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Opening Extract from...

Venus Envy

Written by Louise Bagshawe

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Venus Envy

Louise Bagshawe



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Chapter 1

'Alan Pell's coming round in five minutes,' Keisha announced.

'Lucky you,' I said grumpily.

'Yeah.' Keisha preened, stretching her elegant black back like a prizewinning Siamese. 'He says there's a job going down at *Up and Running*.' She tugged her tiny Gucci cardigan disapprovingly round her polished-ebony shoulders and flung an expressive glance at my work station. Bits of clay and sweet-wrappers from my latest avant-garde creation littered my side of the room. 'Maybe if you carry on like that he'll recommend you for something at *Blue Peter*.'

'I'll clear it up,' I said gloomily. It did look like a reject from the *Play School* arts department.

'And yourself,' Keisha said not unkindly. She spoke in the tone of someone addressing a poor unfortunate fellow creature. 'I can lend you my black Ghost dress.'

'What's wrong with this?' I snapped.

Her glance at my tattered jeans and paint-spattered shirt was eloquent. My nails were broken, my hair was straggly, and my clothes were a style-free zone.

'He works in the record business . . . he knows lots of people in TV,' Keisha said temptingly. 'Interesting people . . . with money. And power.'

'I don't care about people with money and power!' I lied furiously. 'I only care about Oliver.'

My latest greatest love had just dumped me yesterday. By fax. From the set of his new movie, although obviously he hadn't had time to do it himself. I must be the only girl in the history of dating to be dumped by a secretary.

'Oliver was a loser. And so will you be, if you keep dressing like a refugee from the bypass protests,' Keisha insisted. She opened her wardrobe and pulled out a black scrap of nothing, immaculate in its dry-cleaner sheath. 'If you get this dirty you're paying for it.'

'How much was it?' I asked grimly.

Keisha blushed. 'Two eighty.'

'Two hundred and eighty quid?' I gasped. Keisha gave me heart tremors, the fortune she spent on clothes. Without wincing. She never had any money, but by God, she was flash. We're talking about a girl who once spent a month's dole cheques on an Armani jacket. Men only had to look at Keisha to go running to the nearest Prada store or Rolex outfit. Maybe she sold all the superfluous Rolexes to feed her designer habit. It was one of the mysteries of the ages, how she paid for it.

I felt guilty if I bought an M&S sandwich instead of making my own.

'I could take you down to Neville Daniels,' Keisha suggested cheerfully, 'drag you round to Liberty's and fix you up . . . we could get to first base with about three hundred quid.'

'Three hundred!' I gasped.

'Four hundred, maybe,' Keisha admitted.

I thought gloomily about that idea as I slipped on her dress. Four hundred quid would get me looking presentable. Great. And how was I supposed to find that, three months into London life with my parents still

paying the rent, no boyfriend to pay for taxis or dinners, and a miserable future as a typist looming over me?

The door opened. It was Gail, my little sister, carrying a bunch of health-food bags and looking radiant and fragile in her pure wool organic dress. I still couldn't believe I was sharing a flat with Gail, but when push came to shove, I'd submitted to my parents' dictates. I was sharing this flat rent-free. I was taking the steady job in the City.

Two years ago you wouldn't have caught me dead here.

I was the great Alexandra, Wilde by name and wilder by nature. Failed in school – especially compared to Miss one hundred per cent A-grades Gail Wilde, but so what? I was creative. Making mud sculptures in the sandpit since I was about one, entered all the Young Artist competitions and won six national awards. I had a sunny life lined up as the next Dame Elizabeth Frink. Damien Hirst would have nothing on me. I scraped a C in Maths and English GCSEs, and went to Oxford. Not to do anything academic, as such. Bachelor of Fine Arts – painting and sculpting. With a little art history thrown in.

Oxford was too good to be true. I'd found *The Thornbirds* heavy going, let alone *Middlemarch*, and here I was in some Merchant Ivory film, punting down the Isis and eating strawberries in Christ Church meadows with Japanese tourists. All my friends were patronising, smug Student Grant types from *Viz*. I didn't care. I bought *Socialist Worker* and went on rent strikes. I was going to be like Vanessa Redgrave or Tony Benn – radical, but somehow still rich. Selling my mice and birds for a small fortune in smart London galleries.

All my mates laughed, but I had faith.

I was wrong.

Nobody wanted to buy my sculptures, and six months in bedsit land with cockroaches and broken radiators had crushed my spirit. I wasn't cut out for life on the streets. My bohemian director boyfriend, Oliver, had dumped me for a Californian Barbie doll the first job he got out there. I had no support except Mummy and Daddy. As I was finding out, a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a set of funky clay statues doesn't get you very far in the big city.

'God, you look tired, Alex-Palex,' Gail said annoyingly. She always used our baby nicknames in front of my cooler friends. 'Your b-complex vitamins need boosting.'

'Your face needs flattening,' I growled.

'Great dress,' Gail said airily. 'Pity about the rest of you. Oh, I hope you haven't nicked all the hot water, Keisha, my muscles are cramping, I'm sure it's extreme stress. Maybe I should try Prozac.' She gave her waif-like, doe-eyed reflection a smug glance and flounced into the bathroom. Gail was a hypochondriac and a health-food nut, but she got away with it because she was so fragile and lovely. Even her stupid organic clothes somehow seemed attractively rustic and simple. And, like Keisha, Gail had a job: she was an editorial assistant at *Organic Food Weekly*, making no money and waiting happily for Mr Right to come along and spirit her to a big Gloucestershire estate, where she could satisfy her need for nature by fiddling with a small herb garden, or something.

Gail also fancied herself as the next Martin Amis. She was writing something she called 'the Great Nature Novel', but refused to tell me the plot – like I cared! – in case I nicked it off her. She didn't trust me at all, which was ironic, since when I was at Oxford, Gail, who read sociology at Reading, used to come over all the time and

date all the eligible men. Except Tom Drummond, who wouldn't give her the time of day, but I'll tell you more about Tom later.

Keisha was signing on when I first knew her, but her effortless self-confidence had got her into radio and then TV. She did things I would never dream of. Like driving her Mercedes coupé to the dole office, or making up her CV. Radio had needed experience, so Keisha calmly invented some experience. Now she was about to go for her first major job: Alan was putting a word in over at *Up and Running*, the BBC cult Saturday kids' show. Thousands of people went for the researcher posts there every year.

'When Alan comes over, will you write my letter, Alex?' Keisha wheedled.

I sighed. I wrote everyone's letters in this house. Letters of complaint, job applications, thankyou notes, the bloody lot. It was the only thing, apart from sculpting, I was any good at.

Great, I thought as I looked in the mirror. Gail was right: I didn't look cool at all, I was just plump, scruffy Alex wearing a smart black dress.

Tomorrow was my first day in paid employment. I was still dependent on my parents. I was boyless. I was a failure.

I was twenty-seven years old.

Keisha mistook my silence for anger. She should have known better, I never got angry with anyone. I had the spine of a jellyfish.

'Come on, hon, I'll get your hair fixed for you,' she wheedled.

I needed the help.

'OK,' I said.

The door buzzed. It was Alan Pell, looking sharp as a tack. Another urban star fresh from another promotion.

They were all zooming down the fast lane while I was wrecked on the hard shoulder.

'All right, Keisha babe,' Alan said, looking her Gucci shift over admiringly. 'Hiya, Alex, hon.' He kissed me warmly on the cheek. 'You look really tired. Great dress though.'

'Thanks,' I said wearily. I racked my brains for some snappy comeback, but nothing.

Keisha locked in smooth pro chat-up mode. For such a class-A bitch, she can certainly turn on the charm when she feels like it. Alan was basking in the intense interest radiating from her chocolate eyes.

I stomped out of the flat and spent ten pounds on five Four-Play scratch cards. Then I went round to McDonald's and bought a Big Mac meal with real Coke and extra fries. I won two pounds. I was just stuffing a great fistful of fries into my cheek when Gail, weighing bugger-all and with some smooth, tanned City type on her arm, walked past the window and gave me a cheery wave. The City type looked amazed. Gail was related to *that*?

I told myself tomorrow was another day.

Chapter 2

The radio switched itself on merrily. Bastard. Mark Radcliffe and Lard braying unfunny jokes into my shattered head. Then they put on Metallica. I dragged myself from my comfy, parentally paid-for white sheets and stumbled across the room to hit the off button.

'Rise and shine, rise and shine,' Gail yelled, poking her head through the door. She was wearing a wispy Lainey Keogh web cardigan today, over a neat silk jumper. 'It's seven already!'

'Seven?' I asked blearily. Did people really do this every day? It's against my religion to surface before ten.

'Yeah, hurry up, you'll be late,' Gail said bossily. 'Mummy wants you to make a good impression today. You know she pulled strings to get you this job.'

The sad thing was that this was true. With no formal qualifications, even this shitty job was really beyond me. But, rejoicing that their black ewe had returned to the middle-class fold, Mummy and Daddy had made phone calls all over the shop, cashing in goodwill chips from years of tennis tournaments and letting the local riding school hack over our scrubby field. I had a prompt letter from Personnel at Hamilton Kane, the private investment bank, offering me a job as second secretary to one Seamus Mahon, in Corporate Finance. Mrs Kane played

women's golf with my mother once a month. Even though, since I was about to do this, I clearly had no guts at all, Mummy would still have them for garters if I failed her in any way.

'OK.' I headed for the bathroom, which was sealed tighter than Oliver Brown's cheating little heart.

'Keisha . . .'

'You can wait 'til I'm finished.'

'When . . .?'

'When I'm finished,' Keisha shouted superbly.

There was no way I was getting a shower now.

'You'll have to be quicker than that,' Gail said silkily, 'and there's no breakfast cereal left. Bronwen just got back and she's been on the grass all night and she had the munchies.'

Bronwen was our other flatmate. She was Welsh, lithe and supremely funky. A photographer's assistant, she went on fashion shoots all day and raved all night. She was on first-name terms with all the bouncers down the Ministry of Sound and knew more about drugs than our local chemist. Her clothes were so hip she made the *Face* look like *Woman's Weekly*.

I knew my life was radically changed if I was in the flat the same times as Bronwen. She sat in our kitchen, scenting the whole thing with acrid marijuana smoke so thick I felt I'd be spouting Beatles lyrics any second. She was wearing tight-ass white leather jeans and a pink Spice Girls T-shirt, with 'Girl Power' emblazoned across her impressive chest. Oh, why did everybody else in this place make me feel like Fergie, only less stylish?

'All right sister,' said Bronwen, '*bore da*,' then dissolved into giggles. She was certainly having a good time if she was dropping in Welsh phrases. Bronwen staggered over to give me a boozy hug, and before I

could swerve away she'd spilt black coffee all over my carefully ironed blue suit.

'Oops,' said Gail, hugely amused. 'Better find something else to wear.'

I flounced back into my own bedroom and yanked open my wardrobe. My trouser suit was in the laundry, my navy dress had a toothpaste stain on it. It was amazing, I could almost hear my own blood pressure rising.

Keisha stuck her head round my door. She was a working fantasy in Nicole Farhi, with *Rouge Noir* Chanel lipstick and nail polish perfectly coordinated.

'Black dress. Only option,' she said succinctly. 'Black says – grace and strength,' she pronounced.

I tugged on my black jersey dress. It had a roll-neck collar and was quite forgiving to my unworked-out, McDonald's-loving bottom. Keisha was right, it was the only option. And in autumn it would have looked quite smart.

Except today was the fourth of August, and it was seven thirty, and it was already blazing hot.

Hamilton Kane was in Threadneedle Passage. I knew this very well. And right now the address was emblazoned on my overheated heart, because it took me forty minutes of frantic tramping and hyperventilating over my cruelly mismarked *A–Z* to find the bloody alley. I mean, have you ever tried asking suited City brokers for directions in the morning rush hour? Might as well ask a teeming piranha to stop and chat. The stares were incredulous. And the women were worse. One gorgeous female in Prada, with baby-blond hair and pouting lips, snarled something that might not have been 'Fuck off, fatso', but then again, it might have.

'You're late,' the receptionist said coolly when I burst

through the brass doors into a huge marble fantasy from *Wall Street*.

I panted and dripped in front of her. Three coats of Sure antiperspirant had, despite all its promises, let me down. However, in this dress the odds were stacked against it. My reflection in the dark glass behind her desk was red faced and sweating. My lipstick had already vanished and my under-eye concealer was glowing white like those sunblock streaks on Aussie cricketers.

'Sorry, it was the traffic and the–'

'We work to quite a tight schedule here, Miss Wilde,' the receptionist said nastily. 'You'll be reporting to Jenny, Mr Mahon's first assistant. Her office is on the fourth floor directly you step out of the lifts.'

'Thank you,' I muttered. I strode towards the lifts purposefully. Grace, Alex, grace and strength.

'Oh, and Miss Wilde?'

'You can call me Alex,' I said kindly. Ha, ha, score one to me, snotty cow.

'Very well – you've got a ladder in your tights, *Alex*.'

The lift doors hissed softly shut in front of my mortified face. The mirrored walls confirmed this was not just sadistic wishful thinking. Yes, Jacob could have climbed to paradise up the ladder in my new Fogal tights.

When the doors opened again I was stumbling bare feet back into teetering heels, one sweaty pair of ripped tights clutched feebly in my left hand.

A severe and impeccable matron in a Jaeger suit was standing in front of me with a thunderous frown.

'I am Jenny Robins,' she said crisply.

'Hi.' Desperately I looked round for somewhere to stuff the tights, but there wasn't anywhere, so I dropped them into my handbag. 'I'm Alex.'

*

Over the next two hours I learned several things. 1) I hate typing. 2) I can't spell – 'For goodness' sake, Alexandra, excited, not exited. Professor has *one* "f", I thought it said on your CV that you have a degree?' 3) Where the coffee machine is located; also, the stain freshly spilled coffee makes all over light beige carpet.

'Clumsy! Clumsy!' Jenny shrieked, when she rounded the corner and saw me on my hands and knees trying to wash the carpet in Fairy Liquid and Evian from the fridge.

'Sorry.' I felt near to tears. I was sweating buckets in my horrible dress, I was spilling things and ripping things like Mr Bean in a skirt. I couldn't even type well enough to be a secretary's secretary, and now I had spilled espresso on their carpet at the first attempt. 'It gushed out all boiling–'

'It's hot. Coffee is supposed to be hot,' snapped Jenny, 'and what on earth are you doing? That'll make it a thousand times worse . . . and *Mr Mahon's Evian*! Who told you you could open the executive fridge? Do you know how particular he is about his water? Really!'

I rocked back on my heels. In the gleaming front surface of the executive fridge I saw my own flushed face, with light-brown tendrils of fringe plastered wetly to my forehead.

At that moment the door opposite us swung open and a procession of heavyset bean-counters in Savile Row suits marched out. Most of them gave me amused or disapproving stares as they stormed past, mouthing off about 'equity derivatives' and 'December 50s' and the like. Her face a mask of horror at being so exposed, Jenny yanked me to my feet by the shoulder. She had a strength that would have done credit to a drill sergeant. Or alternatively, my mother.

As the last of the meeting rounded the end of our

corridor, Jenny turned on me with a face that suggested I had just finished the shortest spell of employment Hamilton Kane had ever seen.

'Alll-exandra,' she began, my name rolling furiously off her tongue, 'I must say I have *never*–'

At that moment the door swung open again. A much younger, much taller man, in a flashy navy suit that looked like it came from Alexander McQueen or someone, a man with thick black hair that curled just below his collar in the most engaging manner, a tanned man with incredibly white teeth that were grinning at me in the most friendly way, and a pair of moss-green eyes that were twinkling at me like one of Keisha's gold watches, propped himself against the doorpost and extended me a firm hand.

'Miss Alexandra Wilde, is it yourself?' he asked merrily. His accent was as soft as Irish mist. I thought Celtic gold harps, I thought babbling brooks, I thought glossy-coated Red Setters bounding across Galway moors, or something like that. I also thought, my mascara is running and I want to kill myself.

'It is. Yes,' I stammered, and seeing Jenny's thunderous face, I added, 'uh, yes, sir.'

'Call me that, and I'll be turning around to look for my father. Mr Mahon, if we're being formal. But Seamus, otherwise.'

'OK,' I said miserably.

'*Mr* Mahon,' said Jenny, her face tight with emotion, 'I'm afraid Alexandra has–'

'Ah yes, I see the problem,' Seamus soothed her. 'What a bother that infernal machine is. The coffee comes out far too hot. Anyway, the cleaners'll get that out, Jenny, so I'll tell you what, you grab a mat to lay over the stain and that'll be grand.'

I must have looked like a death-chamber prisoner

hearing the phone ring, because Seamus took one look at my face and coughed gently.

'And Jenny, do you have those letters done?'

'Well.' Jenny went back to her desk and picked up one neat sheaf. 'These are the ones I typed for you, the priorities.'

'Thanks.' He flicked through them rather intently for such a laid-back-looking guy. 'And the recruitment offers?'

There was a pregnant pause. It might actually have been expecting quads.

'Those,' Jenny said heavily, 'were being typed by Alexandra.'

She grabbed a much smaller, second sheaf of letters. Covered with angry scrawls in green biro.

Seamus flicked through my attempt at gainful employment. His lip twitched.

'Jenny, you're an angel, so you are,' he said, though unless he was thinking of the Angel of Death I'd like to know which one he had in mind. 'Why don't you get cracking on the Mandarin spreadsheets, while I try and explain all the madhouse rules to Alex, seeing as she's new to the team?'

I breathed out a deep sigh of relief. I still had my job. My father would not scream at me. My mother would not have to cancel her golf sessions with Fiona Kane.

Then I felt a wave of depression seize me as I realised what I was being grateful for these days.

'Very well, Mr Mahon,' Jenny snapped, and slunk back to her desk like a Dobermann cheated of its dinner.

'Come in, Alex. If it's OK that I call you Alex?'

'It's fine,' I said, wishing tremendously that he would give me five minutes to repair my face.

No sooner was this thought formed in my head than my boss stopped again, regarded me considerately and

said, 'Only first you'll be wanting to dab that coffee off that lovely dress.'

I fled to the ladies' in one second flat, to face the greatest disaster area outside of central Bosnia. My runny mascara was giving me an 'eighties Goth vibe, my blusher had sweated off and my teeth were dotted with lipstick, from all that chewing my mouth in naked terror I'd been doing. Hurriedly I washed my face clean of all make-up products; better to go bare faced than court disaster twice. Then I tried to dry my sticky forehead with paper hand-towels. I thought about sticking my head under the hand-dryer to try for a quick blow-dry effect, but with my luck today Jenny would just walk right in and have a heart attack.

I gazed at the results. Neater, but still horrible. Black jersey dress and naked face reminiscent of a scrubbed, chubby schoolgirl. I yanked my clammy hair back from my forehead and tied it into a viciously tight ponytail that yanked up the skin at the corners of my temples.

Let's face it, I was just not cut out to be a corporate slave.

I ran back to Mr Mahon's office before he got up a search party for me. It was a daunting office, with floor-to-ceiling windows affording a magnificent view over the City of London. Various domes and spires peered serenely out behind New York-style skyscrapers. The office itself was peppered with enough computers to launch a NASA satellite and covered with enough Bokara rugs to please an Arab Sheikh. I wondered idly whether if I breathed enough of the air in here, would my own tiny bank balance grow any bigger? The flowers on his desk were the kind of twiggy, leafy affair that says 'designer florist'; the *Wall Street Journal*, probably flown in that morning, rested comfortably on his antique mahogany desk . . .

I gulped. My mistyped letters were laid out before Mr Designer Everything of the twinkly eyes. I was being weighed in the balance, in this Temple of Mammon, and I knew I was going to be found wanting.

What would Keisha do? Actually, at this point, Keisha would most likely light up a fag without asking, blow a stream of smoke in the boss's face and then swing her Manolo Blahnik heels up on his desk. Keisha, when she used to be a temp, regularly used to get up from her desk in the middle of the afternoon without a word to anybody and go and get her nails done. Nobody fired her, but then again, nobody would dare. Whereas I was the working world's equivalent of the seven-stone weakling on the bodybuilders' beach. I sort of begged to be reamed out.

Seamus Mahon leaned forward. I could see he was shocked by the web of green ink that represented my first morning on the job.

'Alex Wilde,' he said, 'now would that be any relation to Kim?'

'Sorry?' I asked blankly.

'Sure, you know her, so. "We're the kids in America," ' he whistled tunelessly. 'You look a little like her.'

Great. Now I look like a frumpy washed-up early 'eighties icon. Why not just say I look like Roseanne Barr and have done with it.

'No,' I said, as coldly as I could, but it washed right over Seamus Mahon.

'These letters, Alex. They're not actually spelled right.'

I blushed with mortification.

'But that doesn't really matter.' His Irish lilt was creamy as the head on a pint of Guinness. 'If you press–' he showed me a simple little thing on his keyboard – 'it'll

check the spelling for you. And correct it. It's wonderful, what they can do with technology these days.'

'Oh,' I said weakly. Why, why hadn't Jenny told me that? My boss was clearly some kind of Nazi, longing for me to screw up so she could have this delectable creature all to herself.

Although, looking the way I did, the field was effectively clear for her anyway. I might actually have predicted something like this. I looked so fat, and so ugly with my unprotected face and no tights and clammy hair, I was bound to meet the most devastating man I'd ever laid eyes on. In fact, I'll tell you the surest way I know to flood your life with desirable men. Put on ten pounds, break out in spots and/or varicose veins, and have a hair-colouring disaster that leaves you with green streaks round your ears. Then Brad Pitt and Harrison Ford lookalikes will suddenly appear magically from every corner, like the mice coming out of the mouse organ in *Bagpuss*.

'I'll remember that,' I said.

'How about I call one of the computer boys and ask him to help you round all the shortcuts? Jack?' he asked, punching up a few numbers on his space-phone. 'Could you come up here and talk to my new assistant? Show her the ropes, like.' He listened to the other end whilst smiling engagingly at me, then laughed. 'That's right enough, there, Jack. I'd say she is. Now you take very good care of her, you hear? She's new. And she's Fiona Kane's pet project.'

He hung up. Embarrassment flamed through me. Great, just great, so everybody knew I was here because of the spurious golf-club connection.

'Thanks, Mr Mahon.'

'I thought we said Seamus,' he reproved me, smiling kindly at me as I fled his office.