



# Part One

FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT . . .



# ONE

## MARCH

**I** 'M TOTALLY ACING LIFE,' I think with a smile as I slam my car door shut with one hand and pick my Starbucks order off the roof of the car with the other, all while balancing a hefty stack of paperwork and some samples in one arm and hanging my old slouchy brown handbag (soft leather with a brand-new YSL lipstick inside and space for a bento box, thank you very much) over my shoulder. What is this amazing skill you develop once you have children? One minute you're drinking cheap snakebites out of plastic cups with your student friends, and the next, you're a sober working mother to one small human and you can competently carry 846 items with just

your left arm. I tell you, there's always something new to discover.

After crossing the road without dropping a thing and pushing open the door of MADE IT, I feel a rush of warm air hit me and silently wish the girls didn't always blast the heating so high. It's not a hot yoga class, it's an office, for goodness' sake. My office, to be exact. Well, it is while Natalie isn't here.

MADE IT was and is the brainchild of Natalie Wood, the most together, savvy, inspirational businesswoman I know, and my friend now too, I guess. Natalie set up her make-up artistry and modelling agency here in Cambridge just before her first son was born. Now he's at university, she's taking some well-earned time out and travelling the world with her wonderfully supportive husband Martin, while her two other perfect sons are excelling in their school programmes. And here I am – once her assistant but now second-in-command – running the place while she's away.

It took a lot to get here, and I want so much to do well at this. Last year was one of the worst and best of my life. But after tackling some major drama in New York City (seriously, don't ask) where I showed Natalie that I could step up to the plate, she asked me to take over while she took her first proper break in years. At first, I

was apprehensive but if life – and Natalie – have taught me anything lately, it's that you have to put your best foot forward and believe in yourself. This year, that's how it's going to be. And, while I'm at it, I'm going to show my little girl that's the way to do it too.

I've been holding the fort since January, and Natalie will be back at the start of April. If anyone asks, I'm loving every second, everything's under control and I don't lie in bed at night ticking off a mental list of things I need to work through the next day. I'm absolutely *not* sometimes desperate for Natalie to come back, I don't *ever* have a five-minute stealth panic in the toilets and I never have to search the 'LadyBoss' tag on Instagram for motivation before meetings (even though I detest the term – we don't ever say 'GentBoss', do we? It's not that incredible that a lady can be a boss, is it? But I digress). OK, so maybe I do freak out about it all from time to time, but if I think back to where my life was twelve months ago, I'm bloody glad to be here and wouldn't change it for the world. Unless by 'world' you mean a billion pounds, calorie-free carbs and a child who listens to me when I ask her to get dressed for school.

So here I am – Robin Wilde, Badass Boss Single Mum Extraordinaire – acing it. Well, maybe I'm hiding in my office with my caramel mocha, hoping to limit any

interactions with Skye Bristly, the office darling, who intimidates the shit out of me, while also appearing cool and boss-like enough to earn the adoration of the other girls who pop in to file their reports and portfolios and pick up new briefs.

All I really want to do is keep my head down, work out the budgets, chair the creative meeting, handle the booking rotas and plan next month's shoots without being embroiled in conversations about reality shows or the latest vegan yoghurt. I can't keep up with all these things. I'm more of a Netflix-and-chill sort of a woman. As in, watch actual Netflix, eat my seven-year-old daughter's leftover fish fingers and slump on the sofa in a position where I don't have to use a single muscle in my body.

Like I said, I'm totally acing life.

I sit down at my desk and take a deep breath. Today is definitely the day I blitz all the piles of paper in front of me. The expenses to sign off, budgets to input, ideas to arrange on mood boards, invoices to chase, rotas to finalise and old jobs to file. I might even tackle the stacks of paperwork I have in 'organised piles' on the window-sill behind me, too.

I love having my own office. There's something very satisfying about having your own walls and your own desk and your own drawers to fill. I wouldn't say it's

exactly 'Manhattan corner office' glamorous but there's a window on to the street below, my own radiator to warm my bum on in winter and two huge noticeboards to fill with inspiration and, of course, pictures of my daughter Lyla. I've got almost a whole gallery wall of her (her as a baby lying on a crocheted blanket from Auntie Kath, us at a local petting farm feeding a goat, her, aged five, sitting on my best friend Lacey's knee, her paddling in the sea during a rare visit down to Cornwall to see Mum and Dad). Add to that a couple of (fake) succulents and a secret drawer of Curly Wurlys, and you have all the essentials for a busy day at the office. Also, since nobody can see my laptop screen, I can fill one hundred per cent of my time with Very Important Work and never, ever get distracted by pointless videos on Facebook, like that one where the swans are reunited after the lady swan had surgery. Or the one where the panda in the Chinese zoo keeps climbing out of the basket. Or the one . . . it doesn't matter, I don't watch them. I very, very rarely watch them anyway. I'm a professional.

The door opens and I look up. Skye is standing in the doorway flicking her extensions over her shoulder. 'Oh, you're in,' she says in surprise, as if I'm never in the office. The office that I run now. I'm going to show her who's boss. I'm going to be so badass.

‘Yep, here I am. Just grabbed a mocha on my way,’ I say with an apologetic laugh, lifting my cup off a stack of expense forms. Why do I sound apologetic? I’m supposed to be badass! Natalie wouldn’t do this. Natalie wouldn’t have to do this.

‘Didn’t Natalie send a memo round last year saying we should all use BPA-free keep-cups for drinks and steel bento boxes for food?’ she asks condescendingly, eyeing my take-away coffee cup and continuing to loiter by my door. She has a point, I reluctantly admit to myself. I don’t *often* succumb to the lure of the coffee shop but this morning I had such a hankering. And I do own a couple of bento boxes since all the Posh Mums at school started getting competitively creative and regular lunch-boxes of sandwiches and Penguin bars fell out of vogue. The boxes I have are plastic, though . . . I don’t know if they have BPA in, whatever BPA is.

‘Thank you, Skye. I’ll bear that in mind,’ I say with a smile that hopefully says, *Back off, lady, I’m armed with a hot sweet drink here* or at least *I’m sorry, please stop pointing out that I’m wrecking the planet and move on to the next thing*. ‘Is there anything I can help you with?’ I finally say out loud.

‘Yes, what’s the rota? Neil, my boyfriend, wants to take me away for a long weekend. Natalie was always really



prompt with letting everyone know a fortnight in advance, so we could plan our lives. She used the noticeboard in the kitchen especially. Maybe you could get up to speed with that?’

Of course Neil wants to take her away. I bet Neil’s favourite thing to do is parade his Gisele-like girlfriend on weekends away. A year ago I’d have been jealous, but now I can’t think of anything I’d like to do less than spend time watching Neil scoop out his protein shake powder or cut the sleeves off his T-shirt to make bicep viewing easier for us all. What I want to do at the weekend is hang out with Lyla and take it easy – this being a boss thing is tiring.

‘Right, well, I’ve just got here and I’m about to finalise the bookings so as soon as I know, you will too,’ I say, very professionally, taking a sip of my warm coffee nectar and feeling soothed.

‘OK, well don’t forget to print it and put it on the noticeboard as well,’ Skye responds bossily, placing a well-manicured hand on a jeans-clad hip with more attitude than I think possible for 9.15 in the morning. Skye’s wearing the most perfectly tailored black jeans I’ve ever seen. I bet even Piper would lust after them. Piper, by the way, is my best friend Lacey’s little sister. We all grew up together and now she lives and works

in New York on the art scene. (If you tell me you've seen a more stylish, confident, swish young woman, I'll tell you you're wrong.)

I don't think I've ever found a pair of skinny jeans that don't make my soft bits squish out over the top or cling tightly enough round my ankles, but Skye has. Her ankles are showcased by the dark denim and there's not a jot of squish anywhere. Maybe that says more about our body shapes than the jeans, though . . . Along with the jeans of perfection, she's wearing a snug khaki long-sleeved cotton crop top with a lot of criss-crossing fabric over the bust, a Gucci-style belt (*is it real?* I wonder) and chunky black heeled sandals. Basically, her idea of casual March workwear is my idea of full glam summer Going-Out wear. She's tanned all over (I suppose you can't do my 'just bits you see' method if you wear stringy crop tops) and seems to have no trouble standing in her stilt-like shoes. I, on the other hand, am in blue skinny-ish jeans that have a good amount of stretch in them so they're super comfy, an oversized cream cable knit jumper from ASOS in the sales last year and pale pink Converse. My conker brown hair is up in a high pony and I've only gone for a light layer of BB cream because my skin, thankfully, is having a good week. It's not that I don't have nice clothes or

don't look OK in my outfits, it's just that when you're only just managing to juggle your work and mum life like I am, you don't prioritise contouring and fake-tanning your stomach! Plus, call me old, but that crop top looks cold! Chunky knitwear and easy flats for me, please. I'm still acing it. I'm just warm, comfy and acing it.

'Yes. I will. Just like I said.' Oh, she will not have the last bloody word here. I am the boss. Like a gorilla in the jungle, I must assert my power.

'Ok, great.' More hip, more attitude, no moving away from my door, though. 'Also, you know those coffee companies don't pay tax, right? Something to look into next time you want a little "treat".'

Urrgghh. I know her game. She wants to knock me off my perch, dammit. She will not win. Not today, missy.

I employ my best Mum-isn't-taking-this-shit look, the one I reserve for Lyla when she refuses to get out of the ball pool at soft play and shows I mean business. Eventually, after I almost tear up from not blinking, Skye slinks off, no doubt to make herself some organic black chai in a sustainable keep-cup.

This is the thing about being the boss. You think it's going to be cool to have a higher-level job, but then you find you have to deal with the likes of Skye and her

cronies. The rest of the team are sweet, but whispering that stops as soon as I enter a room has not been unknown. They all seem to absolutely adore Skye and treat her like she's their queen, which doesn't help the ego she seems to be carting around on her tanned, slender shoulders.

But, no – think leaderly thoughts, Robin.

I know why Natalie hired her. She's a good make-up artist. Really, really good, in fact. She has an amazing creative edge which clients love, is fully trained in special effects, is astounding at general beauty, has enough in common with the models to make them love her (if there's ever a woman who has mastered the Insta-pose, it's Skye. How she even gets some of the angles I will never know) and, frustratingly, she works harder and longer than anyone else. Is it any wonder I'm so intimidated by her?

And suddenly it's time for our creative meeting. I love this part of my job the most. Anyone who has bookings for the week ahead comes in, we run through the jobs, discuss ideas and talk through any concerns. When I joined MADE IT, I would sit in these meetings in awe of Natalie. She'd listen carefully to each idea and smoothly guide the conversations so that everyone had a say, encouraging those (usually me) who were a bit shy. These

meetings feel like the heart of the agency, and show how far we've come – once it was all local jobs, little photo shoots and wedding make-up. Now we still do all those things, but MADE IT has grown so much that we're getting jobs from far and wide. Every meeting there are more bookings, more opportunities – and I so want to show Natalie I can handle it. Once she's back from her sabbatical she'll chair them again, but for now I'm head of the table, along with my non-eco-friendly cup that I make a mental note to change.

There are eight of us this week, but as we list the upcoming jobs and offer each other advice, it's clear that Skye is dominating the meeting. Try as I might to interject, she has the room hanging off her every word and frankly, she has the best ideas and tips.

'OK, so,' I chirp as confidently as I can, 'we have a job for a group of children with special needs next week. They are transforming their centre into a fairy garden for the day and have asked us to send two juniors out to apply delicate eyeshadows, fluttering false lashes and, I'm sure, a whole lot of glitter.' Skye jumps in to suggest adding little special-effect latex tips to the tops of their ears to give them the pixie effect. And since neither of our junior MUAs are fully trained in special effects yet, Skye agrees to take one of their places for a lower fee

than normal. I am astounded, but of course the rest of the office just accept that Skye the Wonderful would be so gracious. Kareem, one of our part-time MUAs, actually puts his hand on Skye's shoulder and says, 'You're such an inspiration.' Skye coolly looks down at her lap and smiles with a nod. Have I turned into a massive cynic?

We reach the last section of the agenda. I open the floor to anyone with 'any other business' and, of course, Skye has some.

'Yes, Skye, please do share,' I say in the encouraging tone I learnt from Natalie.

'Have you sorted the rotas yet?'

What? We spoke about this an hour ago. Is she deliberately baiting me in front of an audience?

'We spoke about this, Skye,' I say calmly. I'm like a swan. Cool and collected up top but paddling like billy-o under the surface.

'We did, but, as you might remember from a couple of months ago when you were a part-time make-up assistant, Natalie always made sure to have the jobs out a fortnight in advance and printed on the kitchen board. She was always so efficient, you know?' Skye says smoothly.

Wow. Just wow.

One of Skye's fangirls, Nix (it's short for Nicola. Apparently you can just put an 'x' in your name and make it cool. Call me Robix from now on), jumps on the bandwagon. 'I don't want to sound harsh, but Skye's right. Natalie was, like, really organised with the rotas and a lot of us have lives outside this place. We need to work around that and like, yeah . . .'

'Thank you, Nix, I know exactly what you mean, I have a hectic life too and will be as prompt as I can with your rotas,' I offer with a smile akin to one of the nuns in *Call the Midwife*. I chant to myself; *Kill them with kindness*.

'No, I mean lots of us like going out or going places, that sort of thing,' Nix says. She might be a brilliant make-up artist but I'm not sure she's a brilliant mind.

'Yes, Nix, I know what "having a life" means,' I snap, cross with myself for letting it get to me.

'I don't think Nix meant to upset you, Robin, I just think we all need a bit more organisation on your part,' Skye says in the most patronising tone I've ever heard, while Kareem nods sagely and some of the others start to shift in their seats, clearly picking up on the tension. Like the mature leader I am, I put a stop to this.

'Right. Lovely. All good points then. The only adjustment being Skye on the fairy job. Everyone else knows

what they are doing. Rotas will be up by lunchtime. Let's all crack on.'

And with that, I stand up, gather my rather yummy rose-gold and pink stationery, plus the sodding rotas, and leave for my office, my sanctuary, with my heart in my Converse but my head held high.

NOW, ROTA DONE, MEETING managed, budget document . . . opened. No emergencies. Skye only sent one round-robin email, this time demanding that 'the person who insists on changing the sound system to Radio 2 must consult the group'. Sorry, no can do, Skye. After all, who doesn't like Radio 2? It's cool now, OK?

All in all, a grand day. As I'm saying goodbye to Stuart and Alice, the admin team, Skye appears. 'Robin, don't forget I won't be in next Monday. My boyfriend Neil is taking me away, remember?'

'Mmmm, you mentioned that this morning,' I say probably a bit less enthusiastically than I meant to. I just really want to get out of the office, I'm hungry, ready for dinner and Monday is a full week away.

Taking my lack of passion to heart, Skye fluffs her metaphorical feathers. 'No need to be salty about me having a boyfriend, Robin. I'm sure you'll find one someday.' Stuart and Alice almost gasp at the audacity



of this, probably enjoying the drama. What's got into her? Maybe this is because I didn't sagely nod when Kareem told her she was an inspiration.

What does 'salty' even mean? Why do these young people have so many new meanings for words I don't understand? I take a wild guess, stand up an inch taller than usual and formulate my cutting response.

'Skye, thanks for once again highlighting your relationship status. I'm very pleased for you. My self-validation doesn't depend on a romantic attachment, nor does my well-being. Perhaps one day you'll feel secure enough in yourself to not seek a man's approval but until then, I'm off home.' Satisfyingly, Skye looks momentarily shocked, then like thunder and, with that, I turn on my heel (not before noticing Stuart's gobsmacked face and Alice's eyes alight), strut out and cross the road to my car.

One-nil, Badass Boss Single Mum Extraordinaire.

What would I have done differently if I'd known that, in less than four weeks' time, I'd be on the verge of losing *everything* I'd worked so hard for . . .

## TWO

**H**OME! AFTER BLASTING THE best eighties power ballads Spotify has to offer in the car, normality resumes. I say ‘normality’, but in truth I’m hit with what looks like an explosion in an apothecary. Lotions, potions and dozens of bunches of little dried purple sprigs are strewn all over the lounge floor. Of course I pretend I’m not worried about any of them staining the brand-new cream carpet I had laid when we moved in at the end of last year. (My old house had a hard-wearing oatmeal sort of affair, so as a treat, to match the beautiful oak furnishings and battered brown leather sofa I brought with me, I bought the carpet. It comes to something when

a carpet is a treat, doesn't it? Will scouring the internet for a better fixed-term mortgage be a treat next? Or buying myself summer season passes to stately homes and gardens? What about finding the best deals in bargain supermarkets? I have recently become obsessed with Mum vloggers doing pound shop hauls on YouTube. Perhaps I'll watch a few more once Lyla's in bed.)

We're starting to feel more settled in our lovely new place. I bought lots of wooden Moroccan-style frames and finally printed off a load of photos from my phone and made a gallery wall in the hallway, we have colourful tiny flowers in little glazed pots dotted around windowsills and – just like all the best interiors Instagrammers – I've invested in the fluffiest, most tasselled rug imaginable for the front room. Here's hoping I can keep it clean for more than three weeks.

I realise I've let my mind wander and I need to focus on being in the moment. Lyla and our beloved Auntie Kath look up to greet me with happy smiles on happy faces.

'Auntie Kath brought her crafts over, Mummy! We're making lavender bath bombs. We've been doing them for hours because you've been at work so long. I thought you might be sleeping there tonight. Why are you *always*

at work, Mummy?’ my energetic seven-year-old demands before I can even say hello.

‘Nice to see you too, Bluebird!’ I say as I pick my way over plastic moulds, spoons and measuring cups to go in for a big cuddle. Ah, the best part of my day.

‘Hey, Kath!’ I add to my auntie, who beams back. She is a godsend for picking Lyla up from school and babysitting until I can get home. Lyla squeezes me so hard around my tummy I almost squeak.

‘Hello, lovey. She’s right, we’re making lavender toilet-ries. It’s very relaxing. It does wonders for the night sweats now I’m going through The Change! When I don’t use them I wake up wetter than a lady of the night, but if I do, I’m fresh as a daisy,’ Kath responds cheerily.

I try to keep a straight face.

‘So I’m utterly obsessed with lavender, lovey. I’ve been reading about its healing properties on the web and we’ve been talking about it all week at Cupcakes and Crochet. Sue said the lavender oils completely cleared up her problem skin from The Change, and you remember what a pizza-face she was!’ Kath titters. But I’m busy picking bits up and looking at the little spots of purple staining my aforementioned very sophisticated new carpet.

‘Are they for you or a gift?’ I ask, almost nervous to hear the answer. I’m not sure I want lavender soap

infused with carpet fluff, biscuit crumbs and an, er, intimate drying effect.

‘For *you*! You can have all of these because I’ve been working on them non-stop at home. I’ve got hundreds already,’ Kath says, busying herself with opening the moulds and popping out little purple spheres. They look pretty good, actually.

‘Oh, lovely, erm . . . thanks!’ I say, picking my way back over to the door to dump my bag on the little hall table I picked up at a boutique shop in town. I’ve always wanted to be one of those women who has a big entrance hall and a small table with a ‘catch all’ tray and an elegant bunch of flowers. Our flowers are fake from Poundland but you wouldn’t know from far away, and only Lacey raises her eyebrows at them (she’s a John Lewis girl herself). ‘Fresher are better,’ she’d say, but she’d add kindly: ‘I’ll get you some’. It’s probably quite easy to keep fresh flowers in the house when you own a bloody florist’s, I often point out.

‘I’ve done them for all my friends,’ Kath continues, gaining momentum. ‘Moirra swears by them. She said after she had a soak with the bath-ballistic I did, she felt so sensual she took the moisturiser into her boudoir and asked her Allan to apply it for her! Well, you can guess what happened next . . .’

I am literally horrified by the thought of Kath's neighbour Allan slathering her latest creation all over his wife's naked torso but I manage to keep it in and nod enthusiastically, trying to shake the idea out of my head. Even the lady of the night image was more appealing than Moira and a frisky Allan. I hope Kath's OK. Is it normal to spend all your time making hundreds and hundreds of senior-sex-inducing bath bombs in your spare time?

'What's a boudoir?' Lyla pipes up, her glacier-blue eyes and pixie nose the picture of innocence.

'A bedroom! Another word for bedroom, sweetie, that's all,' I jump in with quickly, trying to think of something else to say before she asks what 'sensual' means too.

'Shall I put some jacket potatoes in?' I say, heading into the kitchen and away from the madness.

'No need, lovey. There's a lasagne I made this morning, I've got garlic bread in the fridge and Lyla helped me make a salad when we got in from school. I've done crumble for afters.'

'Oh, Kath,' I say, going back in and navigating my way back across the lounge to give her a hug. 'What would I do without you?'

## THREE

**I**T'S MY DAY OFF and I've been looking forward to this day for ages. I'm off to see Lacey. The joys of working flexible hours and the odd weekend: a day off in the week. Instead of heading home after the school run for a cheeky Twix (you just can't indulge in early-morning chocolate with a seven-year-old in the vicinity, they're like sniffer dogs for any kind of confectionery – unless you want a hyped-up crazy on your hands, you have to hide anything worth eating till later in the day), I drive over to Dovington's.

Since accepting Natalie's offer to run MADE IT, I've seen less of Lacey and it's a shame. I really miss our weekly natters around the giant oak table in the back

room of the florist's she inherited from her grandmother. Lacey is my oldest and best friend and my favourite person to put the world to rights with.

Before I go in, I glance up. There's a flat above the shop belonging to a nice old lady who we suspect is a bit lonely. She keeps herself to herself but Lacey will often do an essentials shop for her, and at the end of the day, she'll often leave a selection of the flowers they've not sold by her front door. As usual I can see this week's proudly displayed in a vase on the upstairs front window-sill.

Pushing open the door and hearing the familiar bell tinkle makes me smile straight away. Dovington's is such a welcoming place, beautifully scented with a mix of delicate florals and warm incense dotted around by Terri, Lacey's right-hand woman. You can't help but feel at ease here. The front half of the shop, with its huge floor-to-ceiling window, is laden with every kind of flower, all displayed in big white vases and buckets in the centre of the room. It's organised so you can either go in and pick up a ready-made bouquet or, my favourite option, you can take a flat wicker basket and choose each individual stem and make your own arrangement, a floral pick and mix. On one wall, big metal shelving units show off trendy planters, watering cans, succulents, little plants



already in bloom, tempting ornaments and gifty trinkets and beautiful vases and pots. At the back there are a couple of big high desks with piles of paper and cellophane for wrapping and an old bashed-up till that's seen better days.

Beyond the till is my favourite part: the big back room. Lacey uses this for crafty projects, hosting workshops ('How to Make a Fresh Floral Crown' is always fully booked out during festival season) and, most importantly, gossiping with me over big cups of hot tea.

'Only me!' I say, popping my head round the door of Lacey's 'office' (the least office-like place you can imagine). It is like stepping into a warm hug from a friend. Though it's spring, it's still nippy outside. The radio is playing some happy playlist and Lacey's table is covered edge to edge in scraps of pastel crêpe paper, wire, string and the odd pair of scissors.

'Ah, hello! Just the person I need! How would you like to spend the next hour of your life helping me finish these bloody pastel pompoms?' Lacey asks with a despairing look.

'I've never wanted to do anything more,' I say, taking a seat and fluffing about with tiny bits of tissue paper. 'What exactly are they? What are they even for?'

As Lacey gamely explains how to make a paper

pompom (good old Pinterest, a fountain of craft inspiration) and why we were making forty-five of them (to hang from the shop ceiling for her upcoming Mother's Day display, one of her busiest times of year), I can tell her mood is low.

'What's on your mind?' I ask, wondering how much I'll have to push to get it out of her.

'Oh, I'm just getting sorted for Mother's Day. It's a busy, busy time,' she says, trying to brush me off.

'No, I mean what's actually up? I can tell there's something.' I'm not easily fobbed off, and she knows it.

'Honestly, everything's great. Karl's just got his promotion, Piper's still loving New York, I'm happy here, everything's great.'

Good try, Lacey.

'Lacey Hunter, you can lie convincingly to a lot of people but never to me. Come on, talk to me.' I surprise myself at how sternly the words come out.

'Wow, you've really taken that managerial position to heart, haven't you?' she replies.

'Yes. I have. I am a very badass firm lady boss and I demand you tell me.' I think it's best to add a spoonful of humour to help the stern tone go down. It seems to do the trick until Lacey stops smiling and twiddles a piece of wire round her thumb.

‘I love you, Lacey, I want to help, even if it’s just to listen,’ I say, taking a much softer approach.

‘I know, I just hate going on about it,’ she says, looking down at her hands sadly.

Straight away I know.

‘It’s this Mother’s Day stuff. I thought I’d be a mother by now or at least be blooming in pregnancy, but *again* I have to watch everyone else being celebrated, while I carry on “trying” and getting nowhere. Karl and I are really struggling. There’s no fun to be had in a scheduled optimal ovulation shag and we bicker constantly. It’s hard, Robin.’ Big fat tears drop down her cheeks and soak the little scraps of lilac crêpe in her lap.

‘Oh, Lace.’ I reach out to put a hand on hers but she moves hers away. ‘It’s going to happen, it really is going to happen.’

‘You say that but it still hasn’t. It’s been so long. We’re seeing the consultant, but it’s horrible. I’ve lost hope. Karl tries to put on a brave face but I know he’s starting to worry too and it’s showing in his snappy mood. It’s shit, Robin, I feel like a massive fucking failure.’

I can see Lacey spiralling into a familiar hole and know her well enough to know I can’t pull her out with platitudes and reassurances.

‘You are absolutely not a failure – nowhere near – but

that pompom will be if you don't stop crying all over it,' I offer, trying to distract her.

Lacey lets out a wet, teary half-laugh and looks up at me, needing more.

'I know it must be so shit, Lacey, shitty-shitty-shit-shit, but you're on the right track. You're seeing the right people and I just know you'll find a way in the end. If there's anyone in this whole world who would be the most amazing mum, it's you. It's going to happen. BUT, until then, let's keep going, let's make these bloody puff things, let's decorate the shop to perfection and let's have a good day of it!' I say with as much gusto as I can muster. I can't promise she will get pregnant, but what I do know is that somehow – somehow – she'll find a way to be a mum. But *somehow* isn't an easy word to hear. I don't think I would hold it together if I were her, either. The only thing that seems to work these days is distraction.

'It's not fair. We've been on "the right track" for so long. Karl's mum said when we moved into the house after we got married, "New house, new baby", and now every time she comes over I think of that. It's not a new house anymore.' Her voice wavers.

'Well it's not the house that's going to get you bloody pregnant, is it?' I say.

‘That’d sting!’ Lacey can’t help but let out a weak laugh and I take this opportunity to laugh with her. She wipes her face, takes a deep breath to reset herself and starts to quiz me.

‘So,’ she says, changing the subject entirely. ‘How’s it going with secret lover-boy?’

‘I’ve no idea who you are talking about,’ I reply breezily.

‘Your mystery man from far-off shores,’ she nudges further.

‘Nope, still not with you.’ Ha! I won’t bend.

‘Mr Lover who takes you out for wine and pasta and you end up shagging by 10.30 p.m.’ Now I wish I hadn’t told Lacey about the post-pasta sex last time I’d seen him.

‘Sorry, still not sure who you mean, there’s no “Mr Lover” in my life.’ I’m making a point now, to myself as much as to Lacey. Love has nothing to do with it.

‘Oh, fine. *Edward!* The guy from New York you see *every* time he’s over here!’ Lacey throws her hands in the air in exasperation, sending bits of paper puff scattering all over the table.

‘Oh, *that* guy! Yeah, Edward’s fine – probably. It’s not like we talk much, he just looks me up when he’s back in England,’ I bluster as I think of that dreamy date-that-turned-into-a-full-weekend in January. ‘I saw him a couple

of weeks ago. I popped down to London when he was working there, we saw a gig, had some lovely pasta—'

'Had some lovely sex—'

'Ha! But yes, I suppose it was lovely.' I laugh at the thought of describing sex that way. It is, though. It's not 'loving' but it is lovely. My ex, Theo, was all thrusts and grunts, and Lyla's dad Simon was fumbles in the dark, but Edward and I just seem to fit together well.

'So you're falling for him, then?' Lacey probes, with a smile and a sparkle in her eye.

'God, no! I'm not falling for anyone, Lace. I'm just happy doing my work thing, doing my mum thing, doing my pompom thing,' I say, flipping a pompom about. 'I'm honestly not looking for anything serious – I don't want another Theo on my hands.' I mean it. Things are fine just as they are.

'But Edward isn't Theo,' Lacey says matter-of-factly.

'But Edward is a man, Lacey, and I don't need one of those. I like him. That's it. And that's enough,' I respond in kind.

'Don't tar every man with the same brush, Robin. This one seems quite nice, that's all I'm saying.' Ugh, why is she being so reasonable? She has a point but I'm not going to accept it. Things are fine. I don't need anything or anyone to mess them up.

‘Yes, he’s nice, yes, I like hanging out with him but no, I’m not “seeing him”, I’m just sometimes seeing him.’ I give her a hard stare which means I’m done.

‘OK,’ she says, thankfully sensing the tone. ‘I’m proud of you for standing strong, Robin, for not being swept up and for loving the life you already have.’

We spend a few minutes tying thin wire round the middle of the pompoms with the help of a YouTube tutorial. Then we pile the completed puffs on the table. It actually looks quite cool and I’m impressed I’ve been a part of making them.

‘Are things still going well with your Other Friends?’ Lacey asks in what she probably thinks is a casual tone but I sense the slight panic in her voice. She’s always been this way, ever since primary school when I sometimes played with another little girl called Sarah (I wonder where she is now? I’ll have to Facebook-stalk her when I get home) and Lacey was worried she’d be my new best friend. I had to give Lacey three Pogs (remember those?) and a friendship bracelet to fully convince her she would be my best friend forever. So far, so good!

‘Do you mean Finola and Gillian? All good. I think we’re having a get-together next week at Finola’s stables with all the children, which will either be amazing or, most likely, utter chaos,’ I laugh, noticing the look on

Lacey's face. I'm not sure if it's 'you have new friends' or 'you have children to socialise with' that caused the flash of sadness, but I don't want to see her spiral down again so I quickly change the subject.

'I'll tell you what though, Lace, Skye is a total pain in the arse. I can't handle it.'

Lacey instantly perks up at the prospect of a bit of mild gossip or slaggery-offery. Good.

'The really pretty, really young, really talented one that you hate?' she says a bit too eagerly.

'Yes! No, well, I don't *hate* her and if I did, it wouldn't be because she's young and pretty and talented, which she totally bloody is. It's that she's patronising with it. The other day she saw me reading a Sidebar of Shame article about feminism and told me that *she's* not a feminist, she's equalitarian. Good for her, I said, but when I told her I'm a feminist, loud and proud, she said, "Oh, it's not cool to use labels". It's the fact that she thinks she is always in the right, as though everyone needs to be bloody perfect, like her,' I say.

'You're perfect, too, though.' Lacey supports me without a second of hesitation.

'But everyone loves her, she's amazing at her job, she looks great, she saves the planet, everything! The other day we both went on an editorial job and it went really



well. We each had our own areas and set-ups so although we were there together, we weren't really working as a team like me and Natalie used to, even though she was meant to be assisting me. She did the base work and I would do more of the artistry – I don't get much chance to do it now I'm in the office so much. Anyway, the photographer came over at the end of the day and gushed about how much she loved what I did with the models and how beautiful their eyes were. Without skipping a beat, Skye thanked her for her kind words. Skye didn't do any of the eye work. I was so flummoxed, I just stood there. As if that's not enough, on our work Facebook page the photographer has left a positive review thanking Skye Bristly for "the best eye make-up in town and her wonderful attention to detail". That should have been me but now, as usual, she's the queen of everything and I'm just plain, boring Robin hasn't-done-the-rota-on-time Wilde,' I say, flumping down my latest half-made pompom.

'Now it's my turn to give you a pep talk. Robin Wilde, you are ace. Look at everything you've achieved in your life. You run your beautiful new home like a dream, you are the big boss of a major office, you're a single mum with no support at all, you're juggling a long-distance relationship AND you have time to help your friends

make crazy paper decorations. You are the bee's knees, the cat's pyjamas, the wildest Wilde in the West! Don't let anyone take that away from you!' Lacey says with a sudden burst of passion that makes my heart sing.

Everything she's said is hugely over-exaggerated, but Skye makes me feel a bit crap so I'll take it. Yes, I have a cleaner now, and I'm only the boss temporarily; I have childcare support from Simon and his girlfriend, Storie, as well as Kath, and I'm not in a relationship with Edward. But sometimes, you just have to smile and say thank you. God bless Lacey, the best of eggs. It feels so cruel. My poor Laceyloo. God, I hope she and Karl make up. I don't know how many more of these crushing monthly disappointments their marriage can take.

There's nothing I wouldn't do to give her what she wants so badly.