

Life's Too Short to Frost a Cupcake

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. I want to make that clear at the start. Some people have hinted that I engineered this whole thing – even implying that I had a master plan in place before I left London. The truth is I had no clue what was happening, and by the time I did realize, I think you’ll agree that it was too late to do anything about it.

Everything else that followed – the incident inside the Barnsley Corn Maze, the fracas at the stay-at-home young mothers’ group and my involvement with the Dairy Prize at the Ohio State Show – none of it, trust me, was planned. And for the record, I never claimed to be a recovering alcoholic.

I simply assumed that it was a Monday morning like any other. Stephen had already left for work. He’s a solicitor in the property department of a London law firm, and if you’re not at your desk by seven-thirty a.m., they reclassify you as a part-timer.

Stephen and I are boyfriend and girlfriend, but virtually engaged, and we live in Southfields, which is a suburb of south London for people who would like to live in nearby Wimbledon but can’t afford it. In July the Wimbledon tennis tournament is held at the famous All England Lawn Tennis &

Croquet Club, which is situated just half a mile from our flat. It's very exciting: lots of the roads are closed, and once I stood next to Chris Evert in the queue at the Southfield's Starbucks. People with gardens lining the route to the tennis championships set up stalls selling home-grown strawberries and home-made lemonade. Stephen and I don't have a garden because we live in a very small one-bedroom top-floor flat.

Graham, who is my boss, always starts late on a Monday because that's his day to take his grandchildren to school. He's very nice, underneath his no-nonsense exterior, and lets me start late, too. So I took the opportunity to run my Dettol wipes over the kitchen counters, washed the floor, which doesn't take long because it's about the size of a bath towel, and ordered our Internet shopping from Tesco because I had a feeling that I would be working till all hours that week. And since I would be stuck at my computer all day, and I didn't have any meetings scheduled, I put on my comfy Marks & Spencer's black corduroy jeans and my Dorothy Perkins thick-knit mauve crochet cardigan. I work at Carmichael Music, where Graham is the boss of the UK office and I'm his assistant. In two days' time Phoebe Carmichael – the daughter of our firm's founder Terry Carmichael – will be arriving for a week-long review of the London operation. I had a nasty feeling that Phoebe meant 'review' in the sense of 'firing people'.

I log off from the Tesco website – it doesn't take long because Stephen and I are creatures of habit and order the same things every week – and take a moment to stand in front of the bathroom mirror and put on some lipstick and a bit of matte face-powder. I'm one of those women whose make-up has remained unchanged for twenty years. I buy it all from Valerie, Dad's long-term girlfriend, who is an Avon lady in her spare time.

Right now I do look a bit pasty – there has been no sun in Southfields for several months now – and so I take my courage in my hands and apply some of my new mineral powder, a free sample from Valerie, which helpfully performs the three tasks of foundation, blusher and powder all in one. Dad says that Valerie has found her vocation as an Avon lady. She expertly applies tons of make-up, whereas when I put on foundation and the works, I often find, staring at the mirror in the ladies’ loo, that, far from being blended, my make-up has formed a tide-mark along the jaw-line and I’m sporting two uneven panda eyes.

Hmm. It’s hard to judge because our bathroom has no natural light and Stephen only buys low-wattage, energy-saving light bulbs. I shouldn’t have been so liberal with the special brush, £2.99 with every purchase. Also I think it may be at least two shades too dark. I turn the pot over and am alarmed to see that it’s ‘Beautiful Bronze’. I’m always Ivory. I have pale skin, which does tan if we ever get any sun. Perhaps it’ll make me look like I have a healthy tan, like I’ve just got back from a ski-ing holiday.

The basin is now sprinkled with mineral powder, so I give it a quick wipe-down. I like to clean the bathroom every day: with the advent of MRSA you can’t be too careful. I favour Tesco’s bleach-based spray for basin and lavatory and Windolene-brand wipes for the bathroom mirror. The extra expense of Windolene is well worth it in terms of convenience and a smear-free finish. It’s important to keep on top of the cleaning, though given the size of our flat, this is not too difficult. Our flat is, depending on whom you listen to, best described as bijou (the estate agent), cosy (me) or poky (my sister Teresa). There is one white-walled bedroom, a tiny square shower-only bathroom and an open-plan living room with a dining area leading on to a tired

1980s galley kitchen. At our flat-warming party my sister Teresa shook her head at the chunky white Provençal kitchen tiles. ‘Very dated, Alice. You could have got a proper house in Surbiton for your money,’ she sniffed. But later Dad gave me a hug and congratulated me on ‘getting on the property ladder at last’ – and because Teresa was standing next to us I didn’t tell him that the house is actually in Stephen’s name only.

Then all that’s left is to lace up my Clarks moulded-sole lace-up shoes – as I say, we haven’t got any meetings today and it’s forecast to rain – pull on my coat and grab my handbag. I don’t brush my hair at the moment as I find that it makes the frizz even worse. Instead I’m experimenting with towel-drying it and standing with my head between my knees fluffing it out. But I found out when I woke up this morning that this doesn’t work so well if you do it the night before and go to sleep with it slightly damp.

The coat is a Per Una puffy number which was a present from Dad for Christmas. He worries about me catching a chill on the Tube-station platform. Teresa calls it the sleeping bag. ‘Very useful if the train breaks down, Alice. You could provide warmth and shelter for four commuters.’ My handbag is actually my trusty Karrimor rucksack (technically a daysack because it doesn’t have a metal frame), which contains my purse, keys, paperback, antiseptic hand wipes and thermos of coffee. Stephen and I gave up Starbucks three weeks ago in order to save both cash and calories. Imagine, after just one week we have saved enough to purchase the one-handed kitchen-roll dispenser from the Scotts of Stow catalogue. In time, I’m hopeful of acquiring a complete set of Dorma bedding, including curtains. As for the calories, I’m still waiting for progress on that front. Dad says that I’m just right as I am, but I could definitely do with losing a

few pounds. Like a bear, I put down fat for the winter.

I head out of the flat, carefully double-lock the flat door – the deadlock first, then the Yale – then descend the three flights of stairs, pulling my Karrimor rucksack over my shoulders. I then repeat the double-locking procedure with the house front door, even though Stephen and I are the only people who do this, despite several reminder notices to the owners of the other flats. The notices were in large capitals – Stephen bought a thick black marker pen especially – but even that didn't make a difference. Stephen is very good like that – he's responsibility personified.

I started going out with Stephen after something of a dry spell in my dating life. To be accurate, it was a two-year drought. I'm not one for blind dates, speed-dating or Internet chat. Before I met Stephen I was working at Kingston Council, where I met Paul, a junior planning enforcement officer, with whom I endured a tumultuous on off relationship for two years. Paul wasn't tall, dark or handsome, but he did kiss very proficiently and he was great at stir-fries. We enjoyed a three-month honeymoon period, but our relationship began to come under pressure when he was seconded to night work as part of the Noise Abatement Task Force, and took a further turn for the worse when he went back to college to do a degree in Town Planning. He got really sniffy then. 'I'm sorry, Alice,' he said after the first term. 'I think I need to find someone who's my intellectual equal.' You've heard of men who dump you after you've slept with them. Paul was cut from the same cloth: he waited until after I had typed his term paper – *Pavement Layout: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century* – to tell me.

It was a relief to meet Stephen, a man who, unlike Paul, has never once been late or forgotten my birthday (he has a reminder programme set up on his email). He's also very

supportive of my career. I was very nervous indeed when I went for my job interview at Carmichael Music, but Stephen had ensured that I was thoroughly prepared. He made flash-cards with key statistics about top performers of the last four decades. When I was asked about key trends in the recording industry, I could talk for five minutes without hesitation or deviation about digital download technology. They stopped me after three. Donny Osmond made his first television performance aged only four singing ‘You Are My Sunshine’, by the way.

Physically I would describe Stephen as bookish or, better still, intellectual-looking. He’s tall, nearly six foot one, which I think is good on a man. He’s of very slim build with fine, sandy hair which he has swept back at the sides and short on top, just like Andrew Ridgeley, one half of the now defunct 1980s pop group Wham! He also has what I think is a very distinguished Roman nose. Teresa says that contacts and a decent haircut would take ten years off him, but he’s been going to junior-stylist night round the corner for a while now and sees no reason to change.

Outside I zip up my coat against the harsh March wind blowing down the street. About half the three-storey houses have been converted into flats, while the rest are invariably described as substantial and much-sought-after family homes. The houses have lovely stained-glass front doors and window boxes, which in the summer will be full of tastefully coordinated geraniums. They are barren containers of soil right now. Our neighbours in Southfields are married with two children and one dog per couple. The mothers have Volvo estates and the husbands drive those fast Audis. The dogs come in three makes: Labradors, scotties or spaniels. We wave hello, but they don’t socialize with us because Stephen and I are childless, dogless cohabiters.

I turn into Replingham Road, walk up past Budgen's and hasten past Starbucks, lest I'm tempted to grab a hot chocolate. Then I go into the Tube station to wait for a District Line train to Kensington High Street. Standing on the platform, where the overhead monitor displays a three-minute wait until the next train, I'm depressed to find that I can no longer put off thinking about Phoebe Carmichael.