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The Single Girl's To-Do List

Written by Lindsey Kelk

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LINDSEY KELK

*The Single Girl's
To-Do List*

HARPER

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Four weeks earlier . . .

It had been an odd Sunday.

My boyfriend, Simon, had got up and vamoosed for football before I'd even considered rolling out of bed and onto the sofa for a three-hour *Friends*-a-thon. Even though it was late July, the weather was pretty mediocre and there was nothing compelling me to get up off the sofa other than a judgemental cat staring through the window and the intermittent need to pee. Usually I was mega-motivated on a Sunday. It wasn't too often I worked a regular five-day week, so Sundays were all together too often the only day I had to get anything done; but on that particular day, I couldn't bring myself to do anything more strenuous than to repeatedly text my gay best friend Matthew to ask 'how you doin'?'

I didn't care if it was a fifteen-year-old joke. It was still funny.

And so it was to me in my faded-to-grey Juicy Couture trackie bottoms, a Pokémon T-shirt I'd worn semi-ironically at university and a greasy topknot that Simon arrived home at four in the afternoon. I rolled

onto my back and gave him a sexy grunt. Rowr. Rachel Sexpot Summers.

I knew things weren't right when, instead of giving me the standard kiss on the cheek and vanishing into the shower, Si sat down on the settee, elbows on knees, staring straight ahead and breathing loudly. After a couple of minutes, I muted Monica and shoved myself into a sitting position.

'You all right?' I asked.

'Do you want to go to the cinema or something?' He carried on staring at the fireplace. Not into it, just in front of it. As though he could see something I couldn't.

'I'm a bit knackered actually.'

So sue me. I wasn't being *that* lazy; I'd been working fourteen-hour days all week long. No rest for the wicked, or the make-up artist. 'Why don't we get a Chinese and watch a DVD or something?'

He was quiet for another minute. My finger hovered over the volume button while I waited for confirmation. Or at least the suggestion of an Indian.

Eventually, he spoke. 'OK. So I've been thinking.' Whatever was in front of the fireplace continued to entrance him. 'We should take a break.'

'We're going to Croatia in September.' I gave him a nonplussed stare and draped my legs across his.

'Yeah.' He stretched the word out almost all the way through an Asda commercial. 'No. I meant from . . . like . . . us.'

Now he had my attention.

'We should take a break?'

Whatever it was that was so fascinating in the empty space in front of the fireplace had apparently just started doing a jig. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him concentrate on something with such intensity that wasn't attached to an Xbox.

‘Are you dumping me?’ I pulled my legs up off his knee and curled into a semi-foetal position. I really wanted to brush my hair.

‘No,’ Simon shook his head. ‘It’s not that, I just need a bit of a break.’

‘Sounds like you’re dumping me.’ I was trying very, very hard not to cry. I already looked bloody awful; tears were not going to help my case. But then, neither was talking in a voice so high and squeaky that it made dolphins sound like they were smoking twenty a day. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Stop freaking out. I just need to sort some stuff out in my head. I’m not breaking up with you.’

‘Is there someone else?’

Oh my god, there was someone else. Five years, a mortgage, a co-signed car loan for a crappy secondhand Renault Mégane and he was seeing someone else.

‘No,’ he practically shouted. ‘Of course there’s not someone else.’

Fair enough.

‘Is this because I don’t want to go to the cinema?’ I wrapped my arms around my knees.

‘Do you want to go to the cinema?’

I shrugged, not knowing what else to do. ‘I might.’

And that was it. We ended up going to see the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* film but, to be honest, it was a bit difficult to concentrate. And when Johnny Depp can’t hold your attention, what chance does anyone else have? When we got home, I ran a bath and Simon moved his stuff into the spare room.

The next night, I got home from work to find a note on the bed to say he needed a bit of time to think and he was going to stay with a friend for a couple of days. But he did come home. Just as soon as I went away to work in Manchester for a week. And when I got back,

he'd gone away on a business trip. Then I spent a week at my mum's while she got to grips with a nasty broken leg. After that, he was off on a stag do. And then, one night, he just didn't come home.

But we weren't broken up. It was just a break.

A break that was rounding the four-week mark.

But still, it was just a break . . .

Four weeks later . . .

CHAPTER ONE

‘If someone had told you, ten years ago, you’d be standing here doing this, you wouldn’t have believed them, would you?’ Anastasia asked, adjusting the strap of her lacy bra. She piled a mass of artificial blonde curls onto the top of her head before letting them fall perfectly around her slender shoulders. ‘I mean, modelling? It’s not something your career adviser usually recommends, is it?’

I glanced up from the ridiculously painful kneeling position I’d been locked in for the last fifteen minutes and stared daggers at the clueless blonde.

‘Well, no, it’s not,’ I shuffled from side to side, trying to ignore the shooting pains in my kneecaps. ‘But, to be fair, if someone had sat me down and told me I’d be spending most of my life covering bite marks on your arse, I might have found “model” more believable.’

‘Yeah, sorry about that.’ She shuffled her boobs around while I fought the urge to scrawl ‘slag’ across her bum cheeks in Ruby Woo lipstick. ‘This new bloke’s a bit kinky. Think I’m just going to stick with one boyfriend from now on. I mean, it might be dull as

shit, but I'm thinking go with the one who isn't into all that weird stuff, you know? Thank god we didn't have this shoot last week – you'd never have been able to cover up the rope burns on my wrists . . .'

Breathing out, I blocked Anastasia's mid-Atlantic, Eastern-Europe-via-Essex drawl and focused on the job at hand. If there was one thing I was good at, it was focusing on the job at hand. Rachel 'Blinkers' Summers, make-up artist extraordinaire and queen of elective deafness. It was one of those jobs that sounded super fancy and terribly exciting but, in reality, being a make-up artist boiled down to getting up very early, standing around for hours, making someone else look beautiful and then going home very late. Glamorous.

But at least there was the all-inclusive workout. My kit currently weighed in at over thirty pounds, and lugging it backwards and forwards on the Tube had more or less replaced my weekly run. And there was a chance you might meet the odd celebrity, but all that really meant was that you too could experience the wonder of covering up evidence of sexual exploits so sordid that you could never watch *Coronation Street* ever again. There wasn't a soap star alive that wasn't into something weird. Happily, most days, I was just locked up in a studio in exotic Parsons Green, powdering body parts from dawn till dusk. It was hardly conducive to going home, whacking on the false eyelashes and glamming myself up for a night out with the celebs I'd been rubbing shoulders with all day. In fact, it was mostly conducive to going home, running a bath and passing out by myself while my boyfriend, Simon, watched TV.

I could never date a chef, I thought, sponging on one last layer of body foundation. He might be the best cook in the whole world, but he's not going to want

to whip me up a seven-course tasting menu when he walks through the door. You'd be lucky to get spaghetti hoops on toast for two. Not that I even had that in the house, I lamented. It was Friday, which meant tomorrow was Saturday, and Saturday was food shopping day. It really didn't feel like a weekend unless I'd had my blood pressure tested by a run around Sainsbury's. Unfortunately that usually meant Friday-night dinner was a dodgy low-cal ready meal left over from my last diet, or pizza. Which explained why, on occasion, I needed the ready meals.

'Raquel, you're always so quiet,' Ana said loudly, arching her back to get a look at my handiwork. 'What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing,' I lied, stepping back to take a critical look at her now perfectly peachy arse. Not a trace of her sexploits to be seen; just as well seeing as this was a shoot for multipacks of high-street undies. I wasn't sure my mum would want to buy a five-pack of knickers that enticed wannabe rock stars to gnaw on your rear end. Or maybe she would: she and dad had been divorced for twenty years, after all, so it had been a long time since anyone had rocked her kasbah. I hoped. Ew.

'You're done.' I waved her off with one final flick of the bronzer brush. 'Go on.'

Ana clapped her hands together and skipped over to her happy place. In front of a camera. Behind said camera, Photographer Dan called out words of encouragement, snapping away while Ana threw herself around the fake bedroom set with all the gusto that I guessed had resulted in her getting bitten on the backside in the first place. It was pretty impressive stuff. I tucked my long blonde hair behind my ears and tried not to be jealous. It was a while since I'd been thrown around a bedroom.

I shook my head at the cavorting occurring in front of me. What did 'a break' even mean? Both television and movies, my most trusted advisors in life, had shown us that breaks were never actually a good thing. Fingers crossed, Simon was staying away from copy girls. This was, after all, the relationship all of our friends were jealous of because we were so incredibly sorted. Five years in and we were all set with the mortgage, a proper car, irritating pet names used in public, everything. I was certain he was going to propose. I actually had the odd wedding magazine stashed in my work kit, hidden away like girl porn. What's more, we still Did It relatively often, which as far as I could tell, was a pretty big achievement after five years. OK, so it wasn't like a Dita von Teese show every night (you try rocking stockings and suspenders when you've been up since six trying to make the latest 'celeb' kicked off *Strictly* look as though they haven't been on a forty-eight-hour bender), but it was good. We were still good. Or at least, I thought we were. It was possible my standards had lowered without me realizing.

'Make-up?' Photographer Dan shouted across the set.

Nodding obediently, I trotted over, wielding my powder brush, ignoring his elaborate tuts and sighs. Dan was one of my more regular partners in knicker-shooting crime and I was used to his 'artistic' temperament, but that didn't mean he wasn't a massive pain in the arse. However, spending six hours together in the middle of a desert, waiting for a fading supermodel to vomit everything she's eaten since 1996 so you can get one photo, really helps you bond with your work buddies. So I let it go.

'Take your time, Raquel.' Dan held his massive camera up in the air with one hand and gave me the

filthiest look he could muster. 'It's not like anyone has anything else to do today, is it?'

I returned the politest smile I could muster while mentally flashing him a great big wanker sign. He knew I hated it when Ana called me Raquel. It was so bloody affected. She knew my name, she wasn't Eurotrash, she was from Basildon and her name was Anne Smith. I never bothered to point out that she'd gone to school with my cousin. Until she dropped out before her exams. Ten years on and she was lying about more than just her name. Twenty-two, Ana? I think not. Sadly, she and Dan were a frustrating combo, and killing them with kindness was the only way to get through the day. A row was usually exactly what Dan was looking for – he loved getting my back up, but I was nothing if not professional. Blowing the excess powder off my brush, I flicked it lightly across Ana's glowing (but not even slightly 22-year-old) skin, while she and Dan giggled at each other. Behold, make-up-artist-slash-invisible woman.

'Done?' Dan asked, checking I'd powered her boobs sufficiently. I didn't know for sure but I was pretty certain that, off set, Dan and Ana weren't being quite so professional as me. In fact, I was pretty certain he was one of the men who had been nibbling on her jacksy. I recognized the bite marks from the last time he'd eaten half my sandwich without asking. Well, maybe he wasn't the bottom-biter but he was definitely up to something with Ana. He was probably the dull one. Crazy sex romps with someone who was only interested in checking out his own biceps couldn't be much fun for a supermodel.

'Just a minute,' I confirmed, looking my model over from every angle. I might think Ana was a vacuous slapper, but I did care about my job.

But no, I thought to myself, stepping out of the bright

lights and back into the shadows, if someone had told me I'd be doing this in ten years, I really wouldn't have believed them.

'Goodbye, Raquel,' Ana breezed by in a flurry of air kisses, swathed in at least three pashminas. In August. 'And, Dan, it was so lovely to work with you again. I hope I will see you soon.'

The air kisses in his direction weren't nearly so breezy, and the subtlety of her charade was somewhat undermined by the fact that the stylist, Dan's assistant, Collin, and I all heard her 'whisper' that she'd be waiting for him in the car. Ah-ha. Suspicions confirmed. At least he had the decency to look embarrassed about it. I chose to take the high road and carried on packing away my kit. There was no way I was getting involved with this. In the six years we'd worked together, he must have shagged enough models to open his own branch of Victoria's Secret, but Ana was actually a name. Good for Dan, finally made it into the Premiership after years in the lower leagues. He was dedicated to his cause, if nothing else.

'Night, Rach,' he shouted across the studio, sheepishly heading out after his latest conquest. I gave him a quick wave before settling down in the make-up chair and pulling out my notebook. Cue satisfied sigh. Whizzing through page after page of my own handwriting, I finally found today's date, written in blue at the top of the page. My to-do list. Taking a black pen out of my handbag, I crossed off the tasks achieved with one straight, black line: drop off dry cleaning, buy toilet roll and knicker shoot. Still to go, buy wine, bikini wax, wash hair (it was almost down to my arse; honestly, it really was a task that warranted its own bullet point) and call my brother.

OK, so maybe my attachment to the lists was slightly unhealthy, and possibly the buzz I got when I crossed something off shouldn't be quite so satisfying (another indication that my sex life wasn't all that it should be?), but I had a system. Write in blue, cross it off in black, new list every day, don't go to sleep until they're all done or rolled over. I couldn't help it; apparently I had some sort of genetic defect that prevented me from achieving anything unless it was written down. I blamed my GCSE science teacher, who told me making lists would help with my revision. I might have failed double modular science but I passed obsessive-compulsive order development with flying colours. To be honest, I knew which had come in more useful over the last twelve years and it wasn't anything to do with a working knowledge of photosynthesis. Well, hopefully biology would come into play tonight because tonight I had bigger fish to fry.

Tonight, I was going to lure Simon back into the big bedroom.

CHAPTER TWO

Because no plan can succeed without the assistance of reliable wingmen, I had drafted in my best friends, Emelie and Matthew. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived at The Phoenix, Emelie was wasted. The queen of pre-partying had put away almost an entire bottle of red at my flat and was now trying to convince us to join her in a round of shots. And, for whatever reason, only known to himself, Matthew was encouraging her. Generally speaking, I didn't drink. Hangovers really didn't sit well with my job: there weren't many models or celebs that wanted a make-up artist stinking of gin, breathing on them for an hour at a time, and applying liquid eyeliner half cut is not something I'd recommend. That said, I was a pretty good drunk, more happy than emotional and, nine times out of ten, I managed to keep my kebab down. Emelie, however, was not blessed with that talent. Despite knowing that she was incapable of drinking so much as a shandy without vomiting all over the night bus, she never gave up. Amazing tenacity, that girl.

'Come on, Ray, it's Friday,' she said, brandishing a shot glass, brimming with thick, sticky-looking liquor. 'And, you know, liquid courage.'

‘One shot,’ I warned, more an order for her than a promise to myself, then knocked it back in one. My throat scorched with sambuca afterburn and, by the time I’d prised my eyes open, she was ordering a second round. Too bad tonight would not be a night spent holding back her hair while she brought up half of Burger King.

‘If you leave me with her, I will destroy you,’ Matthew said, reading my mind. I shrugged, trying not to smile. He loved her really. Matthew (never Matt) and I had been friends ever since he walked out of a queer theory lecture at uni, declaring it ‘a great big bag of wank’.

As his brand-new flatmate, I felt obliged to chase after him, and we spent the afternoon, evening and much of the early morning in the union, drinking pints and making up our own queer theories. Mine hung on the idea that men were just greedy, Matthew’s on his belief that ‘touching a vagina would make him vomit’. There was evidence to back both schools of thought. After that, we were bonded for life. It was a win-win for me – I never had to worry about him trying to get in my pants and he had a stand-in girlfriend to keep his grandmother happy. His mother had known he was gay from birth, by his account, but his grandparents weren’t quite so accepting. Which was possibly why he wore a skintight, neon-pink T-shirt to his grandfather’s funeral.

The poor lamb hadn’t had an easy time of it as a kid. His dad had skidaddled before he was even born and only shown up again a year earlier, shortly before shuffling off his mortal coil and leaving Matthew an absolute ton of money, leading him to quit his air steward job and spend the last twelve months generally fannying around London with absolutely no aim in life. Even when he wasn’t rich, he was pretty much a catch, however you looked at it. The boy was huge, well over

six feet tall, and broad with it. Handfuls of thick blond hair dropped into his dark blue eyes and his skin was always tanned, despite my constant sun-bed warnings. Looks-wise, he was somewhere between Hitler's Aryan dream and Louis Walsh's wet dream. Personality-wise, definitely erred more on the side of fascist dictator than Gary Barlow. Which was pretty much why I loved him. That and because he came over and killed my spiders when Simon wasn't around.

It was still early, only just after ten thirty, but the club was already busy. Over in a dark corner of the small, sweaty basement, my brother and his friends were cooing over some guest DJ's vinyl collection and debating which records to play. I raised a hand when he looked up. They ran this night every month, mostly so they could hang around the DJ booth and look cool to girls. The things boys did to get laid. Said the girl still trying to find a way to get comfortable after her speculative Brazilian.

'Have you said hello to Paul yet?' Em asked, distributing the second round and looking at my brother with puppy-dog eyes. 'We really should.'

I threw back the shot and shuddered. 'We really shouldn't,' I disagreed. 'Actually, you really shouldn't. Seriously, Em. No.'

'I'm just saying we should say hello,' Em said, absently licking a drop of sambuca from her little finger, completely oblivious to the fact that every man in the bar was waiting to offer to do that for her. 'As if I fancy your brother.'

Emelie Stevens and I knew everything about each other. We were each other's secret-keepers. She knew I hadn't lost my virginity until I was 22. She knew I couldn't get to sleep at night unless I knew where my childhood teddy bear was. She knew I accidentally ran

over Matthew's cat when I was supposed to be looking after it. I knew she had spent several years of her childhood starring on a Canadian children's TV show. I knew she had got a pregnancy test in the first year of uni after she let John Donovan touch her up behind halls after the Halloween party. And I knew she'd had a crush on my brother since he came to collect me for Christmas break in the second year.

It was ridiculous, really – Emelie was beautiful. As in, I worked with supermodels day in and day out and I still thought she was beautiful. Medium height, medium build, slightly more than medium boobs, from the back maybe you might think she was a regular girl, but then she would turn around and you would literally stop in your tracks. She had the longest, thickest auburn hair and offensively green eyes that were lined with the thickest, flutteriest eyelashes this side of Bambi. Her outfits were always faultless and she could make a bin-bag look sexy if she wanted to. If that wasn't enough, Em had grown up in Montreal and, even after ten years in London, had an adorable lilting French-Canadian accent that slipped out when she was stressed, or angry. Or on the pull. As a package, she was unbelievable. Unfortunately for mankind, she was ridiculously unattainable.

While I hadn't been single since I was 16, Em hadn't been in a serious relationship in, well, ever. It wasn't for the want of offers, she went through men like I went through pickled onion Monster Munch, but they never lasted more than a couple of weeks. Either they liked her too much, they didn't like her enough, they were too rich and showy, they were too poor and boring. No one stood a chance. She constantly rattled on about how she was looking for 'the one', how she'd know him as soon as she saw him and that there was no

point wasting time on losers, but Matthew had another theory: that she was so hopelessly in love with my slag of a brother, no one else stood a chance. As pop psychology went, it wasn't a bad call. Unfortunately, my brother wouldn't dare mess about with her. Paul's feckless womanizing was a badge he wore proudly and, while he'd made his intentions towards Emelie quite clear over the years, I had intervened at every opportunity. My best friend was not another notch on his bedpost. Not that there could be a lot of bedpost left by now. Oh universe, why would you surround me with so many manwhores?

'Did you get the email from uni?' I changed the subject while trying to convince my hair to stay behind my ears. There was just So Much Of It. 'About the ten-year reunion?'

'Got it, read it, deleted it,' Matthew nodded, pulling my hair loose again. 'They just want money.'

'I just can't believe it's been ten years since we started.' Emelie was trying to catch the bartender's eye for some proper drinks. Luckily, the bartender was a woman so it was taking longer than her usual three seconds. Almost a whole thirty before a bottle of white wine was in front of us. 'It doesn't feel like ten minutes ago.'

'And look at you two now,' Matthew replied, wrapping an arm around Em to physically remove her from the bar. 'Top make-up artist and super-successful . . . what exactly is it that we call you?'

She made a face and wriggled out of his bear hug. 'I'm a graphic artist.'

'You're a what?'

'She drew a picture that someone put on loads of stuff and then lots of little girls bought it,' I clarified for Matthew. 'A picture of a cat.'

'Got it,' he clicked and pointed, ignoring Em's 'I'm

not amused' face. As always. 'You're the one that weasels kids out of their pocket money.'

'You can both fuck off, I'm a graphic artist,' she started defensively. 'And Kitty Kitty isn't a picture of a cat, it's a brand. And it's one of the most successful between brands in the UK.'

'Tween,' Matthew smirked. 'Stop making up words.'

'Em, we know.' I pulled out my Kitty Kitty wallet and waved it in her face to prove my point before she went for Matthew. 'He's jealous because he's unemployed.'

'Taking a sabbatical,' he corrected, spying an empty sofa and crossing the dance floor in three strides to bag it before a group of girls could hurl their handbags onto the table. 'You're only unemployed if you're broke.'

'Run that one past me again?' Em asked with faux innocence.

Matthew closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. His 'I'm calm, really' pose. 'I'm taking time out until I work out what I want to do.'

'For the last year,' Em said, not quite quietly enough.

'For the last year,' he repeated pointedly, in her face. 'Maybe I should just draw a crappy cat and stick it on lunchboxes instead of doing something worthwhile.'

'Because serving people chicken or pasta at fifty thousand feet was worthwhile?' Em snapped back.

'No, you knob, that's why I'm taking a sabbatical!'

'For the last year—'

'Children,' I said loudly. 'Inside voices?'

Matthew narrowed his eyes while Em stuck out her tongue before they both turned to look at me, argument forgotten. Really, I spent far too much time feeling like a primary school teacher on a field trip than was healthy. Which was one of the reasons I needed Simon back so badly. Perfect, adult, sensible Simon. The one thing in my world that reminded me I was a grown-up.

Well, Simon and my tax return, but I really didn't like to put the two of them in the same category if I could help it.

'So tonight's the night?' Em asked, inching down the hemline of her tiny black Topshop dress. 'With Simon?'

'Yes,' I confirmed, forcing my hair back behind my ears again. 'Tonight is the night.'

'Is there a plan?' Matthew asked, flicking my hair loose again. 'Don't put it behind your ears, you look like a sad mouse. And no one wants to shag a sad mouse.'

'Thanks,' I glared at the floor rather than at my friend and took a deep breath. 'And no, no plan. I'm just going to go over with a drink and say hi to his friends because you know, his friends love me.'

Em and Matthew nodded encouragement. His friends did love me. I was the cool girlfriend. The one that thought it was hilarious that they went to Spearmint Rhino after their Christmas party. The one who made bacon sandwiches the morning after when they passed out on our sofa. The one who understood the offside rule. Or, at least, I was the one who tolerated the strip clubs, made the bacon sandwiches to sober them up and pretended to understand the offside rule. And elaboration on those facts was completely unnecessary.

'And then you're going to pull him to one side and tell him he's the love of your life and this break stuff has only made you realize how badly you need him and that you want to have his babies?' It would be an understatement to say that Emelie had something of a romantic nature.

'Or pull him to one side and tell him that tonight's the night he gets to go where no one has ever gone before?' Matthew's sensibilities were not quite so romantic.

'Firstly, Matthew? Ew. And Emelie, your relationship

advice is not required.' I started to brush my hair behind my ears but stopped myself just in time, much to Matthew's delight. 'I'm just going to tell him that I think that the break has been really valuable, I've had a lot of time to think about what I want and that now I think we're ready to move on to the next level.'

'Babies?'

'Anal?'

'Oh my god.' I pressed my hand to my eyes, hoping they'd have disappeared when I opened them again. But no. Still there. 'No. To both. But especially Matthew. God.'

Matthew shrugged and took a deep swig of his drink. 'I'm just saying, if you really want to get his attention . . .'

'I don't think we need to pull out the big guns just yet,' I said, checking my watch for the millionth time that night. It was almost eleven. Why wasn't he here yet? He always came to The Phoenix on Paul's nights. 'I'm just going to suggest we talk. We've been together for five years, we finish each other's sentences, we're supposed to be together.'

'Yeah, because blokes love talking on a Friday night,' Matthew said to Em, who nodded in agreement.

'He's right,' she agreed. 'I mean, not about the back-door proposition; although, actually, he's probably right about that too. Men are weird.'

'This just makes more sense,' I replied. 'Simon isn't good at planned one-on-one situations. He thinks I'm trying to give him an appraisal. I don't want him to feel like I'm bullying him into a deep and meaningful, it's just going to be a "hey, how's everything?" casual chat during which he will remember how fabulous I am and how much he misses me, then it's back home for mind-blowing sex and we're done.'