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Opening Extract from...

Puzzle Girl

Written by Rachel Featherstone

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Puzzle Girl

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PROLOGUE

Every story has a beginning, middle and an end, and tonight, my story begins. Finally doors that seemed superglued shut are opening. Tonight I won't just be 'Lovable Cassy', I'll be 'Cassy, the next big thing'. 'Cassy, the woman who –' My phone beeps and I quickly unlock it to see a new email from my boss.

From: Thomas Samuel
Sent: Fri 19:20
To: Martin Robertson; Cassidy Brookes
Subject: Dinner at Lola's

Arranged to have drinks before Patterson dinner so aim for 8pm.

I forward the message to Seph, he'll have to meet me at the restaurant. I don't have time to weigh up the pros and cons of the three different clutch bags on my bed. I just grab the little black one – black does go with everything – and shove my phone, purse and lipstick inside.

As I shut the front door of my apartment, I hear the one opposite open.

'Looking sexy, Princess.'

'Don't call me that,' I say and slap Dan on the shoulder. Dan is, to all intents and purposes, my surrogate brother.

‘Sexy or Princess?’

‘Both,’ I say. ‘I’m going for the cool and sophisticated look.’

Dan and I even look like we could be related. We both have dark hair, fair skin and small curved noses. Our eyes are different though. Dan’s are dark brown but mine are lighter with a swirl of green.

‘Where’s Seph?’ he asks.

‘Meeting me there. Don’t pull that face.’

‘Just remember it’s not about him. This is your big night.’

I grin. It is my night for a change. Don’t get me wrong, I understand that Seph has a demanding job as a lawyer, but it will be nice to have him on my arm for once.

‘Wish me luck.’

‘You don’t need it,’ Dan says and gives me a hug. ‘Now go before you’re late.’

I hail a taxi as soon as I reach the main road.

‘Lola’s, Shoreditch, please.’

I still can’t quite believe what I’m about to do. I’ve been working my way up the ladder at Holywells, a leading digital marketing agency. I have a wonderfully diverse set of clients but I’m yet to get that star client that puts you on the map. Until tonight that is. Tonight I will be meeting my idol, the God of digital marketing, who transformed social media from being a place of chit-chat to a professional enterprise. Within five years of founding MediaTech, it outgrew the ranks of traditional marketing agencies and now develops its own bespoke social media products. And now MediaTech are interested in bringing Holywells on board to run some of their platforms. It’s like a dream come true. With MediaTech

on my CV I could go – and do – anything. I could even start my own business one day.

My hands are shaking with anxiety and excitement in equal measure. I would usually do some sort of puzzle to help me relax but tonight I want to stay completely focused. Instead I take a few deep breaths and pull out my notebook – I never go anywhere without my notebook – and read over my talking points for the dinner. We arrive at Lola's at 7.50 p.m., I thank the driver and pay. Even from the outside, Lola's has a smell that makes you salivate. The most exclusive restaurant this side of London, newly awarded a second Michelin star. This night really couldn't be more perfect.

The porter greets me with a friendly smile and helps me take off my coat. I feel like I'm walking on velvet, the carpet is softer than cashmere. I can see the maitre d' waiting to greet me. I begin the short walk towards him and suddenly I'm filled with nervous energy again. I take another deep breath and say my calming mantra in my head.

I am a strong, professional woman.

I am a calm, professional woman.

I am a calm, successful woman.

'Good evening, ma'am.'

'I am a confident, successful woman.'

'Indeed, ma'am.'

Did I really say that out loud? My cheeks get that prickly sunburn feeling and I'm definitely blinking too often.

'Do you have a reservation?' the maitre d' asks. He has a look on his face that makes me think he may have asked me that already.

‘Err, yes,’ I say and tug at my skirt, my cool, sophisticated look well and truly evaporated by my own body heat. I flick my hair back and say as confidently as possible, ‘I’m with the Holywells party.’

‘This way please.’

OK, so as beginnings go, this one is not as good as I hoped but I’m determined that this night is going to be a success. I follow the very polite maitre d’, who didn’t so much as smirk at my embarrassing introduction, through to the bar. Mr Samuel and his wife are already here. Mr Samuel, one of Holywells’ senior partners and head of my department, is the very best kind of boss and mentor: innovative, fair, intelligent and just a little bit eccentric. Try to imagine Elton John in his mid-forties wearing a polo shirt and Rupert the Bear’s yellow checked trousers and that’s what he looks like most Fridays before he goes off to play golf with clients. He has a soft smile and is always surrounded by an aroma of peppermint that puts me at ease.

‘Ah, Cassidy, you remember my wife?’

‘Very nice to see you again, Mrs Samuel.’

‘Please, call me Veronica. And where’s your other half?’

Before I can reply, Martin arrives along with a blonde of the fashion-model variety. I expected no less. Martin and Veronica greet each other like old family friends.

‘Cassy,’ he says and nods his head in greeting, ‘this is Isabella.’

‘Hello, Martin, Isabella,’ I say.

Isabella whispers something in his ear and then heads towards the ladies’ room. My fake smile was obviously

too convincing because Martin has taken a few steps towards me.

'It's nice to see you've let your hair down for a change.'

'Is that your way of saying I'm uptight?'

He's only been here two minutes and already I feel like I'm having an allergic reaction. The side of Martin's mouth crinkles into a smile.

'It was a compliment. I'd almost forgotten your hair had a natural curl.'

Something in Martin's gaze almost fools me into thinking he's genuine, but then I remember who I'm talking to. Martin is my colleague, or 'my peer', as the professional world would say. Every day he comes into the office wearing a new pair of cufflinks like a mark of his alpha male status. There is never a jet-black hair on his head out of place. I admit that his pristine, tailored, slim-fit suits bring out the best in his physique (not that I would *ever* swoon over him the way the other office girls do). He has the George Clooney gene; he's even the same height. Women of all ages seem to be drawn to his dark brown eyes and his soft smile that says, 'you can trust me'. I used to think it was just women, but not even the firm's partners can withstand his charm. They treat him like a chip-off-the-old-block.

'Oh my God, he's here,' I whisper to Martin.

A shyness comes over me that I haven't felt since my first date with Seph. Gregory Patterson, the most influential social-media expert in the country, is walking over to us with a beautiful woman on his arm who makes even Martin's latest conquest look ordinary.

'Greg, so wonderful to see you again,' Mr Samuel says

and shakes his hand enthusiastically.

'Likewise.'

'Let me introduce you to two of the company's rising account directors, Martin Robertson and Cassidy Brookes.'

I shake his hand feeling almost giddy. I think I mumble something about it being an honour to meet him but I seem to be having some sort of outer-body experience. Opportunities like this don't usually come so early in a marketing career. The *Mad Men* wining and dining element is usually just for partners and senior staff, but with Anabelle, the Head of Accounts, on maternity leave, Martin and I have had more opportunities. We talk business for around twenty minutes, enjoying the best cocktails I've ever tasted. I make a few good points but I can't help but be a bit distracted wondering where Seph is. He should have been here by now.

'Well,' Mr Samuel says when the conversation reaches a natural pause, 'shall we make our way over to the table?'

I decide that it's best not to mention that Seph is yet to arrive. I hope he's OK. I hate the way my mind rushes to the worst conclusion but I can't help it.

'I must say, you are making me feel special bringing me here,' Gregory says as we are shown to our table. 'I'm impressed you got a reservation at such short notice.'

'Ah, well, I can't take the credit for that,' Mr Samuel says. 'Martin arranged it. I think he's better connected than I am.' Everyone laughs as I feel a little piece of me die inside.

Seph's empty chair is threatening to give me palpitations. I discreetly pull my phone out of my bag and

send him a quick text under the table. One of the advantages of working in the tech business is that using a smart phone blind becomes second nature. The waiter pours each of us a glass of pink champagne and I feel my bag vibrate on my lap. I pull out my phone and read the text from Seph.

From: Seph Mobile *Fri 20:45*
Don't bother trying to reach me. I won't be coming. I'm at the flat packing up my stuff. I will be gone by the time you get back. It's over.

I stare at my phone. I go in and out of the text message app five times. He definitely sent it. It's definitely the correct date and time. How … How could he think this is the right time for a joke? Unless it's not a joke. My mouth goes dry.

'A toast,' Mr Samuel says, 'to endless possibilities.'

The bottle probably cost a week's wages but I can barely taste it. My heart is thumping with fear. My mind is whirling and I can barely keep up with the conversation.

'Ah, well perhaps we should get Cassy to test you. Cassy?'

My eyes slowly pass over Mr Samuel's face. I am vaguely aware that I need to respond.

'Cassy is our in-house quizmaster,' he remarks to Gregory. 'She revived the Holywells tradition for pub quizzes when she joined. Cassy, I'm sure you can think up a brain teaser to test Greg.'

I blink hard. I can hear the words Mr Samuel is saying but I can't seem to join them into a sentence.

‘Greg was just telling us that he is a puzzle fanatic like you, Cassy,’ Veronica adds and gives me a look of encouragement.

‘Puzzles, yes,’ I say. ‘I do love puzzles. Holywells participates in a monthly pub quiz.’

Oh God, I think that’s what Mr Samuel just said. I instinctively raise my hand to my forehead. This is all too much to process.

‘Cassy? Is everything OK?’

‘Fine, thank you.’

I need to talk to Seph.

‘So … do you have a particularly nasty brain teaser for –’

I push my chair back from the table. Mr Samuel looks at me with surprise.

‘I might just go and give Seph a quick call to make sure he’s on his way.’

I stand up but my legs falter beneath me.

‘Wow,’ Martin says, holding me tightly by the arm, ‘those cocktails seem to have gone to your head. Here, allow me to escort you.’

‘Ah, such a gent,’ Gregory says. The others all smile but I don’t seem to remember how.

‘Cass, what’s going on?’ Martin asks as soon as we’re out of earshot. ‘You’re off your game.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say and yank my arm back, my senses slowly coming back to me. ‘I just … need to make a phone call. You can drop the knight in shining armour routine.’

Martin holds his hands up in surrender and walks back to the table. As soon as he’s out of sight I call Seph’s mobile. It rings out. I try again. Three more times in fact. I

call Dan and it goes straight to voicemail.

'Dan? Are you home? Wherever you are, can you go round my flat? It's Seph. He sent me this weird text and I think he might be …' I take a deep breath. 'I think he might be leaving me.'

I can barely believe what I'm saying. Seph, boyfriend of seven years, would never do something like this. It just has to be miscommunication. I stand outside Lola's for another few minutes but I know it is going to look odd if I wait much longer. I'll just have to go inside and act like I need to use the ladies'. I briefly return to the table and give a feeble reason to be excused again. Almost as soon as I enter the bathroom my phone vibrates.

From: Seph Mobile *Fri 21:13*
Don't try to contact me. This is the best way. Bye

I barely have time to process the words – they all seem to be moving around like I'm trying to solve a conundrum – when my phone starts flashing Dan's name.

'Hi,' I say, my voice nearly failing me.

'Hey, hun.'

Dan's tone, a little softer than usual, is all I need to confirm that this nightmare is really happening. I sink to the floor, my knees crunched up to my chest. I can see my pathetic reflection in the floor-length mirror on the far wall of the bathroom and watch myself taking shallow breaths as Dan talks about something. I see mascara tears running down my reflection and instinctively lick my lips. They're salty.

'Cassy? Are you still there? Cassy? Cassy!'

I snap out of my daydream and stand up.

‘I’m here,’ I say and brush down my dress. ‘Can you keep Seph at the flat until I get there? I’ll be about twenty minutes.’

I wipe my eyes with a paper towel and patch up my mascara. What’s that saying from *Grease*? *It’s no use crying over spilled milkshake.* Well, this milkshake hasn’t toppled over yet.

‘You can’t walk out on dinner,’ Dan says.

‘Yes I can,’ I say determinedly. ‘This is more important. *Seph* is more important. I have to speak to –’

‘Cassy, Stop! Please, hun, just stop … He’s already gone.’

I don’t remember getting home. Martin put me in the taxi I think, probably thrilled to get rid of me and have Gregory all to himself. It seems like everyone wants to get rid of me. Except Dan. He tucked me into bed almost as soon as I got home. He said I could sleep at his but I wanted to sleep in my own bed, so he offered to stay in my spare room instead. He didn’t think I should be alone. It’s late now. Maybe even early morning. My head is pounding and my pillow is cold with damp. I must have been crying in my sleep. I pull myself out of bed and walk to the en suite, there’s a sour aftertaste in my mouth that I want to get rid of.

The sight of my toothbrush brings tears to my eyes. It looks so lonely in its little holder. After a sharp intake of breath to steady myself, I reach for the toothpaste. Oh my God, he took the toothpaste. I don’t believe this. *I bought the toothpaste!* What kind of man – no, what kind of *animal* – does that? I walk out and slam the en suite door shut. All the fear and sadness that has been engulfing me

suddenly turns to rage. But then just as quickly it turns back to sadness. I throw myself back onto the bed and begin to cry.

'Cassy? Are you –' Dan doesn't finish his sentence. He lies down on the bed next to me and pulls me in close.

'I just don't understand why.'

'It's OK, Cassy. Everything's going to be OK.'

'No it's not,' I say. 'It's over. He's gone.'

I lie in his arms, letting the words process, and I whisper, 'The end.'

SIX MONTHS LATER



ONE

The sunlight seems to have once again found that impossible-to-get-rid-of gap in the curtains and the sound of my alarm clock soon adds to my torment. With my eyes still closed, I fumble for the snooze button. My hand hits something tall, cylindrical and cold but, like an arcade claw machine, I grab nothing but air. Half a second later I hear the dull thud of glass hitting carpet. I peer over the edge of the bed, my eyes squinting to adjust to the light. It's a bottle of Merlot. Thankfully empty, although I don't remember finishing it.

I pick up my phone and start to sift through the overnight emails. Then I catch sight of the time. I double check my alarm clock.

How many times have I pressed snooze?

I meant to get up extra early today. I sit up straight and then quickly hold my head. I think I may have drunk that whole bottle of Merlot on my own. My eyes start to focus on things in the room: my suit hanging on the wardrobe door; the empty space next to the wardrobe where Seph's muddy golf clubs used to hibernate and the wonky hook on the back of the bedroom door where his football calendar used to hang. I really do need to make buying a new calendar a priority. I quickly pick up my notebook and add it to my most recent to-do list.

I gather my strength and walk to the kitchen. The

toaster pings and I let out a cry of shock.

'Morning, Princess. I'm making toast,' Dan says, popping his head above the counter. I hadn't noticed him crouching down by the fridge. 'Don't you have any butter?'

'Second shelf, behind the yogurt.'

I sit down at the breakfast bar and hold my head in my hands. Scattered scenes from last night replay themselves.

'It would have been our eight-year anniversary,' I remember telling Dan. 'Eight years.'

'I know,' he'd said. 'Thank God you only wasted seven and a half years.'

'Do you have any jam?' Dan is asking me now.

I shake my head and a vision of Dan tucking me into bed last night comes back to me.

'I don't have time for toast,' I say, my body finally kicking into gear. 'I need to get to work. I've got that meeting remember?'

'Why do you think I'm up this early,' Dan says and smiles at me, almost sympathetically.

Neither of us has mentioned the meeting since I first told him about it last month. MediaTech had been deliberating for some time over whom to partner with and had finally narrowed their agency choices down to us and one other firm. With Anabelle still on maternity leave, Mr Samuel had asked Martin and me to each come up with a strategy to swing the decision in the firm's favour. I hadn't known quite how to react when Mr Samuel had approached me. It had been a chance to redeem myself for the disastrous client dinner early this year but also a reminder of how brutally Seph had dumped me in the same number of characters as a single

tweet – I'd counted, twice.

Dan had been the one to encourage me to take this second chance, just like he'd been the one to pick up the Seph-shaped pieces of my heart. 'This is a perfect opportunity to prove to yourself that you've moved on,' Dan had said to me when I told him. 'And show all of them what you would have shown them at that dinner if not for an inconsiderate, egotistical –' I'd stopped him then. But Dan was right. This was a second chance that few people get in their careers. Spurred on by this thought, I quickly begin to gather up the things I need to take with me and put them in my bag. Usually I do this in the evenings but last night was an exception. I shower and get dressed so quickly I consider sending a timesheet to the Guinness Book of Records.

'Weren't you planning to get up *extra* early today?' Dan asks, mockingly, when I return to the living room.

'Yes, thank you for that wonderful insight, Daniel.'

'It's called irony,' Dan says as I rush past him.

'What is?'

'You, Miss Organisation Extraordinaire, running late.'

'I am not running late,' I retort.

'Oh right. So err, why exactly are you galloping around the flat?'

I pause and let myself catch my breath.

'Because I'm not as early as I would like to be,' I say.

Dan laughs.

'You've been doing so well since the moron left as well. I bet this is the first time you've been running late in what, six months?'

'Six months, six days and eleven hours to be exact but who's counting. And I am *not* running late.'

Dan sighs. ‘Y’know what I keep asking myself? Are you actually counting or just freakishly good at maths?’

I stop and look at him.

‘Let’s go with the maths thing,’ I say.

Dan looks like he wants to say something but decides against it.

‘I’m fine,’ I say. ‘I’m just stressed about this meeting. I really need it to go well.’

‘It will,’ he says and gives my shoulders a quick massage. ‘As long as you don’t miss it because you’re running so *late* that is.’

I give him a friendly slap on the arm and head to the door just as Dan starts singing, ‘Ironic’ by Alanis Morrissette.

As soon as I get into the corridor I realise I’ve forgotten something. I rush back inside and walk over to Dan. I kiss him gently on the forehead.

‘Thanks for staying over last night.’

‘Anytime, Princess. Now go before you miss your own meeting.’

I am definitely not late. However, I am significantly behind schedule and consequently have successfully missed my regular DLR train, my backup DLR train and my backup, backup DLR train. That said, the DLR seems to be running behind schedule today as well, with trains every fifteen minutes rather than every seven, so it’s not entirely my fault that my pocket-sized journey planner is looking like it would have been more useful as toilet paper.

The DLR platform is lined with businessmen and women, most tapping away frantically on smartphones

and looking a little impatient. The board has said the next train will be arriving in three minutes for the past ten minutes and I can feel my leg beginning to twitch. Soon I really will be late. It's not long before the marketing manager in me takes over and I find myself cross-examining each billboard ad in turn. The latest film whose title catches the eye brilliantly. The Richard and Judy book club selection that uses its patron's stamp of approval so effortlessly. Then I reach an empty billboard and my mind goes into overdrive thinking about what I would advertise on it.

A good piece of brand advertising lasts a lifetime, that's what Mr Samuel always says. 'Keep Calm and Carry On' is a prime example. Does it only make people remember the Second World War posters? No. Why? Because it resonates with people today. Now we all have our own personal version of the Keep Calm family. Mine's easy: 'Keep Calm and Do a Puzzle'.

The red and blue train draws into the platform; the brakes let out a loud, piercing screech. I walk into the front carriage and sit in the front row, by the window. The same as every weekday morning. The same as I did the very first time I got on a DLR train with my gran at the age of five.

A small burst of excitement still erupts in my stomach as I sit in the 'driver's seat' of the DLR. I remember the first time I saw the Passenger Service Agent open the control box, the buttons reminded me of Liquorice Allsorts but I couldn't understand why there was no steering wheel.

The other commuters pile on behind me. Many are trying to juggle their morning coffee in one hand and the

Financial Times in the other while also holding on to one of the aqua-blue hand rails. Most of the women are wearing trainers and have shoe-carrying-enabled handbags. Some are even applying make-up as the carriage jolts up and down sporadically, a skill I wish I had. For England, it's a pretty nice morning, but for mid-August it's fairly underwhelming. Nevertheless, inside this now sardine-packed carriage the temperature is rapidly approaching 'surface-of-the-sun'.

The next station is Canning Town. Change here for the Jubilee line.

It still bemuses me that so many people choose to live close to Canary Wharf and then commute into the City. Why would they choose to live in the middle of a sterile, colourless nowhere only to commute into the culture-filled city that is London?

Obviously I am one of these people. But I did have a reason to move east. The law firm Seph works for is based right in the sterile heart of Canary Wharf. But I have to admit, even though Seph's gone, I don't want to move. Living by the London Excel Centre has been a lot better than I expected. It's an up-and-coming area. It's even got its own little Tesco Metro now. And it's also cheap enough for Dan to rent the flat opposite. It's like we're in *Friends*! He's like a mixture of Joey and Chandler. I'm Monica except, instead of being a chef, I'm a marketing strategist and, instead of cleaning, I make lists. I'm forever making lists, they help me to focus and prioritise.

The next station is East India.

A voice comes through the speakers to let us know we

are going to be sat here for a couple of minutes and within seconds my leg is twitching. I stare at the winding tracks ahead as if somehow, if I stare hard enough, I can magically make the train move. I decide to look over my notes to take my mind off the time.

I unzip my bag and pull out my note –

Oh my God, I've forgotten my notebook!

This *cannot* be happening. Not only have I *never* gone a day since secondary school without a notebook, today of all days I *really, really* need it!

The next station is Blackwall.

It's too late to go back for it. My lungs are starting to hyperventilate the phrase, 'need notebook, need notebook'.

I take several large, deep breaths. I need to look for the silver lining. Although this situation doesn't seem cloudy so much as tropical storm.

OK. OK. There is a sliver of silver lining, I suppose. I do, after all, have a back-up copy of my notes in the office. I take out my phone and go to the virtual notepad. It hasn't got my notes but I can make a new list, which will have to do for now. The battery hasn't got much charge left I notice, but it should last until I get to work.

The next station is Poplar. Change here for services towards Canary Wharf.

I start to run over today's pitch in my head. I begin with a short clip which will be used as an advert for the new MediaTech platform. It has a voice-over that I pretty much know by heart. It's a satirical mash-up of some of the more famous advertising voice-overs of recent years.

It goes: ‘Everyone has secrets, don’t they? Things they dare not share with the outside world. But the truth is the internet knows most of them. Ever noticed how the ads running down the side of social-media platforms become more and more aligned with your personal preferences? Almost like Internetland knows just what you want? That’s because it does. Internetland has been tracking you. Someone, somewhere, has your Internetland travel path. Remember, it’s not just a travel path, it’s your travel path and it’s time you claimed it back.’

The next station is Westferry.

I look out of the window as we leave Westferry station, although I don’t remember reaching Westferry station or the announcement for that matter. My leg is twitching again. There’s no more prep I can do before I reach the office so I turn to my best stress-busting technique: the free newspaper, or more accurately the crossword in the free newspaper. It’s amazing how a puzzle can transport you out of a stressful situation. You can forget about everything that’s going on in your life. The social media posts drop off your radar first, then the people around you and the scenery, until finally the only thing you can see is the small black-and-white grid in front of you.

The next station is Limehouse. Change here for C2C services.

I’m halfway through the crossword and I get stuck. I slam the paper down on my lap with such force the man next to me makes eye contact. The frustration of the clues, the fact I’ve forgotten my notebook and being late suddenly all seem too much. I can’t keep my mind off

what happened at Lola's. Mr Samuel didn't say much about what happened after Martin had helped me into the taxi but I can guess how it must have looked. What must Gregory Patterson think of me? I'm lucky I'm being allowed to stay on the account.

The next station is Shadwell. Change here for trains to Tower Gateway.

This is my chance to make amends for running out on that dinner. If I can demonstrate that my marketing project will increase the forecasted online traffic and consequently the revenue streams of the proposed MediaTech platform, the Lola's dinner will become a distant memory. If I screw it up … The thought triggers my right shoulder to jar. The knots in my back feel like golf balls under my fingers as I try to smooth my tensed muscles. I remind myself that it is important to think positive thoughts.

The next station is Bank where this train terminates. All change.

I spring to my feet and shuffle forwards to get as close as I can to the doors. I glance at my watch. I had been aiming to get into the office for 7 a.m. and prepare until 10.30 a.m. But it's already 8 a.m. and the train is only just reaching Bank station.

I get ready for my daily game of Underground Army, a game I made up to help keep me sane. It stops me killing tourists or fellow commuters as I tackle the assault course that is getting-out-of-Bank-station during rush hour.

I hang on to the hand rail as the train jerks into the station. The long, dull beep starts and the doors slowly

begin to open. Commuters pile off like a swarm of ants, oblivious to the other commuters around them. The woman in front of me is trying her best to wheel off a pushchair and carry her suitcase at the same time. Travelling with a child in rush hour must be the worst.

'Here, let me help you,' I say.

I take the suitcase and prop it up on the platform while she manoeuvres the pushchair over the gap between the train and the platform edge.

'Thank you,' she says to me, still looking a little flustered. 'I think I'm going to wait for the crowd to go first,' she says and sits down on the platform bench.

'No problem,' I say and then quickly jog towards the archway that leads to the escalator to make up for the precious seconds lost.

I dodge my way through a group of early-bird tourists who are gathered around an Underground map looking puzzled. The escalator is in sight. I nudge my way through the crowd that has gathered at the bottom waiting to ascend at a snail's pace up the right-hand side.

As a child, I used to run up the stairs. But in three-inch heels and a suit-dress, the safer option is to power-walk up the left-hand side of the escalator. I quickly reach the top and then hastily weave through the crowd to get ahead for the next set of escalators. Why the engineers could not have just built one long escalator, I don't know.

Finally, after a few tortuous minutes, I reach fresh air, a little smoky and fumy as it always is in the City. A gentle breeze cools me down from the sticky, claustrophobic heat that the Underground generates. I used to switch to the Central line at Bank and go two stops to Chancery Lane before making a short five-minute walk to the office

off Hatton Garden but since the break-up I've been walking from Bank. I've made a conscious effort to get fit, both physically and mentally, to clear my mind of negativity and feel good about myself again. The walk from Bank to Hatton Garden is a mile and adds about ten minutes to my journey but not only do I find the walk therapeutic, it is also like a mini victory at the start of everyday and a reminder that life after Seph – my life after Seph – is better.

I was about a week into my new regime when I realised that Exit 1 was the most efficient exit. The first couple of days I'd used Exit 3 to the Royal Exchange, one of my all-time favourite places, but then I realised you spent the first five minutes after escaping the Underground navigating your way across two sets of traffic lights. I begin to weave my way through the stream of Londoners and tourists and my thoughts soon turn to my presentation as I start my brisk walk down Poultry. *Everyone has secrets, don't –*

A woman shrieks. There's a long, continuous beep from a car horn and the treacherous screeching of brakes. I freeze. A cyclist veers off the road and onto the pavement. It's heading right for me.

'Look out!'