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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Piano Man Project

Written by Kat French

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# THE Piano man PROJECT

KAT FRENCH

AVON

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*For James, with love. Grouchy is the new sexy, right? You just need to get that cooking thing down . . . x*

# CHAPTER ONE

'Don't you think there's something sad about buying yourself a new vibrator for Valentine's Day?' Honey picked up a lurid pink model and eyed it with distaste.

'Why?' Tash laughed. 'My last one was the best boyfriend I've ever had. When it gave out I buried it in the back garden and planted a phallic cactus over it as a tribute.'

'How the hell did you break it, anyway?' Honey frowned at the hunk of neon plastic in her hand. It looked pretty indestructible.

'Overuse, probably,' Nell chimed in on her other side. With her big brown doe eyes and smooth chignon, she was a study of tidy perfection.

'We can't all lead cookie-cutter lives, Nellie,' Tash chided.

Nell sniffed. 'I don't hear you complaining when those cookies end up in your kitchen cupboard.'

'True,' Tash laughed. 'Just don't go looking for your next cutter in here. Although actually, maybe you should. I'd pay

good money to see your mother-in-law dunking cock-shaped shortbread in her tea.'

Nell shot her a sarcastic smile, privately needled by Tash's good-natured teasing. *Had her life become too cookie cutter?* Looking at the alien things on the shelves around her, there was every chance it had. A frown of concentration crumpled her forehead. She'd read enough magazines and books to know that a stale marriage was a step away from disaster.

In both looks and life, Nell and Tash were polar opposites, and Honey knew that her place in the world was somewhere between them. If they were traffic lights, Tash would be green; all flashing emerald eyes and come-hither grins that had men falling at her feet. Nell would be red: stop; don't cross; clear and direct. For Honey, the amber light. Warm, never quite sure, approach with caution. Or perhaps it was closer to 'don't approach at all', if the lack of decent men in her life was anything to go by.

'It went rusty.' Tash scanned the shelves with an expert eye, her riotous red waves swishing around her shoulders. 'Don't ask. Oh thank God, a waterproof one.' She grabbed a gleaming turquoise vibrator and kissed the box. 'Hey there, handsome. I need you in my life.' She dropped it in her basket with a grin.

'How 'bout you, Honeysuckle? Something for the weekend?' Tash waved towards the army of vibrators lined up on the shelf like a platoon of soldiers ready to spring into action.

'Not for me.' Honey slid the pink vibrator back into place on the display.

'There's no need to be so sniffy,' Tash said. 'I mean, it's been quite a while since your last, er . . .'

'Not that long, thank you,' Honey snapped. It had been more than twelve months ago since she'd split from her last boyfriend – not that Mark had ever really qualified for the title. She seemed to have a knack of attracting the wrong kind of men, men who were more interested in football and beer than romance or flowers. Or orgasms for that matter, besides their own.

Her only long-term boyfriend of note had been Sean at uni, a biology student who'd treated her body like an extension of his textbooks, something to study for cause and effect. It was little wonder that her body had refused to perform under such intense scrutiny. She'd eventually given him the push when he'd pulled a magnifying glass out of his bedside drawer before unbuttoning her jeans.

'Honey?' Nell said, and she realised that both she and Tash were looking at her and waiting for an answer.

'I don't know. A year or so, maybe?' She shrugged and looked away from her friend's raised eyebrows.

'Fuck! A whole year without sex?' Tash threw a second vibrator into her basket. 'I'm buying you this. It's a gift. You need it more than I do.'

'Ha-ha.' Honey took it back out of the basket. 'Thanks, but don't waste your money. They don't work for me.'

'They work for everybody, Honey.'

'Not me.'

'Have you ever tried?' Tash asked.

'I don't need to, okay?' Honey turned away, uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. 'I just don't . . . well, you know.'

Tash and Nell grasped an elbow each and turned her back around to face them.

'You don't what?' A frown rumpled Nell's smooth brow. 'Orgasm?' She whispered the question.

'Don't stare at me like I'm a criminal,' Honey muttered. A sex shop was so not the place to discuss this. She felt like an atheist in St Paul's cathedral.

'I'm no prude, I like sex. I just never have an orgasm. It's no big deal.'

Tash stared at Honey as if she'd grown an extra head. 'No big deal? It's friggin' huge! I'd die if I didn't come at least once a day.'

'Even when you're between men?' Nell asked. Her diamond wedding band glinted as she fiddled with the buttons on her polka dot silk blouse, which came straight from the 'glamorous teacher all the dads fancy' pages of the Boden catalogue.

Tash tapped the package in her basket. 'Meet my new boyfriend.'

Honey glanced away. Glittery red hearts dangled throughout the store like a love grotto, although the dummies clad in crotchless knickers and peephole bras made it more 'sex den' than 'romantic arbour'.

'What is all this stuff?' Nell murmured, wide eyed as they passed through a heavy velvet curtain. She picked up a dark string of beads and wrapped them around her wrist. 'I didn't know they did jewellery.' She twisted her arm to admire them. 'These would be perfect with my new purple dress.'

Tash laughed. 'Yes. How thoughtful of them to make their bum beads multi-purpose.'

Nell yanked them off, her cheeks a good match with the violet beads as she tossed them down. 'That's revolting.'

‘Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it, girlfriend.’ Tash raised a knowing brow.

Nell sat down and crossed her ankles, the image of a prim school marm. ‘I think I’ll wait for you here.’

‘’Kay. But just so you know, you’re sitting on a sex couch,’ Tash winked.

‘Christ!’ Jumping up, Nell smoothed her hands down her navy pencil skirt. ‘Is nothing normal in this place?’

‘This *is* normal, Nell. Simon would probably love to see you in crotchless knickers.’

‘He most certainly would not. He’d tell me to return them because there was a bit missing.’

Tash shook her head and huffed. ‘You know, I think he probably would.’

Honey slid the handcuffs she’d been examining off her wrists and grinned. Simon and Nell were the perfect couple. Childhood sweethearts. Mr & Mrs Vanilla. He’d probably have a heart attack if Nell wore anything more risqué than M&S white cotton. ‘Come on, Nell, let’s get you out of here. Tash, we’ll meet you next door in five.’

‘So, Honey. About the orgasm thing,’ Tash said as she slid into the booth in the crowded bar ten minutes later. Honey sighed.

‘Jesus, Tash. Don’t start. I really don’t need to talk about this.’

‘Okay, okay, you’re right,’ Nell soothed. ‘But . . . when you said you don’t, you didn’t mean you never have . . . did you?’

Honey reached for her wine in resignation. ‘It really doesn’t bother me.’

'Well, it should. It's bad for your health, if nothing else.'

'No, Tash. It would be bad for *your* health. I don't miss what I've never had.'

'Are you one hundred per cent bona fide certain that you never have?' Nell asked.

'Jesus, Nell. If she had one and missed it then there really is something wrong with her.'

Honey cleared her throat.

'Err, I'm still here, remember?'

'I just don't get how you can't once you're in the heat of the moment, to be honest,' Tash said, looking genuinely perplexed. 'You must have been sleeping with the wrong men, Honey.'

'It's no one's fault,' Honey shrugged.

'Do you think you're getting too wound up about it and then that makes it impossible to relax enough for it to happen?' Nell frowned.

Honey shook her head. 'Please . . . just stop? I'm not wound up, and I'm perfectly relaxed. I don't expect it to happen, and it doesn't happen, so let's just move on, okay?'

'I can't believe we've been friends for ten years and you've never mentioned this.'

'That's because it's honestly no big deal.'

Nell and Tash reached for their own glasses with something dangerously close to pity on their faces.

Tash narrowed her eyes. 'When did you last flirt with a man?'

Honey twisted her bangles around, a jumble of gold and bright-coloured metals. Men worth flirting with were thin on the ground in her day-to-day life. She briefly entertained the idea of flirting with Eric the Lech who occasionally

came in to the charity shop she managed, but the idea turned her stomach. He already tried to squeeze her bum most days as it was. One flicker of encouragement from her and he'd have her round to view his ancient Y-fronts over an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* in his sheltered accommodation. No.

'You can't remember, can you?'

Honey shook her head and sighed. 'I just don't meet men I could flirt with. I spend all day serving old dears, and on the rare occasion I meet anyone fanciable they always turn out to be dickheads.'

'You've just been with the wrong men,' Nell soothed.

Honey couldn't argue. The few men she'd slept with wouldn't win any awards for technique, but deep down she knew it was more than that. She'd simply been born without the orgasm gene. Fact.

'Let us pick someone for you,' Tash said.

'No way!' Honey could just imagine the men her friends would come up with; jet-set playboys with perma-tans on one side, trainee teachers in jesus creepers on the other.

'You know what you need?' Tash swayed her glass in Honey's direction. 'A specific. Something to sort out the men from the boys.'

'I'm not with you.'

'Well, take me. My specific is money. No money, no Tash.'

'You are so shallow.' Nell laughed.

Tash shrugged. 'I prefer to say realistic.'

'Well, I'm not fussed for rich.'

'No, but there has to be something,' Tash said.

'Good father. That was my specific.' A faraway smile

kissed Nell's lips, doubtless thinking of Simon and their year-old baby daughter. She'd never known her own father, so Simon was her lover, friend and hero all rolled into one.

Michael Bublé crooned something sentimental from the speaker behind Honey's ear. 'Reckon you can fix me up with Michael Bublé?'

'Tall order, chick.' Tash sat up straight in her chair. 'But . . . that has just given me a great idea for your specific.' She paused, sparkle eyed. 'You need a pianist.'

Nell laughed. 'Where the heck is she supposed to find a pianist around here?'

'Hey, if you can rustle me up the Bublé or Robert Downey Jr, I'm all for it,' Honey said.

'Think about it. All those hours of practising scales would make a man talented with his hands.' Tash warmed to her theme. 'And only clever, sensitive men would bother to learn the piano.' She sounded too certain for anyone to question her logic.

'Tash's right, Hon,' Nell chimed in. 'You need a pianist.'

'Well I don't know any.'

'Not yet . . .' Tash winked. 'But you will.'

'Er . . . how?' Honey reached for the wine bottle.

'No idea.' Tash pushed her glass towards Honey.

Nell grinned. 'We need to check out dating sites.'

'No way!' Honey sloshed wine onto the table in panic. 'There's no way I'm signing up for online dating.'

Tash and Nell eyed each other. 'Of course not,' Nell said. Tash coughed.

Honey narrowed her eyes. 'Have you got your fingers crossed behind your back?'

Nell shook her head and uncrossed her fingers.

'I can't even think of any other famous pianists, let alone regular joes.' Honey frowned.

'Elton John?' Tash suggested.

'He's gay. And married. I don't want married. Or gay.'

'Liberace?'

'Great. *Dead* and gay.'

'Right,' Nell intervened. 'So we're looking for straight, breathing pianists with a thing for boho blondes.'

'And gorgeous,' Honey said. 'He has to be gorgeous.'

'Well, I think it's genius,' Tash said. 'In one easy swipe you've managed to eliminate ninety-nine per cent of the male population, leaving only a small pool to fish in for the catch of the day.'

Honey laughed and shook her head to dislodge the image of herself in waders reeling in an unwilling Michael Bublé. 'A fishy pianist. Every girl's dream.'

Hal heard female laughter and doors slamming well after midnight in the shared hallway outside his flat and yanked the hard, unfamiliar pillow over his head.

Great. His new neighbour had a laugh like an alley cat as well as no respect for anyone else in the house. Had he been in a charitable mood, he might have acknowledged that she actually had no clue he'd moved in that afternoon, but her laughter annoyed him too much to be reasonable. Laughter annoyed him right now. As did people. Laughing people were a particular bugbear. He'd been here for less than a day, but he hated this house already.

# CHAPTER TWO

Honey squinted like a gremlin against the glare of the morning sun. Or was it afternoon? After a morning spent lounging on the sofa, her hangover had been replaced with the dire need for a bacon sandwich and a bucket of coffee. Pan on and bacon in, she started to feel a little less deathly and ran to grab the ringing phone before it clicked to the machine.

'Hello?'

'You sound as rough as I feel,' Tash grumbled. 'What did we drink last night? Meths?'

'The tequila was your idea.' Honey grimaced. 'Did you get home okay?'

'Course. The taxi driver made me hang my head out of the bloody window in case I threw up, but yeah.'

Honey laughed at the image of Tash like a family dog on a road trip.

'I wonder how Nell is?'

'Fine, no doubt. She'll have drunk two pints of water

before bed, and have Simon on hand with Alka-Seltzer and a bowl of hand-mixed muesli. Lucky cow.'

Honey knew Tash well enough to detect fondness behind the grouch.

'It's our own fault,' Honey laughed. 'Nell didn't have tequila. It's the mixing that kills.'

'Does she always have to be so friggin' sensible?'

'Yeah, but who would you rather be this morning?'

'Er, waking up next to Simon, the dullest man on earth?' Tash said. 'I'll stick to the tequila and the headaches, ta very much.'

Honey yelped as a screechy wail assaulted her ears.

'What the fuck is that noise?' Tash yelled.

'Crap! The smoke alarm! Gotta go, Tash. Love you.'

Honey belted into the kitchen. Smoke and burnt bacon. Double crap. At least there were no flames yet. She hurled the pan in the sink, wincing as the high-pitched alarm battered her already thumping head. She scrabbled onto a chair and pressed reset, weak with relief as the noise stopped. Then she tilted her head. It hadn't completely stopped. Triple crap. Wow, she'd done a thorough job. When she opened her front door the alarm out in the hallway was going full throttle, and the damn thing was too high for her to reach.

She clamped her hands over her ears, then jumped out of her skin when the door to the empty flat opposite hers flung wide open.

'Is the fucking house on fire?'

Whoa. Where did he come from?

'No, sorry. I burnt my bacon. Just give me a minute . . .'

Honey tried to hide her surprise at finding a dishevelled Johnny Depp type yelling at her in her own hallway. Well,

strictly speaking it was a shared hallway, but as the flat opposite had been vacant for months she'd become kind of territorial.

She squinted at him. Dark glasses at lunchtime hinted at a fellow hangover sufferer. Maybe he was some famous rock star hiding out. She could dream. Whoever he was, the faded black t-shirt clung to his body in a way that suggested fit, and the tattoos inked down his arms suggested sexy. It was a shame then that his personality rendered him thoroughly repellent.

'Just shut that fucking racket up, will you? I'm trying to sleep.'

'Umm . . .' Honey stared at the alarm in panic. Her head was thumping, and out here the noise was even louder than in her kitchen. 'I would, but I can't reach it. Could you possibly . . .?'

He was well over six foot; with a stretch he'd make it, no problem.

'No I fucking cannot. What sort of grown woman can't cook bacon? Sort your own mess out.' He curled his lip and slammed his door.

Honey reeled. Her life was full of people who, on the whole, were decent human beings. To come up against someone so outright obnoxious came as a shock.

'Fine!' she shouted. 'Fine. I'll do it myself.' She made a half-hearted attempt at jumping to smack the alarm box. Futile. At five foot five and not very athletic, it had always been a long shot.

Plan B was required. Honey took her slipper off and hurled it upwards, but still she missed the alarm by a good foot. Then she spotted her tall, red polka dot umbrella

propped in the corner of the hallway. Bingo! Could she reach the reset button with the metal end spike? She tried, but the damn thing wobbled too much for accuracy and the close proximity to the noise threatened to burst her eardrums.

*Gah*. The next time she wanted bacon she'd go to the café on the corner.

Honey sighed and opted for the only source of action left. She swung the umbrella above her head and whacked the alarm clean off the wall. It bounced hard against her new neighbour's door, then landed with a squawk, before dying. She closed her eyes in relief.

Johnny Depp wrenched his door open again.

'What?' he growled.

'*What* what?'

'You knocked my door.'

'Oh.' Honey bent to pick up the mangled alarm. He recoiled as she straightened, as if her nearness offended him.

'I didn't knock. The alarm hit your door on the way down.'

'You smashed it.'

No shit, Sherlock.

'I suggest you don't attempt to cook again. You might burn the fucking house down.'

The stony look on his face told her that he wasn't amused. As did the door slammed in her face. Again.

Prick.

'I can cook perfectly well, thank you,' she yelled, annoyed by his assumption. This was her home. He was on her turf. If he thought he could roll up and chuck his weight around, he could think again.

In a valiant last stand the alarm case pinged open, and the battery plopped out pathetically onto Honey's foot. A bubble of laughter filtered up. She'd murdered it.

She threw a glance at the door opposite.

Hello new neighbour. It's good to meet you too.

One thing was for sure. This guy was no Simon. There wasn't a meek or mild bone in his body. Tash would love him – as long as he was loaded. Their wine-fuelled conversation from last night floated back. Her specific. She knocked on his door.

'Umm, you don't happen to play the piano, do you?' she shouted, knowing how funny Nell and Tash would find it when she told them.

He didn't need to open his door for her to hear him howl *fuck off*.

On the other side of the door, Hal inched along the hallway. Ten paces to the kitchen work surface, where he'd left the half-empty whisky bottle last night. The cool glass against his sweaty palms soothed his rattled nerves. The wail of that alarm had kicked him straight into DEFCON 1 mode.

Stupid airhead woman. 'Could you possibly reach it?' Her question still taunted him. He tipped the bottle to his lips, and the harsh burn of the whisky took the raw edge off his anger.

She'd smelled of strawberry shampoo and bacon smoke when she'd stepped close, and the ever-present laughter behind her voice had told him she didn't take life seriously.

Well, she should.

He fumbled his way to the bedroom and walked until his shins hit the edge of the mattress. The unmade sheets scratched his skin when he sprawled out, whisky in one hand, the other balled into a tight fist of frustration. He hated this house, and now he hated Strawberry Girl too.