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Written by Katie Agnew

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'Stardom is making me depressed,' claims millionaire actress

The sex symbol looked at me with huge, watery blue eyes. She curled a golden lock (of hair extension) around her perfectly manicured finger and sighed deeply. As she did so, her pert (cosmetically enhanced) breasts rose gently out of their silk casing like a pair of golden globes before softly settling back into their bra. I stared at her pouty bottom lip as it quivered gently. She looked as if she was about to burst into tears. I was praying furiously that she wouldn't. I'd had celebrities laugh at me in interviews before, I'd spilt coffee over my favourite rock god and I'd even snogged the best-looking quarter of a boy band, but I'd never yet made one of the glitterati cry.

Lucy Lloyd – film icon, face of Chanel and object of many a grown man's sexual fantasy – had just confided in me (and hundreds of thousands of *Glitz* readers) that she was suffering from depression. She spoke in a strange mid-Atlantic drawl that fell somewhere between her luxury villa in Beverly Hills and the three-bedroomed semi in Stoke-on-Trent where she'd grown up. Like most celebrities, she was painfully thin – one of the dozens of Hollywood stars who were always being held up as terrible role models for teenage girls in the middle-brow, middle-England tabloids. 'ARE THESE WOMEN MAKING YOUR DAUGHTER ANOREXIC?' screamed

one headline that week, alongside a photograph of Lucy looking willowy in a white, sequinned couture dress. Like all 'lollipop ladies', her head was too heavy for her scrawny neck to support, so it kind of flopped to one side and rested on her bony shoulder instead. The resulting look was strangely appealing, like one of those poor abandoned, malnourished puppies you see on *Pet Rescue*. The kind of look you know is unhealthy and yet secretly hanker for all the same.

I was trying hard to concentrate on what she was saying, but my eyes were inexplicably drawn to the girth of her bare thighs. They were minuscule, thinner than my forearms. We were sitting side by side on a cream leather sofa, in the most opulent suite of London's most exclusive hotel. With our knees almost touching, it was impossible not to draw comparisons. I looked from my denim sausage legs to her bronzed twiglets and back to my sausages.

How can she have so little flesh? I wondered. What sort of superhuman Pilates instructor knocks a grown woman into this sort of shape?

As I dragged my eyes away from her body I realized Lucy was still talking to me. Thank God I had my Dictaphone with me. It was great stuff.

'…You see, Laura,' said Lucy (nice touch, using my name, she must have been on a Positive Media Image course). 'When I was a teenager, I used to think, If I was beautiful I'd be happy; if I was rich I'd be happy; if I was famous I'd be happy; if I had a gorgeous boyfriend, *then* I'd be happy. Now I've got all that and I'm still miserable. I lie awake at night wondering, What the hell do I need? What *will* make me happy?'

A tear trickled down her suntanned cheek without smudging her mascara. If it was a performance, it was a bloody good one. In my experience, stars as big as Lucy Lloyd

didn't usually conduct interviews without having a publicist or manager present, and I'd been pleasantly surprised by the lack of interfering busybodies when I'd arrived. A young PR girl from the film company had simply met me from the lift and ushered me into Lucy's room.

'Aren't you going to sit in on the interview?' I'd asked.

'No,' she'd replied. 'Lucy's an old hand at these things. We trust her.'

Lucy wasn't acting like an old hand, more like a frightened little amateur, and although I was delighted by this journalistic coup – 'Hollywood Star in misery shocker!' – I was also beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable about being alone in the presence of a broken-hearted celebrity. I passed her some toilet roll from my bag and tried to avoid eye contact – which wasn't too difficult with so many other interesting body parts to obsess over. What exactly are you supposed to say to a blubbering film star? I mean, it's hard to feel *too* sorry for a multi-millionairess who wears a size zero and has a bottom that defies gravity – especially one you've only known for half an hour. And yet, there was something so fragile about her, so broken, that I had to resist the urge to clutch her to my ample bosom and hug her until she felt better. I was utterly baffled by her unhappiness; the woman had *everything*, so why was she so miserable?

According to the red-top newspapers, the divine Ms Lloyd had been paid more than $20 million for her last movie. Back then, I earned just over a grand a month, and more than half of that went towards my rent. Her boyfriend, the actor Billy Joe Johnson, had just been voted the sexiest man in the world – for the third time running – while my other half, Pete, was once voted most likely to become a serial killer in the upper sixth and hadn't been awarded so much as a cycling proficiency badge since. She had the

pad in LA, a massive work/living space in Shoreditch, a penthouse apartment in SoHo (New York, of course) and a whole entourage of yes people to pander to her every whim. I had an overpriced shoebox in Kentish Town, a fairly crap boyfriend and a flatmate who was allergic to cleaning products. But I had more than Lucy. Much, much more. At least I was happy with my life.

Professionally speaking, it was the best interview I ever did, the ultimate candid encounter – Lucy Lloyd uncovered, stripped to the bone, laid bare. The sound bites she'd given me were far superior to the half-truths, lies and clichés that most celebrities offered up as a poor excuse for an exclusive. I was used to conveyor-belt interviews, where every word uttered had been censored by the management and cleansed of emotion. This was something else entirely. What Lucy had said felt real. I knew I'd done well, but I also felt like a bit of a leech for sucking such juicy details out of her.

After the interview, Lucy kissed me on both cheeks – I remember it distinctly because her skin was slightly fuzzy like a peach – and then she promised to invite me to the VIP bit of her post-film premiere party the following week. I accepted gratefully. Celebrities often do this to journalists, but they never usually recognize you on the night, and you end up talking to some boring PR who wants you to write about sanitary products for her client. In fact, star-studded parties are never quite as flash as they appear to be when featured in *Hello!*. The free champagne lasts until 7.30, the big names arrive just before midnight and stay for five minutes, like Gucci-clad Cinderellas – Madonna never turns up at all – and all you're left with is a gaggle of B-listers powdering their noses in the ladies' room and several disappointed journalists standing around eating mini fish and chips. Still, I went to them all just in case.

I left Lucy, lost on the huge couch in her minimalist chic hotel room, and stepped back out into the drizzle of a November afternoon. Office girls in black trouser suits and mid-week shoppers were scurrying around Covent Garden, muttering under their breath about the tourists who had stopped in the middle of the pavement, crowded under umbrellas, poring over A–Zs. None of them knew how close they were to a real bona-fide, living, breathing icon. Nobody was aware that, for the last ninety minutes, I had been in the company of Lucy Lloyd. I wondered sometimes if I had a strange, enigmatic glow of importance when I left interviewees of this magnitude. A small childish voice always wanted to show off. I had an urge to tap a smart-looking City type on the shoulder and say, 'OK, so you've made five zillion pounds on the stock market this morning, but guess what *I've* been doing? I've just met Lucy Lloyd and she invited me to her party.'

It was at moments like these that I loved my job the most. The buzz of hanging out with somebody really important, the knowledge that I had some sort of secret 'in' with the in-crowd, would keep me smiling for days.

My iPhone rang.

'How was she?' demanded Pete.

Bear in mind that this was Pete who had absolutely no interest in my 'frivolous and superficial' job. Pete who thought I was a bit of an airhead because I enjoyed shopping. Pete who deliberately remained ignorant of popular culture in a vain attempt to appear intellectual. Pete who, despite all this, couldn't wait to find out what the world's most celebrated beauty was like.

'She was depressed,' I replied, happy to share my newly acquired wisdom on all things Lucy Lloyd. 'Really, really

unhappy. I mean, I think it was genuine. She cried and everything.'

'Right, but was she beautiful?' he continued.

'Yes, gorgeous, but too skinny, like they all are,' I explained, stepping gingerly over a puddle. 'Look, Pete, it's pissing down and I've got suede boots on. I'll call you when I get back to the office, all right?'

'But do you think her tits are real?' he persevered. I could hear at least two male voices egging him on in the background, and I realized that the news desk of one of the most respected broadsheets in the country had come to a standstill while the staff fantasized about Lucy Lloyd's cleavage.

'Of course they're not,' I snapped, annoyed that he wasn't interested in any of the important stuff I'd discovered, like what she had to say, or how she felt, or what sort of human being she appeared to be. 'I'll see you later. Bye.'

I was desperately trying to hail a cab when my mobile rang again. Assuming it was Pete demanding greater anatomical knowledge of Lucy Lloyd, I said, rather rudely – well, it was raining and I was disillusioned by him … again – 'What is it now?'

'Is that Laura?' asked an unfamiliar female voice.

'Yes.'

'It's Tina here, from Scorpion TV. We met last week.'

Oh – my – God. It's the TV girl, I realized, just as a free cab ignored my outstretched arm and covered me in muddy rainwater as it passed.

The week before I had been screen-tested for a hot new television show. This had been the most monumentally exciting event of my life so far. Better even than getting my first ever job on *Metro Miss* magazine. You see, I had always wanted to be someone. And not just anyone, you understand, preferably someone with fame, fortune, a clothing

allowance and the ability to get a table at The Ivy. And then Scorpion TV called me out of the blue, saying they wanted someone 'young, witty and good-looking with a journalistic background' as their new presenter – I had apparently been suggested by someone.

I knew it wasn't that unusual for TV companies to approach journalists to audition as TV presenters. There are certain crossover areas between the two professions: we interview famous people, we have an unhealthy interest in popular culture, we crave seeing our names in print. For me, though, a move from occasionally having my face in *Glitz* to having it on terrestrial television was a quantum leap. Something I wanted so badly I ached for it. A chance to propel myself into another universe. In other words, an event so momentous that it couldn't possibly happen in the real world. Not to me, at least.

Being a journalist for a glossy magazine isn't exactly the worst way to make a living. In fact, it's pretty damn cool. You get free trips abroad, you get paid to meet famous people, you never pay to see your favourite bands perform, you get discounts in clothes shops and cabs on expenses. But you also live in the much less glamorous periphery of Celebland – the Media burbs, that is – and after a while you start to hanker for that gold-embossed invite to the VIP party. Scorpion TV had handed me the invitation, now all I had to do was get past the bouncers.

Being a confirmed insomniac, I hadn't slept at all the night before the screen test. I just lay there thinking about six-figure deals, diamond-encrusted Louboutin shoes and never having to get the tube again. Then I realized it was 2 a.m. and the panic set in. It was a familiar pattern.

Think, Shit, it's late. I'm only going to get five hours' sleep.

Decide that five hours is not enough to sustain me and that I will therefore totally fuck up tomorrow's screen test.

Run through countless nightmare scenarios of everything that could possibly go wrong.

Realize that the maximum amount of sleep I can now achieve is four hours.

Have a cigarette.

Know for a fact that I'll look dog rough the following day and that I won't be able to string a sentence together.

Spend two hours willing my brain to shut off. It won't.

At 5 a.m. the traffic on Kentish Town Road gets heavier, and I mean physically heavy: articulated lorries, mail vans, armoured tanks. The room shakes.

At 5.30 a.m. the first tube thunders past about five inches below my basement flat. My bedroom is at the epicentre of an earthquake reaching 6.9 on the Richter scale.

Fume silently for thirty minutes and then start to cry, thus making my already tired and puffy eyes red and piggy.

6.20 a.m., finally fall asleep.

7 a.m., alarm clock goes off, but I don't hear it due to deep, if belated, slumber.

9 a.m., flatmate, Becky, knocks on door and wonders if I shouldn't have left already.

9.10 a.m., try on outfit which I had deemed suitably gorgeous for interview. It looks crap.

9.20 a.m., trip out of the flat wearing trusty jeans dressed up with fuck-me shoes. Can't walk, but feel vaguely sexy – if thoroughly brain-dead.

Hail cab I can't afford.

I had arrived at Scorpion TV's studios two minutes late, wearing no make-up due to lack of time. This was not planned. The plan was to get up at seven after a restful eight hours' sleep, spend two hours choosing the sexiest, sassiest,

most TV-friendly outfit in my wardrobe, before achieving a Cheryl Cole-style glow in the make-up department. Oh, and I was going to blow-dry my hair poker straight, like all those sleek Hollywood chicks I meet – quite an ambitious plan for a girl with corkscrew curls. I would then arrive at the studios exactly five minutes early – keen, but not too keen, with time to compose myself. Instead, the moment I arrived, Tina appeared and ushered me into a room the size of an aircraft hangar, full of cameras, wires and blokes doing odd things with microphones.

'It's great that you felt confident enough to do this without make-up,' she said. 'You'd be amazed at how much slap most girls wear for these things. And it's important we can see what you look like on camera, warts and all.'

A good-looking guy called Matt started helping me with my mike, which was fine by me. He clipped the sound box onto the waistband of my jeans and then threaded the tiny microphone up underneath my T-shirt, brushing my left breast on the way.

'Sorry, love,' he grinned.

Tina told Matt to stop flirting and asked me to sit on an upright stainless-steel stool plonked smack bang in the middle of the vast room, facing the largest and most intimidating camera. The crew obviously spent most of their waking hours in the studio. The assembled equipment required to make light-entertainment television had become as comfortable to them as my battered couch at home had to me. To the TV virgin, however, the soulless cavern of a room was filled with alien bits of metal, ankle-breaking wires and over-confident television types. I was absolutely petrified. No one explained what I was supposed to do, the procedure of live recording being second nature to them. I was already feeling a bit wobbly on the too-shiny stool

when the lights were switched on and my warts-and-all complexion was illuminated by a million megawatt bulbs. For a nanosecond my head started to spin and I thought I was going to faint.

Tina's voice brought me back to earth. 'Just talk about yourself for five minutes to camera,' she said chirpily.

I felt like my mother must have felt when I gave her an iPhone for her birthday: excited, but totally baffled about what exactly I was supposed to do. Where do I talk? Who can hear me? Am I shouting? For the first time in my life I thought before I opened my mouth … and then I jumped off the cliff.

'Hi, I'm Laura McNaughton. I'm twenty-five and work as a feature writer for *Glitz* magazine …'

Sweating under the lights, with all sorts of wires stuffed down my jeans, I rambled on about my job, my flat, my boyfriend, my life, to a glass screen a couple of feet in front of me. It was all totally surreal and mildly uncomfortable. I desperately wanted to look at the human beings in the room, to tell my story to ears that might listen. But I'd been told to glue my eyes to the screen. The problem was, a machine gives you no feedback, no sympathetic looks, or reassuring sniggers when you say something witty. I tried the vulnerable Princess Di huge-eyed look, the sex kitten pout, newsreader deadpan and then the wacky, zany, 'I'm mad me' children's-presenter approach. But I was so self-conscious I probably just gurned. Can I blink? Am I talking too fast? Does the sweat on my top lip show?

I was unsure whether I'd been talking for five minutes, thirty seconds or three hours, but suddenly I just dried up. Finito. The end. The monologue over. 'Um …' I gazed over at the crew and smiled shyly. Had I just humiliated myself entirely? I'd been staring so unblinkingly at the camera that

I now had white lights flashing in front of my eyes and it took me a while to focus on Tina.

'Lovely, Laura!' she said, with what appeared to be genuine enthusiasm, and the crew gave me a clap. 'Now, this is Madeleine,' she continued.

A plump, middle-aged woman wearing a lime-green kaftan, too much make-up and a white turban-style hat appeared from nowhere and pulled up a stool beside mine. She hopped onto her perch rather gracefully for a large lady.

'Madeleine is a Madame in a dominatrix brothel,' announced Tina with a straight face. 'I'd like you to interview her for five minutes and find out as much as you can about her working life.'

Now I was on home ground. There was nothing *Glitz* magazine loved more than to feature salacious sex stories, and I'd spent many a Monday morning interviewing members of the sex industry and their clients. There was little I didn't know about stripping, whipping and dominating. I was, if you like, an old pro. Madeleine was putty in my hands and quickly confessed all: giving enemas to MPs, spanking media moguls while dressed as a schoolmistress and putting nappies onto business tycoons who were sick of being grown-up in the boardroom and craved the comfort of the cradle. Even Tina had to stifle a giggle, so I knew I'd done well. Five minutes passed in a flash.

In fact, I was feeling something approaching confidence until I slithered inelegantly off the stool and realized my bum had gone numb, which may well have been the reason I then tripped over a wire, went arse over tit and ended up flat on my face at Matt's feet. He made no attempt to conceal his hysteria while helping me up. He then whipped off the wires, revisiting my breasts on the way out, and gave

me a filthy wink before Tina ushered me back out of the studio and the building.

'I'll give you a call in a couple of days, once the producer has seen your tape,' she had said while nodding at a six-foot-tall glamourpuss who was obviously being screen-tested next. One look at the competition and the little bit of hope clinging to the back of my throat dropped like a lead balloon to the pit of my stomach. I decided that the chances of hearing from Tina again were negligible, but at least I'd given them a laugh.

So, why was she calling me now? To break the bad news that I was never going to be a TV star?

'Darling, I just wanted to let you know that Jasmine, the producer, has seen your tape. She – loves – it,' enthused Tina in media speak, all staccato sentences and sugared hyperbole. 'Has to meet you. But I think it's safe to say, the – job – is – yours. If Jasmine likes you in the flesh, of course. When can you come in?'

I thought I was going to faint. This wasn't the sort of thing that happens to people like me. I mean, I was just a normal girl. My dad was a history teacher, not a movie mogul. I was brought up in the suburbs of Edinburgh, where life gets no more exciting than the arrival of a new alcopop. I went to a state school. I still hadn't come to terms with getting a feature-writing job on a glossy magazine, let alone this. Me on TV. How mad would that be? Somehow I managed to pull myself together enough to arrange an informal chat with the producer the following afternoon – nobody ever has an interview in the world of media. No, they're all so cool that they make life-altering decisions over drinks at Soho House.

With that I was left alone, standing in the gutter, soggy-haired in sodden boots and with a ridiculous grin on my face.

This is not the sort of news one should digest alone. I called Pete back. 'I've got a second interview for the TV job!' I screeched. 'The producer loves my tape.'

'That's nice.' He sounded distracted. 'I'd better go. Tokyo's just crashed.'

Right then, I made a mental note to find myself a new boyfriend as soon as I became famous. One who gave a shit.

Calling Mum was a much better plan. She'd be suitably excited. Hell, she never tired of showing her old ladies – she delivered meals on wheels – my byline in *Glitz*, even when the topic was 'How to give the perfect blow job' or 'Guaranteed orgasm for every reader'. Apparently I was already quite a celebrity at the local Miners' Club, which was now full of multi-orgasmic pensioners well-versed in the secrets of the prostate.

As predicted, Mum nearly crashed her car in disbelief. She was juggling her recently acquired iPhone on her lap with Bobby, the West Highland terrier, while driving at 15 m.p.h. on the dual carriageway. I was scared my news would cause a multi-vehicle pile-up on the Edinburgh bypass, but there was no sound of screeching brakes, so I assumed she'd managed to keep control.

Of course, I'd told Mum about my screen test, but she'd been even more dubious about my chances of actually ending up on the box than I'd been. Scottish Presbyterian pessimism kicked in, and after a half-hour chat with her, I'd convinced myself I'd be better suited to retraining as a nun than pursuing my media dreams. Even now, despite her evident pride at my success, in my moment of glory, she managed to put a dampener on the news.

'I mean, it's a wonderful opportunity, darling, but I watched a programme about Paula Yates last night, you know, Peaches and Pixie's mum,' she warned. 'I don't want

you ending up like that. My advice would be to stay away from rock stars and drugs, dear, they're very bad for your health.'

'What about Dad?' I asked, hopefully. 'Will you tell him?'

'Um, no, dear. I don't think so. It's probably best to let things lie at the moment. I'm not sure he'd approve. You know what he's like. But he'll come round. One day …'

Mum didn't sound convinced. Neither was I. Dad couldn't even bring himself to talk to me on the phone since I wrote what I thought was a rather hilarious account of my sex life in *Glitz* a couple of months earlier. He hadn't read it himself – he only ever read *The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday* and the *Historic Review* – but unfortunately for me, most of his fifth-year pupils had devoured the article with relish. Poor Dad had endured weeks of jibes from a bunch of spotty sixteen-year-olds who now knew his daughter's oral-sex technique. I could see why he was upset, but I had tried to apologize. If only he wasn't so stubborn.

Next I called Fiona, my adorable, and adoring, little sister. Fiona and I were as close as two siblings could get without actually being Siamese twins. She was four years younger than me, but we looked almost identical, except that while my hair had dulled to mouse by the time I was twelve, hers had remained the same baby-blonde shade we'd been so proud of as little girls. Personality-wise, we often seemed to be negative images of each other. She was as quiet and thoughtful as I was exuberant and loud, as settled and careful with money as I was restless and irresponsible with cash. Fiona was a born carer who spent her working days making other people's children better as a paediatric nurse at Edinburgh's Royal Hospital for Sick Children, and her spare time looking after her friends and family. She was the good daughter and I was more of a handful.

Case in point: when Dad blew up the kitchen last summer while attempting to deep-fry haddock, Fiona was round there like a shot. She was the one who made the firemen cups of tea, cleaned up the mess, phoned the insurance company, found the petrified dog hiding under the next-door neighbour's car and mopped up Mum's tears. I was the one on the end of the phone finding the whole thing wildly amusing and being no help whatsoever. But at least I wasn't as useless as Dad. He just sat in the garden and sulked, apparently.

I always felt that Fiona was what I would have become had I made different decisions in life. Deep down, behind the public façades we had created for ourselves – as people do – we were very, very alike. We agreed instinctively on pretty much everything, from politics – free health and education for all – to animal welfare. There was a large part of me that craved her well-ordered life and her calm disposition. Likewise, my sister held up my life in London as some sort of fantasy existence. We were the ultimate mutual appreciation society.

'Oh, Laura,' she sighed when I told her about the TV audition. 'You are so clever.'

'Thanks, darling. But I don't think it's got much to do with intelligence,' I replied. 'Just luck, really. Anyway, I still might not get it.'

'Of course you will,' she insisted. 'I have a feeling. Oh dear, I think I'm going to blub …'

Fiona has always had an abundance of feelings.

Back at the *Glitz* offices on the South Bank it was hard to contain my excitement, but I was determined to keep the news of my potential new job quiet until it was definite. The open-plan office was buzzing as usual. Three skinny

adolescent models sat on the orange leather sofa in reception, clutching their books of photographs and waiting patiently to get the once-over from the fashion girls. Graham, the art editor, and Nat, my features editor, were bickering over the choice of Spotify playlist. The editor's PA, Cathy, was on the phone, lying to an unwelcome caller that the editor, Trudy, was in New York all week and wouldn't be available. Meanwhile, in the beauty department, the girls were squealing with delight over the arrival of a boxful of lipglosses in various shades of coral.

The *Glitz* offices had been redesigned at great expense to the company just before I'd started working there, with exposed brick walls, kidney-shaped desks, curvy orange chairs and state-of-the-art Macs. It would have been lovely if it wasn't such a bomb site, with piles of newspapers, magazines and empty coffee cups strewn everywhere. The only oasis of calm amidst the chaos was Trudy's minimal, white private office. The lack of clutter seemed to point out that the woman didn't actually do any work.

As always, Trudy summoned me into her office for a post-interview debriefing the minute she spotted me.

'Lau-rah!' she screeched, which was a cue for me to drop everything and run. She tried to carry it off as some sort of a professional meeting, when in reality it was a thinly veiled excuse for news, scandal and gossip from celeb world.

'So?' she asked, glaring at me from behind an enormous vase of rare black orchids. You'd be amazed at how much expectation can be loaded into two letters and a question mark.

I knew my part by heart. I had to tantalize Trudy with enough juicy morsels of celebrity scandal for her to believe I was a decent journalist, put whichever famous woman I had just interviewed down a tad in order to make Trudy

feel better about the fact she was neither famous nor beautiful herself and share bitchy little observations that couldn't be printed for fear of pissing off Lucy Lloyd's influential management.

'Well, she's horribly skinny,' I confessed in conspiratorial mode. 'Definitely anorexic. She had that downy hair thing going on here.' I ran my hand along my jawline to show where I'd spotted the tell-tale peachy fuzz that indicates a body too thin to insulate itself without extra hair. In reality, the sight had upset me. Why would a woman with so much to offer the world want to take up so little space in it?

Trudy tut-tutted and looked smug. Which was rich coming from a woman who survived on a diet of nothing more calorific than multi-packs of Marlboro Lights and slimming pills. A star pupil of the A-woman-can-never-be-too-rich-or-too-thin school of philosophy, Trudy Wheeler gave a whole new meaning to being on a diet, and if it wasn't for her protruding nose, she really would have disappeared when she turned side on.

'And she's terribly depressed,' I continued, on a roll. 'She burst into tears and told me nothing makes her happy.'

I'd definitely earned Brownie points here. Trudy was positively glowing at the idea that Miss Hollywood Star could be half as dissatisfied with her lot as she was herself. Personally, I felt like a lowlife, bitching about Lucy, who had actually been pretty sweet to me, and added quietly, 'But she was really nice. Not too starry, just sad. Very, very sad.'

Trudy gave me a withering look and muttered, 'Stupid girl,' just loud enough for me to hear. She then informed me that she wanted the interview on her desk first thing tomorrow. It was 5.30 p.m. and I was supposed to finish work at six.

'What's wrong?' asked Natalie, my features editor, when I got back to my desk.

'The witch wants my copy tomorrow first thing,' I said, flopping into my chair. 'I'm supposed to be going out tonight.'

Natalie gave me a sympathetic look. The only thing that made working for Trudy palatable was the fact that the rest of the staff were not only lovely, but all in total agreement about how much of a bitch the boss was. Natalie reckoned Trudy was only horrible because she was jealous of all the pretty, young things working for her. A nice theory, but in my case, I knew Trudy found me uncouth.

'You can take the girl out of Scotland, but you can't take Scotland out of the girl!' she once proclaimed loudly at a *Glitz* party after one too many glasses of champagne.

OK, so I was having a drinking competition with Graham at the time, but, hey, a girl's allowed to have fun, isn't she?

Sometimes I tried to see myself through her eyes: big mouth, big boobs, big bum, big hair, and then, of course, there was the accent – it might have been toned down after four years of living in London – I knew my friends back home thought I talked 'posh' now – but I still rolled my Rs and dropped my Ts. God, she'd get a shock when she realized someone wanted to put me on the telly!

Trudy reminded me of a scabby old pigeon, all brown and withered, as if the life juice had been sucked out of her, with tiny birdlike eyes, a sharp, pointy nose and limp brown hair which looked, despite the best attempts of the Aveda Salon at Harvey Nic's, as if it might fall out if you gave it a good tug. No one seemed to know how old she was, but she'd been in the business for ever. Trudy hated children and animals, presumably because they're messy and leave dirty marks on calfskin sofas and Prada suits alike. She was

a notorious bully who revelled in upsetting her employees. When off sick, staff were never genuinely ill in Trudy's opinion. However, Trudy herself suffered from such severe stress-induced migraines that she had to go home early at least twice a week. She was possibly the biggest egomaniac in London. Employees weren't allowed to interrupt her when she was speaking – such efforts would be met by an outstretched hand and a blunt, 'Shut up, I haven't finished speaking yet' – nor were they permitted to disagree or voice an opinion that differed from her own. For example, say Trudy held up a colour printout of next month's cover of *Glitz*, and asked the assembled staff members their opinion. If one of them thought that perhaps the cover star had been airbrushed a wee bit too much and now looked like an alien, well, it wouldn't be a good idea to point this out, because the point of the exercise was not to air one's views but to say how wonderful the cover was and to inflate Trudy's ego even further. Except I didn't quite grasp that at first and got into all sorts of trouble by being far too free with my genuine opinions rather than just saying what she wanted to hear. I soon learned.

The only thought that kept me sane when bearing the brunt of one of her rants was Graham's theory: he was always reminding me that Trudy's behaviour, like that of all bullies, stemmed from insecurity. He believed that Trudy – real name Gertrude – must have been terribly unpopular at school and that her entire career had been based on a need to prove herself cool to the trendy girls who gave her a hard time there. Indeed, Susie, Mary and Julie – or whatever their names were – would probably be working in M&S now, mothers, grandmothers even, and they must have been very impressed by their former schoolmate's success: 'Who'd

have thought it. Gertrude Wheeler, the editor of a glossy magazine.'

I just wished they'd left her alone all those years ago. Then we might have had someone sane sitting behind the Conran-designed editor's desk rather than Bin Laden in a Prada skirt (beard and all).

Like Margaret Thatcher – Trudy's absolute all-time heroine. Enough said – our esteemed leader had a husband called Dennis. She treated him just like she treated us, but the poor man couldn't even escape to the pub at the end of the day, or keep his CV updated in the hope that a more desirable position would appear in the *MediaGuardian* on Monday. Dennis did something important in the City and earned even more money than Trudy, but she talked to him like a three-year-old who'd just wet his pants.

'Dennis, what the fuck are you still doing at work?' she was now screaming down the phone loud enough for the entire office to hear. 'We've got Vivienne and John Paul coming for supper. I need you to be home when the caterers arrive and I have a manicure after work …'

Five minutes later she click-clicked out of the office in her heels towards the company car, which was waiting downstairs to take her to Knightsbridge.

'Oh right, so you've got to stay until you've written two thousand words and she's off to get her nails done. That's nice,' said Natalie, disappearing under her desk. 'Think we'd better open a bottle.'

Nat reappeared with a bottle of cheap Merlot. Working late was so much the norm that we had a secret booze stash to help us through the long, dark hours after six. We had a company tab round the corner at Oddbins, which we used rather too liberally for the accounts department's liking. Normally, I didn't mind working late. I knew it

was a position for which a thousand girls would gratefully give their Manolo Blahniks. In a job market crowded with talented, keen, bright wannabe journalists, a writing job on a women's glossy was something to cherish. Even if it meant working until midnight, and even with Trudy as a boss. Tonight, Pete and his mates would be in the Oxo Tower without me, and I badly wanted to join them and celebrate my TV success by drinking my own body weight in Prosecco. But a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do, and I had an interview to write. And besides, I always enjoyed a drink with Nat.

'I'll stay and keep you company for a bit,' she said. 'Rob's at his mum's tonight, so no need to rush back.'

Nat was less enthusiastic about the whole magazine thing than me. She'd laugh when I got all excited about going to meet such-and-such a band, or so-and-so who was in that film last year – you remember, the one with the gorilla and the set that shook. She had an underlying cynicism I didn't understand. I liked Nat a great deal, but I suspected she'd begun to take the perks for granted. I thought she'd miss them when they were gone. You see, Nat had a plan to escape, which I found difficult to comprehend. All I wanted was to get deeper and deeper into the inner sanctum of the great media circus, while all she wanted was domesticity and normality. Madness!

She was the only person I knew in London who was under thirty and married. Hell, finding a boyfriend in that city was hard enough, let alone one who wanted to commit. Nat had single-handedly restored my faith in romance. She and the heartbreakingly cute Robbie had met a couple of years earlier, when he had represented her against a Dickensian landlord in the small claims court. Poor Nat had endured rats, a sewage leak and a near-death experience

with a dodgy boiler while living in an East London hovel owned by a certain Mr Wright – and she had to pay £800 a month for the privilege. When she moved out, Mr Wright refused to repay the deposit, claiming Nat had left a stain on the carpet. Robbie was her knight in pinstriped cashmere, the lawyer who had won her several thousand pounds in compensation … in return for her undying love. God, I loved that story. They'd been inseparable ever since. Nat's escape plan involved going home to bonk her Robbie stupid each night in the hope that he would impregnate her so that she could disappear into the sunset – pushing a very fashionable buggy, no doubt.

Nat was the only other 'common' girl in the office, and by that I mean she was one of the few who didn't have a double-barrelled name, and the only one, other than me, who hadn't been to Rodean, Benenden or Cheltenham Ladies' College. Nat was also the one who had employed me. Perhaps she wanted an ally. Physically, she was my opposite: tiny, neat and terribly chic, while I always looked like my clothes were too tight or needed a good iron. Natalie's nails were perpetually French manicured, mine were bitten and chipped, and she had an astounding array of crisp white shirts that never had unsightly stains down the front. Being five foot nothing, she lived in high heels and wouldn't be seen dead in Converse. I admired her attention to detail and always wondered how anybody could possibly look so squeaky clean when their mouth was so utterly filthy. Other than the obvious differences in appearance and outlook, we kind of understood each other without having to try. She was an Essex girl who didn't talk proper neither. But God, was she smart. All she had wanted as a kid was to prove that she wasn't a bimbo, which she had successfully done by becoming a features editor at the tender age of twenty-seven.

And now she had what she'd always wanted, she realized she didn't need it at all.

She showed me a property website she'd been perusing at leisure that afternoon, instead of getting on with forward planning the March issue, as Trudy had instructed.

'Look at this one!' she exclaimed, beaming at the photo of a three-bedroomed Victorian cottage in the north Essex countryside. 'We could sell our one-bedroom flat, in fucking Finsbury Park, and buy all this instead. It's got a water feature in the garden and everything.'

I smiled as enthusiastically as I could, despite my fear of all things rural. I had actually been known to come out in a cold sweat if I found myself more than a short tube ride from the nearest Whistles. Why on earth would an intelligent woman like Nat, with a fabulously glamorous job and a decent salary to boot – I once sneaked a look at her salary slip, so I knew this as fact – want to give it all up and move to the sticks?

'Why do you want to move to the sticks?' I found myself asking before my brain had time to connect to my mouth.

'Laura,' she said patiently. 'You like going to your nan's place, right?'

That was true: I did love going to Granny's house, which was a good 100 miles from the nearest Whistles, but only because I loved the old dear so much, and even then, two days at a time was quite sufficient.

'Yes, but not permanently,' I said. 'Won't you get bored? What will you do all day?'

Nat laughed so hard that she showered me in red wine – so that's where those unsightly stains came from. 'This career-woman stuff ain't all it's cracked up to be, believe me. I've done it longer than you have. And London, I hate the place. It's so smelly and everybody's bloody rude. I just want

to move back to Essex, have babies, get a dog, go freelance and write decent stuff. No more of this fluffy sex and celebrity rubbish.'

I had no idea why she wanted to give up the day job, but had no doubt that she'd succeed in her plan. Pete often said she was the most talented writer he knew, which was rather insulting as I was a writer, too, and I was the one who gave him blow jobs and made him home-made chicken soup when he was ill! He said she'd get loads of work from the broadsheets, and he should know, he was the news editor on the best one. I worried that she'd miss the kudos of a swanky job in town, but she reckoned she was over that.

'You're mental if you think that's what makes you happy,' she said, sipping her wine daintily and grinning at me with a wicked glint in her eye. Nat loved to wind me up. Said it was easy. Rude not to, in fact.

She continued with gusto. 'Yeah, it's nice to show off at parties and tell everybody about your great job, and how you're the dog's bollocks and all that, but I couldn't give a flying fuck what anyone else thinks of me. All that really matters is being surrounded by people who love you. But then you wouldn't know much about that, would you? Your boyfriend's a shit – no offence, babes, but he is – your folks and your sister are hundreds of miles away and your old man isn't speaking to you anyway since you wrote that piece about your sex life.'

Nat was laughing and obviously didn't mean to be cruel, but the comments about Pete and Dad were a bit close to home and her sharp words hurt. I smiled and pretended to be thick-skinned, like I was supposed to be in my job.

'Oi! You commissioned me to do that,' I reminded her sternly, feigning anger.

'I know, I know and I'm sorry, but I told you to use a

pseudonym. It was you who wanted your real name on it. You know what Trudy says about you?' laughed Nat.

'No, what?' I asked.

'She says you're all ego, ambition and big tits,' Nat sprayed her wine over me again as she guffawed.

'Cow!' I screeched. 'I can't believe she said that about me.'

'Well, she did,' said Nat. 'Ego, ambition and big tits. Those were her exact words.'

'What, as opposed to ego, ambition and no tits?' I asked, sucking in my cheeks, flattening my breasts with my hands and furrowing my brow in my best Trudy impersonation.

Nat nearly fell off her swivel chair as we both cracked up.

'Anyway,' I continued. 'My tits aren't that big.'

I looked down at my cleavage, which was bursting out of a tight, V-necked sweater. Nat followed my gaze and raised one perfectly plucked eyebrow.

'I'm wearing a Wonderbra!' I insisted, but even I had to accept that perhaps Trudy had a point.

'Give me a drag of that fag,' gasped Nat, grabbing my Marlboro Light and inhaling deeply, having given up a few weeks earlier for the sake of her fertility.

She handed me back the cigarette and continued. 'I mean, seriously, darling, what are you going to do next? Become an editor like the wicked old witch? That doesn't look like much fun, does it?'

I realized this would be a good time to tell Nat my news. And anyway, it would be handy to have an ally in the office when I had to sneak out to meet Jasmine.

'Fucking hell,' shrieked Nat when I told her. 'That's unbelievable. Good for you, darling. I can just see you on telly. You'll be naked on the cover of *FHM*, like all those other TV dollies, before you know it. Don't think Pete would like it much, mind.'

I suggested Pete might be quite pleased for me, but Nat disagreed.

'He hates it when you're the centre of attention. He gets all bitter and then puts you down to make himself feel better. I've seen him do it at parties when some bloke's interested in what you're saying. Remember, when Shane from Boy Thing was chatting you up at that Brit Awards? Pete doesn't enjoy you being noticed. Honestly, love, I don't think he's going to like this.'

There was no point in defending Pete to Natalie. She'd never been a fan, and once her mind was made up about something there was no arguing with her. I was pretty sure that deep down he would be proud of what I'd achieved. OK, so he wasn't exactly the most demonstrative, touchy-feely type of boyfriend around, but he did love me – in his way. And he had his good points: he was handsome and intensely intelligent, he shared my love of football and good wine, he was well-travelled and well-hung. What more could a girl want? OK, so the odd compliment would have been nice, but hey, you can't have it all.

We polished off the wine and devised a cunning plan so that I could sneak out of the office the next day without making Trudy suspicious. Nat would tell her she'd sent me off to a very important film screening. That would buy me a good three hours. In return, I promised Nat all the exclusive interviews with me she wanted once I made it big. She'd be freelance by then, of course, so we'd offer the interview to anyone but Trudy.

By the time Nat left the office it was almost eight, I was half pissed, completely out of fags and still hadn't started my feature. In a last-ditch attempt to avoid doing any work, I called Pete to tell him I wouldn't be making it to the Oxo Tower. He didn't seem particularly bothered, nor did he

have any interest in discussing my impending meeting with Jasmine.

'What should I wear?' I asked. A sensible enough question, I thought.

'Don't be ridiculous, Laura. It's not going to matter what you wear. They've got stylists to sort out that sort of thing. All this Jasmine will be looking at is your face, which was fine last time I saw it. I mean, it's obvious they're not looking for the Brain of Britain or they wouldn't have called you back in the first place, would they? Ha, ha, ha. It's probably your accent they like. Scottish birds present everything these days. Look, I've got to go. Ben needs a hand at the bar. I'll speak to you later. Bye.'

He hung up before I could say goodbye, and I realized with a pang that perhaps Nat knew my boyfriend better than I did.

There's nothing more depressing than being the only one left in an otherwise empty office with a pile of work to do, especially if you've just had a particularly difficult conversation with a boyfriend who isn't always as nice as you'd like him to be. I could see why Nat didn't approve of Pete. She and Robbie had such a romantic, tactile relationship. I would hear her on the phone to him at least half a dozen times a day, whispering 'I love you' and 'I miss you' and 'I can't wait to see you tonight', even though they'd eaten breakfast together before work that morning.

Nat often said that she thought I deserved someone more like Robbie and, to be honest, sometimes I wished Pete was more like Robbie, too. He treated her like a total princess, called her babe and sent roses to the office on Valentine's Day. Pete found that sort of thing terribly lowbrow. He said it was tacky. And he never called me babe, or darling, or love, or anything other than Laura. At school, my nickname

was Naughty – what with my surname being McNaughton and kids being really imaginative – and I once told Pete this in the hope of encouraging a cutesy pet name – how sad is that? He just sneered. Maybe Nat was right. Perhaps my boyfriend was a bastard. Sometimes I felt sure I deserved more. But after two years together, I'd come to rely on him. And I loved him, despite everything.

I stared at my empty computer screen and willed the words to write themselves. They didn't. I opened another bottle of wine for inspiration and, after a hefty slug, decided to be kind to Lucy. She was depressed enough without me sticking the knife in.