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Where Have All The Boys Gone?

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Chapter One

There is a very small envelope of seduction time available between the stages 'just pissed enough' and 'disastrously over-pissed', and suddenly, Katie wasn't sure she was going to make it.

This man sitting in front of her wore little heels on his shoes, she remembered, swaying slightly. She'd noticed under the chippy, awkwardly tiny bar table in this stupid new bar called Square Root. OK, he was her first date in four months, and she had her best bra on, but still, she really ought to have paid more attention to the shoes . . . it was just, it had been a difficult week.

It had started on Sunday. Louise was still on her international bang-athon, leaving her and Olivia, who came around on Sundays to avoid getting inky fingerprints on her pristine white sofa, studiously reading the papers, watching *EastEnders* and ignoring the obvious sounds of sexual intercourse coming from the spare bedroom.

'How come Kat Slater is really fat and covered in slap and millions of men are in love with her?' Katie had asked.

There was a particularly vigorous grunting noise.

'Umm,' Olivia squeezed her eyes shut. 'For the same reason everyone's in love with Phil even though he looks like a barnyard animal. Drugs.'

'OK,' said Katie loudly, 'I UNDERSTAND.'

There was an endless tense moment next door as everything went quiet. The two girls looked at one another. There was a pause. Then the ritual banging started again.

'Jesus,' said Olivia. She looked at Katie. 'Couldn't you have bought a bigger flat?'

'In North London?' Katie nodded. 'Sure! I should have gone for the rooftop swimming pool. And the maid's quarters. I'm a complete idiot.'

'I'm just saying.' Olivia believed in karma and therefore probably did think having a tiny flat and a huge mortgage in Kentish Town was Katie's fault.

Katie loudly turned the page.

'Bloody hell!' she exploded.

'What? New revolutionary soundproofing spray just invented?'

'No.'

'New laws make it easier to expel noisy tenants?'

'No.'

'Sex makes you put on more weight than Atkins' diet?'

'Look,' said Katie, pointing at the paper.

Olivia squinted at it upside down.

'"Women Going Men Crazy,"' she read out loud. 'You really have to stop buying these women-hating papers.'

They both read the article rolling their eyes. It asserted that their generation of women was a clutch of uncontrollable pissed-up hose-monsters on the loose, terrorising the five nice remaining men in the world. The problem was, from the sounds next door, it was tricky to disagree.

'It says here that there're no men left and we're all going barking. Well, that would explain a lot,' said Olivia.

'If that's true, why is it him in there who's doing the barking?'

Suddenly there was a high-pitched wailing sound.

The two girls looked at each other.

'I'd start a round of applause,' said Olivia, 'if I'd heard even the tiniest little peep out of Lou.'

'Also, we want to pretend absolutely nothing just happened,' said Katie, turning back to her paper. 'It says we're all drunken slut-buckets.'

'Slut-buckets? Really?' said Olivia.

'Honestly, I haven't yet thought up a better way to cope with the modern London man,' said Katie sadly.

The door opened down the corridor, and the paper-thin walls shook slightly. The room they were in, Katie's living room, had a band of old kitchen on the far side. The estate agent had assured her this would make it wonderful for entertaining. In fact, it merely made sure that Katie never ever cooked fish.

Louise tiptoed in, ostentatiously yawning. She had great legs, which she ignored, and a big nose, which she fixated on.

'Ooh, just been asleep . . . thought I'd have a bit of a lie-in . . . tea . . . I think . . .'

The other two girls looked at her and waited.

'Sleepy sleepy sleepy . . .' continued Louise, trying to turn on the kettle in an overtly surreptitious manner.

'I heard about this girl once,' said Olivia. 'She told terrible lies and then one day she got run over by a car because she was such a terrible liar. Karma.'

'Yes. Her name was Chlamydia,' said Katie sternly. 'Chlamydia Liar.'

Louise rolled her eyes.

'OK. OK. I met someone.'

'Someone? Or something?'

She shot the two girls a look.

'I just had sex with a man. Which is more than you two have done for months.'

'I don't think I've seen a man for months,' said Olivia. 'What are they like?'

Louise shrugged.

'Umm . . . they have less hair than us in some bits. And more in other bits.'

'Like monkeys,' added Katie helpfully.

'What else?' Olivia was handling the kettle now, so it was filthy organic green tea in the offing.

'Umm, they have these kind of lever thingies,' said Louise.

'What do they do?' asked Katie.

'They go up and down,' said Louise, stirring in three sugars whilst Olivia gave her a disapproving look.

'The way they work is, in Soho, other men have a hole shaped like the lever,' said Olivia. 'The two bits fit together.'

Katie took her horrid tea and went back to the sitting-room area of the room.

'Ahh,' she said. 'Will we ever get to meet one of these remarkable specimens?'

Louise looked guilty.

'Uh, maybe not this one,' she said.

In Square Root, Terence – that was his name – was explaining how he'd dicked someone over at work in revenge for beating him on a deal. This was the date Katie had been looking forward to for weeks. She'd come to view it as the end of an intolerable dry spell, the way a prisoner views their parole date.

She took another sip of wine, feeling groggy. One shouldn't really place such high expectations on things.

Why was Terence wearing a Burberry cap that also said Von Dutch on the front? And what was underneath it?

'Fing is,' said Terence conclusively, 'I'm all for equal opportunities, and I don't care if it was a bird – she still had it coming to her.'

Then, on Tuesday morning, she'd run into Olivia on the Tube. It was an unseasonably hot day for early in the year, and everyone in the rush hour was miserable in woollies and heavy jackets. Katie was a master of the Tube; avoiding eye contact, walking past buskers and unfolding her *Metro* with a hearty flourish. She may not like London all the time, she often pondered, but by God, she *belonged*.

Olivia was Katie's boss and, behind the scenes, secret friend. It was a bit like having an office romance, with the result that at work she was a lot harder on Katie than she would have been otherwise. At least, that was Katie's hypothesis.

'I wouldn't have minded,' said Katie, swinging off the filthy Tube holds and wondering as usual if anyone ever washed them. They were squeezed together in a carriage full of women, jolting their way into Soho where they worked. 'But I did see him. He was even worse than he sounded.'

Olivia rolled her eyes. 'How could he not be? She practically dug a tunnel to get him out of there. Bald fat midget?'

'Fat beardy twat face.'

Katie shook her head. Poor old Louise had never been the same since Max left.

'Well, we were watching *EastEnders*. A world where people fancy Shane Ritchie is obviously a place where things have gone very very wrong for women.'

They looked around the carriage. The scent of perfume

was strong in the air. An elegant woman – one of those types that can pull off casually draped scarves – was skilfully applying lipstick despite the motion of the rickety old train. Three others stood buried in women's magazines and copies of *Metro*; a couple were hidden behind novels. On the seats were three men buried in newspapers, ferociously showing how post-feminist they were by not giving up their seats. A mixed group of backpackers stood at the end, but they existed in the parallel universe of travellers; Kiwis and Australians and South Africans and Poles and cheap nights in special bars and internet cafés and their own magazines. But the vast majority of the carriage was female. Dozens of them. Katie squinted. Had it always been like this? Was she only just noticing?

Olivia was rudely reading someone's paper over their shoulder. She nudged Katie suddenly.

'Look at that.'

'No! It's rude!'

The woman whose paper it was turned around and Katie got a dirty look. She felt hard done by and narrowed her eyes back. Had she been this aggressive before she moved to London?

'Look,' whispered Olivia this time, scarcely quieter.

Katie didn't get it, the paper was full of its usual rubbish. Olivia was trying to indicate a corner with her eyes, like someone in a coma. Eventually, with lots of grumpy snuffling from the woman to indicate that, though not the type to instigate physical violence, she certainly did not approve of the practice of newspaper stealing, even a free newspaper, and if she could move in the packed sardine tin she would, thank you, Katie saw it.

'Final census results for London' said the headline. 'According to the 2001 census, women outnumber men in the capital by 180,000.'

Olivia was wiggling her eyebrows madly. 'See?'

'See what?'

'What the papers are saying is *true*.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, what do we say every time we walk into a bar?'

'It smells bad in here?'

'No.'

'We're getting too old for this?'

Olivia rolled her eyes. 'OK, besides that.'

'Where have all the men gone?'

'Bingo.'

'Well, that –' the woman holding the paper was no longer sniffing, but listening to them intently '– that's our proof. We're the L.O.S.T. generation of women.'

'The what?'

'London-On our Own-Single-Twentysomethings.'

'That doesn't sound so bad,' said Olivia.

'It's bad! It's bad! It says so in the paper.'

'Stop worrying about it! What kind of a feminist are you?'

'One that wants the right to decide if I want a bloke or not.'

'OK,' said Olivia. 'And . . . do you?'

'YES!' said Katie. 'And men can sense it. That's why I never meet any. I give off strange vibes.'

'Ssh now,' said Olivia.

'OK,' said Katie. They travelled on in silence for a while.

'You know Louise's fat beardy twat face didn't even call,' she said finally.

Olivia rolled her eyes. 'Probably staying in and washing his hairs.'

'There are NO MEN,' sighed Katie for what felt like the nine millionth time.

'Yeah,' said a voice near their ankles. They both looked down. An extremely short, sandy-haired man with a nose like a sun-dried tomato was addressing them both.

'What?' said Olivia, loftily.

'Yeah,' he said. 'You mean, there's no tall rich men.'

'No, we don't,' said Katie. 'Do we?'

'You're wearing a wedding ring,' said Olivia suspiciously.

'She's gorgeous,' said the little chap. 'And twenty-four.' He looked at them pointedly.

The woman who'd been holding the paper looked down too.

'You are right you know,' she said to the girls, her initial frostiness thawing. 'The paper says so. But I knew it anyway. Statistically, there are no men.'

An obviously gay man standing next to her raised an eyebrow and flared just one of his nostrils.

'You think that,' he said.

All three women rolled their eyes.

Another woman leaned over. This was unheard of in the Tube in rush hour; an actual conversation. This woman was tall, skinny and wearing lime green fishnets and what looked like a bin bag.

'I work in fashion,' she said.

'No kidding,' said Olivia.

'No men,' said the fashion woman.

'Publishing,' said the woman with the newspaper. 'No men.'

'Try being a nanny!' came a squeaky Scandinavian voice from the back. 'Only married creeps there!'

The little man looked smug and grabbed Katie's skirt.

'I've banged them all,' he whispered.

* * *

Katie hadn't minded so much at the time – after all, she had a date, the date she was now in the middle of. Terence had now embarked on a story about a fantastic deal he had made at work that had made everybody else look like idiots, except for him. This, it came to her in a moment of clarity, was why she was getting drunk. And she should leave quickly, just in case she tipped over the edge and suddenly started finding him inexplicably attractive.

She'd asked around the office, pretending it was research. Working in PR, as Katie and Olivia both did, you could pretend a lot of things were research.

'Well, what do you think?' she'd asked Miko in the office, who was trying to be sympathetic and maintain her perfect inch-long fingernails at the same time. 'Are there really no men?'

'Yeah,' said Miko lazily, peeling off a strip of old polish. Katie couldn't bear it when she did this. Katie herself was doing a wrinkle check in the cosmetic mirror Miko kept on her desk. She felt troubled.

'I mean,' said Miko, 'they're just spoilt for choice, aren't they?'

Katie thought about this for a second. 'You think . . . what, men are just too nonchalant with all the women around now?'

Miko shrugged. 'Well, look.' She indicated the trendy sloped glass wall which overlooked the lobby of their Covent Garden building. Katie looked down. It always made her feel slightly sick, as if she were going to fall in.

'Girl girl girl,' intoned Miko as people walked through the door. 'Fat bloke. Girl girl girl. Hairy-wristed bloke shagging that girl there. Married too. Girl girl girl.'

Katie sat back. 'So, what – you're saying the men all have two women each and there's still lots of girls left over?'

She thought back over the men working in their office. There were two. Fat Paul who did the books and smelled of egg sandwiches, of which he consumed copious amounts, leaving a trail of watercress wherever he went, and a small gremlin in the IT department who veered away from direct sunlight. Both had unexpectedly attractive wives who turned up stoically at the Christmas party knowing everyone was looking at them thinking, 'Really? Is he fantastic in bed?'

'Hi Lucca,' shouted Miko to the gorgeous, tawny-coloured Italian girl passing her desk, who worked in the marketing department. 'How did your blind date go?'

Lucca swung her heavy beige-blonde hair in a circle. 'I know why you call it "blind date" now,' she hissed.

Miko shrugged. 'Why?'

'Because I want to stab my eyes out with fork! Tell me, why does he think I am interested he meets Robert Kilroy-Silk?'

Katie and Miko both shrugged.

'Why he want tell me – before drink before dinner even that he is not ready for long-term relationship?'

'Would we be better off with Italian boys?' asked Katie sympathetically.

'No! Only if you be their mother always.'

Lucca made a wild emphatic gesture that indicated a general wrath towards the male species altogether and headed off to dish out more abuse to the coffee machine.

'Lucca's much more beautiful than me,' mused Katie sadly.

'Yes, she is,' said Miko.

'But still gets dickheads.'

'Who do you get then?' asked Miko.

* * *

Terence, clearly. He'd seemed all right when they'd met at that barbecue. OK, there'd been lots of other people there, and quite a lot of beer, but now . . . As if doing the opposite of reading her mind, Terence confidently placed a podgy hand on her knee. Inside, Katie recoiled.

'I just want you to know,' he said, boozily breathing in her face. 'I'm just in this for a bit of fun, yeah? Nothing too serious.'

Katie hadn't liked the way the conversation with Miko was going.

Really, what was wrong with her? True, Katie Watson would never win any international modelling competitions. She liked to watch documentaries where hatchet-faced women run up to lanky adolescent girls in the street, whisking them off to new modelling worlds of fun and rock stars in Milan and Tokyo, but she never kidded herself that was *her* destiny. Olivia said once this had happened to her, but although she certainly was lanky, Katie thought she might have been a) telling a fib (not out of character for Olivia), or b) been a victim of a misunderstanding concerning teenage prostitution.

Katie was, well, cute, she supposed. 'You're a cutie,' her ex-boyfriends had said. None of them had ever said, 'Katherine Watson, you are the most staggeringly beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life. I would kill for you. I would lie down and die for you. Your muddy-coloured eyes sparkle like moonbeams; your soft lips, though not in the Angelina Jolie class, are like peaches. Your wide hips are life in my hands and your slightly short stature I consider nothing but a delight.'

Still, it made her look younger than she was, that was something about having a pixie face and a pointed chin. Although she was definitely growing out of the age where

she could wear pigtails to accentuate trying to be cute, which she supposed had benefits in no longer having men ask her how long her stockings were.

OK, on a level of perfectly scientific analysis, she was better looking than about sixty-five per cent of the people she had been to school with and, according to Friends Reunited, every single one of them now had kids. All of them. Even Magda with the Sellotape on her glasses and you couldn't tell if she was looking at you or not. Even Mary Tracey Frances McGoolie, who gave off BO like a blowtorch. And, up until now, Katie hadn't had a date for four months.

Four months, entirely chap-free. And if she was being strictly honest . . . she doodled about while her computer warmed up, still staring into the lobby . . . if she was going to be utterly honest, Clive hadn't really been the stuff of her dreams. In fact, if she was honest she'd only dated him to break her *previous* three-month date-free desert. That was why she hadn't minded so much that he had a skin condition behind his ears and scratched it all over his caesar salad.

Katie quickly sniffed under her armpits. OK, so it wasn't that.

'What are you doing?' asked Miko.

'Nothing!' said Katie. 'Checking my email.'

Miko looked under her own armpit.

'Have you got something new from IT they haven't told the rest of us about?'

'No.' Katie sighed. 'What's wrong with me Miko?'

Miko gave her a narrow look. 'Nothing,' she said.

'That sounded like hmm hmm BUT,' said Katie. 'You know, as in nothing . . . BUT; or I'm single . . . BUT.'

'But look at the facts,' said Miko.

'Ahh,' said Katie.

'We're in the middle of a crisis.'

'I wish people would stop saying that. What crisis?'

'The no-men crisis, you idiot.'

'Is that a real crisis?'

For the first time Katie noticed that Miko wore false eyelashes to go with her false nails. Was anything about her real? Was that Katie's problem – *too* real?

Miko stared at her.

'What?' asked Katie.

'You mean you really don't know there's a crisis?'

Miko patiently indicated the big glass lobby wall again. 'Girl. Girl. Baldie. Girl. Girl. Don't you get it?'

'There are no men?'

'Durr.'

'But that's just something people say. We say it every day.'

'Because it's true,' said Miko. 'Why do you think I bought these tits?'

'Maybe I should buy some tits,' said Katie absent-mindedly in the Square Root, hiccuping for good measure.

Terence's little toad eyes lit up. 'I think you look gorgeous,' he said hopefully. Katie couldn't believe she'd just said that out loud and, taking it as her own final warning, stood up. If his job was as brilliant as he'd been claiming for the last three hours, perhaps he wouldn't mind getting the drinks. She stumbled to the ladies.

On Tuesday night the girls had met up in the wine bar. All around them were lots of other girls having girls' nights out. A lot of white wine was being slugged. Shoes and voices were high. The only man in sight was the waiter.

'Oh God,' said Louise. 'Keep me out of sight of the waiter.'

'That waiter is the biggest slag in NW11,' said Olivia loudly. 'Oh. Sorry Louise.'

Louise was pink. 'I'd had too much white wine. They serve it in those enormous glasses.'

'And then a dog ate your homework,' said Katie. Really, she wanted to talk about work but it was really difficult with Olivia there. Recently, she'd felt as if, on some level, there was a tiny teeny-weeny possibility that doing PR for new food and drink products was . . . perhaps just the slightest bit . . . pointless? Not that there was necessarily anything wrong with anchovy pretzels and pink cola, it's just, that sometimes – like every morning on the Tube – she wished maybe she were doing something a little more useful.

'What was he like?' said Olivia to Louise, eyeing the dark-haired waiter preening himself in the bar mirror and deftly jamming two glasses down in the glass washer as if it were an incredibly cool thing to be doing.

'Perfunctory,' said Louise uncomfortably. 'He gave me the impression that, working here, it's part of his job description.'

'Ladies.'

He had materialised at their elbow. Louise was suddenly peering for something so deeply in her fake Birkin she looked like a horse with a feedbag.

'What's that thing we're meant to get because we're too cool for chardonnay now?' asked Olivia.

'Pinot Grigio,' said Katie. 'Tastes the same, more expensive.'

'Ah, the plastic Prada bag school of ordering,' said Olivia. 'One of those please.'

'Of course,' said the waiter. 'You all look very nice tonight.'

'Thank you,' said Louise from the nose up. 'Again.'

The waiter gave her a quizzical look which showed absolutely no signs of recognition whatsoever, and scooted off.

'Maybe you should rethink that whole "having unbelievably casual sex" thing,' said Olivia.

Louise grimaced. 'I'm getting over Max, OK, and having a great time. Really, really great. Plus, as I keep telling you, it's the law of averages. If there's only one perfect person out there for you, you've just got to get cracking. And never look back.'

'What if the one perfect person out there for you is a pig?' said Olivia dreamily. 'Or married to Jennifer Aniston?'

'What if they live in Laos?' said Louise. 'That's what bothers me. Or if they speak Tulag. Did you know that's the hardest language on earth to learn?'

The other girls stared at her as the waiter popped out the cork from the bottle with practised ease and poured them large glasses.

Louise looked sulky as all around them the women squawked and chattered, their slim legs and expensive shoes glinting in the flattering soft light reflecting off the beige leather chairs. Katie looked at Louise and worried about her. And herself.

'Goodnight Terence,' said Katie when she got back from the loo. She tried to be as nice as possible.

'£60!' Terence was saying. 'For this shit! Jesus!'

'Would you like me to go halves?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'If you like.'

Crossly, Katie put down half the money, noticing Terence counted out his share and didn't leave a tip.

She felt infinitely more sober once she hit the open air. She liked walking in the city at night. People and couples

lurched, shouted or shuffled along, no one paying her the blindest bit of notice.

The familiar sounds of sirens and late-night misadventures echoed as she cut down past the Opera House, her heels clattering on the cobbles, leaving the heavy traffic behind her. A chap was weaving slightly by the side of the road, and she subconsciously hurried up a little bit.

''Ello darlin',' he shouted after her. 'You look nice.'

Probably only compared to him, a very drunk man attempting to take a piss on the street, but still, she appreciated the gesture.

She was wondering how low she could possibly plummet on her male-attention appreciation charts, when suddenly, out of nowhere the man was right in front of her. She jumped six feet in the air.

'Fuck!' she said. 'You gave me a fright.'

Her heart started to pound, hard, when she realised it wasn't the same man after all. She couldn't work out who this person was or how he had landed in front of her, but late on a Thursday night on a deserted street, it didn't feel good . . . Her eyes whipped around to the side, but the genial drunkard was gone.

'Ah,' said a soft voice with a slight accent. 'Yes. That can be what happens.'

He was tall and, with her heart banging furiously, Katie saw that he was dressed all in black, with a hat pulled down over his eyes. He was standing directly in front of the streetlight and she couldn't make out his face. Oh shit oh shit oh shit. This was not good. Man in black on deserted street – either there was Milk Tray involved or this was definitely the opposite of good. Her eyes flicked to the side to see where she could run to and she cursed her ridiculous heels.

'No,' warned the voice. 'Running. Don't do it. I have

a knife. Or a gun. Or something really bad. And you look like a nice person.'

Katie stared at him, frightened beyond belief.

'I – I am a nice person,' she said, her voice two octaves higher than normal. 'Can you let me go?'

'I can always tell,' said the man. 'I only go for nice people.'

Oh fuck oh fuck. She was going to get raped or killed or kidnapped or tortured. The worst, the most awful thing was happening. Oh God. She was in the middle of one of the most crowded cities in the world. Where the hell were all the people? Oh no. She was going to be left for dead in an alley. She wondered how they'd describe her in the papers.

'Show me your phone,' said the man gruffly. He took her by the arm – Katie flinched and started shaking like a foal – and led her to the dark side of the road. They could have been a couple talking.

Her phone. Of course. If she were an actress in *24* she would have thought to have done something useful with that. But she knew from her trembling fingers she'd have been incapable of pressing the tiny keys as she drew it out of her bag.

'This is a shit phone,' said the man, staring at the cheap little black handset.

'Yeah,' said Katie. Everyone kept telling her it was a shit phone. Maybe that would save her life – or make him kill her out of sheer disgust at her poor taste.

The man dropped it on the ground and crushed it under his boot. 'You should be more stylish,' he said. 'You should have a better phone.'

He carefully took her bag from her and started rummaging inside.

'And look at this mess. What a mess. How can you

ever find anything in here? It's full of tissues and lipsticks.'

'It's to deter muggers,' said Katie. She still couldn't get a look at his face, but for a murderous rapist, he didn't seem very interested in her. In fact, he was looking at her lipstick with more interest.

'You have a boyfriend?'

'*What?*'

'Yes, I think you have no boyfriend. You should ditch the orange lipstick. Orange, not good for you. Maybe why you have no boyfriend.'

'Are you going to make me up like your dead mother and rape me to death?' asked Katie in a panic.

It was dark, but she could catch the incredulous glint in his eye.

'No!' he laughed. 'I'm going to take,' he emptied out the coin section. 'Twenty-four pounds and nineteen pence. And these cards, for about half an hour. Don't worry. They'll give you the money back, so it'll be fine. Except for the twenty-four quid. Sorry about that.'

'Don't apologise,' said Katie, furious. 'Don't do it!'

'Yes,' said the man. 'No. I'm going to do it.'

He handed her back the bag.

'That's a messy bag. You should have a stylish bag. Don't you have anyone to look after you?'

'Shut up!'

'Nice girl like you. Should have a nice man to look after you. Buy you nice bags.'

He looked regretful. 'Well. Thanks. Have a safe trip home. Have you got a travel card?'

'Yes.'

'Good. OK. Be safe. Bye!'

Katie turned around to stare at him as he dived off, quick as a cat. Her heart couldn't quite take in what had happened

and kept whumping away, and she suddenly found it difficult to get her breath. She leaned against the wall.

'Fuck,' she heaved.

The drunk man wobbled over.

'Hello darlin'!'

'Where the fuck were you?' she shrieked at him. 'I could have been killed!'

He straightened up and managed to focus for a second.

'Sorry love,' he slurred. 'I've already got a girlfriend.'

And he wobbled off.

'Don't worry love,' said the policeman.

Louise, who she'd called in from home, was hanging about worriedly.

'I mean, he didn't, like, touch you up or nothing, did he?'

Katie looked at him hard. Was this the new, softer, in-touch policing she kept hearing so much about?

'No,' she said calmly. She was feeling a lot less shaken up now than when she'd stumbled into the police station at Covent Garden. In fact, after a couple of cups of tea, she was actually feeling strangely embarrassed about the whole thing, as if she shouldn't have bothered troubling anyone for something as clearly unimportant as a non-rape/murder-related mugging. Outside a car alarm was blaring away, but nobody was paying it the least attention.

'He just jumped me, took all my stuff and scared me half to death.'

'Yeah,' said the policeman, as if he'd just been told one of his shoelaces was untied. 'That happens.'

'Go find him and put him in prison,' said Katie. 'Now, please.'

The policeman looked down at the blank sheet of paper

on his desk. 'It's just, we're not doing too well with the witness description.'

'Black hat pulled down over his face. Foreign accent.'

'Oh, him,' said the policeman. 'He shouldn't be any trouble at all.'

'Do you work late?' said Louise, batting her eyelashes.

'Louise, would you kindly shut it?' said Katie.

Louise shrugged. 'Sure, sure, just . . .'

'I work shifts,' said the policeman, bluntly appraising her. 'Often up late, know what I mean?'

Katie quickly spotted the wedding ring and raised her eyebrows.

'Do you . . . come and go in the night?' said Louise lasciviously.

'Actually, now I come to think about it, I hit my head on the pavement and now have concussion,' said Katie crossly.

'Depends if it's an emergency,' said the policeman over her head. 'You know . . . if you really really need me.'

Katie stood up from the dingy grey plastic chair. 'I don't suppose there's any chance of getting a lift home in a police car while it's going "nee naw nee naw" is there?'

'Maybe,' said the policeman, still looking at Louise. Louise coloured.

'I'll just take the form for my insurance, thanks.' Katie snatched the banda sheet away from him.

'There's no need to be like that,' he said. 'You've just described something that happens a thousand times a day in the West End and you've given us nothing to go on. We're really sorry.'

Katie harrumphed. 'Well, it shouldn't happen at all. Anything could have happened.'

‘Yes, trust me, you’re not the type. Can I offer you some victim support?’

‘I’m not the type???’

‘Shh,’ said Louise. ‘He probably just meant you don’t look like a soft target. That’s good, you know. You look like a proper Londoner, not a rube.’ Louise brushed down her micromini thoughtfully.

Katie grimaced. ‘I don’t think that at all. I think I’m . . . I think I’m getting tired of this stupid city, you know.’

‘Shh,’ said Louise again. ‘You don’t mean that. You love London.’

‘I thought I did,’ said Katie. There was a car alarm going off here too, but she didn’t think it was the same one. She wandered over to where Louise was making instant coffee from a tiny fun-sized jar. That was one of the disadvantages of her new flatmate; she wasn’t quite the coffee purist Katie had learned to be – another important London skill. She picked up the jar.

‘How on earth could this jar of coffee cost £2.39? It’s scaled for a family of mice.’

‘It was late,’ said Louise. ‘It was all I could get from the corner shop.’

Katie looked at the massive patch of damp over the kitchen wall. ‘You know, I can’t fix that patch of damp because every ten minutes someone new moves in next door and they won’t share the cost so nobody knows what to do.’

‘And you’re lazy and disorganised,’ said Louise. ‘What’s your point?’

‘I don’t know . . . I think maybe London is driving me nuts.’

‘Just because of one lousy mugger? And one crappy

date? What about all the fantastic museums and parks we never go to?'

'OK, but that was just tonight. But London . . . it's so full of show-offs and loudmouths.'

'But we like those kinds of people.'

'I know – maybe that's the problem,' said Katie. She stared at the damp patch and tried again. 'It's just . . . everyone always wants to know what your job is. Why is that?'

'Because when you meet a lot of new people, you have to ask them something?' said Louise. 'If you live in a small village you don't need to say anything at all. Everybody already knows how overdue your library books are and how much money you make and whether or not your husband's having an affair with the goat from the next village. And whether so and so's daughter cheeked Mr Beadle at the bus stop. And who threw away the advertising leaflets in the big hedge.'

'You really hated Hertfordshire, didn't you Lou?' said Katie sympathetically, patting her knee.

'Well, London is what it is. I mean, so there's the rain and the buses and the clubs you can't get into and the Congestion Charge and the snotty shops and the way everything is always fifteen miles away and takes for ever and the way no one from the north, south-east or west ever sees anyone from anywhere except those places and despises the people that come from anywhere else. It's obsessed with trainers, cocktails, guest lists and whatever the fucking *Evening Standard* tells them to be obsessed with.'

'That's not sounding so good,' said Katie.

'But it's all we've got,' finished Louise. 'Don't you see? We don't have a huge amount of choice. It's this, or having people discuss everything you buy in the Spar.'

'The what?'

'The Spar,' Louise pouted. 'If you have no shop, you're a hamlet. If you have a Spar, you're a village. If you have a Fairfields, you're a town. Anyway, that's not the point . . .'

'And if you have a cathedral, you're a city! So that's how it works,' said Katie. 'I never knew that.'

'Well,' Louise pouted again.

'There's always the suburbs,' offered Katie.

'Do I look like I enjoy having my hair done and committing adultery?' sniffed Louise.

'Yes,' said Katie.

'That's not the point. The point is, that the city is *cool*.'

'Why?'

'Because it's urban, and hip, and . . . there's hip things going on, and . . .'

Katie sipped her coffee carefully. 'When's the last time you bought *Time Out*?'

'What? Why?'

'Just asking.'

'When's the last time I bought *Time Out*?' Louise looked as if she were trying to remember.

'You're scared of *Time Out*,' said Katie.

'I am not.'

'You are. You're scared of it. I remember. You moved here, read it for six months, never ever did any of the cool things it suggested that you do. Now you're scared of it because it reminds you that there's lots of things happening and all we ever do is go to work, go to the wine bar, and look for men.'

'So, what do you want? A pair of flashy wellies? Some chickens?'

'I don't know,' said Katie. 'But I do know I want a change.'

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