your chances of hooking up with someone? It's like the law that a bridesmaid has to get together with an usher.'

I roll my eyes at her. And there was me thinking she was being sentimental for the fact that we'd been friends with Vanessa for almost fifteen years.

I have to admit I was a little gutted when I found out that I wasn't going to be bridesmaid, as it might have been the closest I'd get to an altar for a long time, but with Vanessa having three sisters and the groom having two, the places had already been filled at birth.

'Despite not being a bridesmaid, I'm actually looking forward to the wedding.'

'I know, me too. It sounds like it's going to be amazing and she seems to have worked so hard on all the little details.'

'Hmm,' says Cara. 'I'm more interested in the seating plan and how far away we're going to be from her cousin Max. I hear he's an usher. Do you remember him from her mum's fiftieth when we were in sixth form? I've been looking for someone to help me test the headrest I've just bought for my swing since Bob the Baker is out of the picture as he did this weird bum thing.'





‘Cara, what have we said about over sharing? You know the rules. I don’t want to hear about what goes on in your bedroom,’ I say, thinking that conversations with her should come with their own form of brain bleach.

‘Well, you know what my golden rule is,’ she says in a husky way before giggling.

‘Isn’t it simply that anything goes?’

‘I do draw the line somewhere, you know.’

‘Uh-huh,’ I say, not believing her in the slightest.

‘So, seriously, are you OK about this wedding on Saturday?’ she says, changing the subject.

‘Yes, I’ll be fine. I know I was a bit jealous when she got engaged, but I’ve had plenty of time to get over it. Besides, Will’s going to be with me, and we usually have a bit of a mushy time at weddings. Plus, you won’t be the only one getting some. Weddings are like the one time we’re guaranteed to have sex when we get home.’

‘What is it about weddings that they’re like the ultimate aphrodisiac?’ asks Cara.

‘I don’t know,’ I say, my cheeks colouring at thoughts of the last time Will and I went to a wedding. We ended up getting pretty hot and heavy behind the marquee as we were leaving. If only I could channel the wedding horn and bring it out all year.

Both Cara and I are sitting in silence for a moment, and for once I’m guessing our thoughts are along the same lines. But while mine are like something out of a Jilly Cooper novel, I’m sure hers could be taken from the pages of a Sylvia Day.





'Evening, ladies,' says Janet, our writing group leader as she walks past us.

'Hello, Janet,' I say, looking up, startled to see her. My fantasy had been so vivid that I had expected Will to be standing in front of me.

I fan myself with my writing folder to attempt to reduce the colour in my cheeks.

'I always feel like the naughty girl at the back of the class whenever she catches us having a drink beforehand,' says Cara, draining the rest of her wine glass.

'I know. It's like if you don't want us to have a drink first, don't hold the meetings in a pub.'

'Thank God she does, though, as I'd never be able to read out half of my work without a glass of wine.'

'You're telling me. I think most of the group are grateful that they can down something while listening to you as well. And to think, you don't even go into the really raunchy stuff in class. I nearly had kittens when I read that first sample you gave me.'

'Yeah, hardcore S&M novels can be a bit of a shock to the senses the first time.'

I'd think they would be a shock all the time. I can only just look Cara in the eye again since reading her work.

Who'd have thought she had been the quiet one in our group in sixth form. She barely even said boo to a boy. Yet, something had happened to her at uni and she discovered who she really was, and ever since then she's been a rampant man-eater.

'I'm not too sure that my homework is any good this week. I'm not looking forward to reading it out at all,' says Cara.





‘Me neither.’

‘But I thought you said earlier you were pleased with it.’

‘I am, but I’m just dreading what Dr Doom and Mr Gloom will say.’

‘Ah well, you can ignore them. I’m sure it rocks.’

I sigh. If it wasn’t for the fact I get to have a gossip with Cara, then the negative comments of those two members of our group would have made me give up coming to this writing group.

I wrote my first complete novel four years ago. So far the only people that have read it in its entirety are Cara and Will. After sending samples and realising it was virtually impossible to secure an agent and get published, I joined the group for help. It’s great for making me write and try new things, and it would be perfect without Dr Doom and Mr Gloom who write ‘serious literary fiction’ and therefore always attack and pull apart the seat-of-your-pants thrillers that I write. Speak of the devils, here they are now.

The middle-aged man (aka Mr Gloom) and the younger failed hipster wannabe (Dr Doom) walk into the pub and mutter hellos as they go into the back room.

The rest of our group are an eclectic mix of writers of sci-fi and fantasy, steampunk, chick lit, historical fiction, poetry and plays.

‘Shall we go in?’ asks Cara, wrinkling up her nose.

If my commercial thrillers take a beating, you can imagine the reaction she gets for her erotic fiction. The only difference is Dr Doom and Mr Gloom are usually blushing too much to critique her in the same way as they do me.



'I guess so.'

We slowly stand up and make our way into the room, finding ourselves our normal seats.

Once everyone has taken their seats Janet kicks the class off.

'Right then, have we all had a good week?'

We nod enthusiastically.

'Anyone got any news they want to share?'

She pulls her glasses down on to the bridge of her nose as if to inspect us a little closer, her face hopeful.

Every week she asks the same question, and every week you can see the disappointment on her face that one of us has not become the next J. K. Rowling.

She's met with silence.

'Right then. The only bit of news I've got is that my latest novel, for any of you following the series, is published on Thursday.'

Janet is a romance author and seems to have a book published every other week. They're historical bodice rippers of the Mills & Boon series variety – not really my type of thing, but it's nice that the group is at least led by someone who knows about the industry, even if Dr Doom and Mr Gloom like to pretend they know more.

'Now, before we get stuck in, I want to warn you that we're going to spend the next few sessions looking at marketing yourself. I know you might think it's irrelevant, but these days as an author you'll be asked more and more to do self-promotion, and it doesn't just start when you get published. You'll find that it could help you to secure a deal if you're active in promoting yourself and have an existing following.'

I groan. How am I going to get a following? I'm lucky if I can get my mum to like a post on my personal Facebook page.

'We'll spend next week looking at what other authors are doing as best practice, and then the week after I want us all to have a go at setting up a blog. So, have a think about possible topics between now and then. It doesn't have to be about books and writing – it could be about your life or a hobby.

'You'll write the first one for homework, and then I want you to keep on publishing for a few weeks. We can then look at social networking and promotion to see if we can push up your statistics.'

I know that's a couple of weeks away, but I'm already panicking.

'Back to this week and those introductions you wrote as homework. Let's dive straight into the sharing part, shall we? I'm looking forward to hearing them.'

As hateful as this bit of the group is, I think my writing is slowly getting better as a result.

'Lexi, why don't we start with you?' says Janet, smiling her ever-encouraging smile.

'Um, OK,' I say, rising slowly to my feet and digging out my piece of paper.

'Klaus clutched at his sides as he approached the wooden cabin,' I start, trying to keep my voice from going all high-pitched and squeaky. I read through the short introduction to a new thriller as best I can. It's pretty hard when my hands are shaking as much as if I were on a rollercoaster.

I finally finish and scrunch up my sheet of paper.

'Lovely, Lexi,' says Janet, beaming the coathanger smile once more. 'Very nicely read.'

Not quite the same as very nicely *written*, but still a compliment.

I sit back down and Cara gives me a thumbs up.

'I thought it was ace,' she whispers.

I smile at her as best I can and tense my muscles in preparation for the onslaught about to come my way.

'So the guy dies of a heart attack?' ask Mr Gloom.

'Uh-huh,' I say through gritted teeth. Here we go.

And as I listen to him and Dr Doom continue to slag off my work, it makes me feel like I'm never going to get anywhere. I try to let the comments bounce off me, developing that thick skin everyone says you need to cope as a writer, but I can't deny that they get to me and I feel like giving up.

Perhaps I just need to accept my situation. I am not destined to be a published writer, any more than I'm destined to get married this side of thirty-five.