

Annie Lyons

Life

OR

Something

LIKE

it



Step into someone else's shoes for a day...

And it will change you for a lifetime.

Cat is very good at her job. She runs a PR company with best friend (and secret crush) Jesse, and is never happier than when her high-profile celebrities are glittering in the spotlight.

But after a footballer client hits the headlines for all the wrong reasons, Cat's career takes a sudden nosedive. So when her brother Andrew unexpectedly needs her to look after his kids for a few weeks, she can hardly say no. She's happily single, hasn't exactly been the 'World's Best Auntie' over the years, and what she knows about looking after children would fit on the back of a postage stamp. But it's only temporary until she gets her real life back on track - isn't it?

Praise for ANNIE LYONS

'A great holiday read!' - Jill Steeples, author of Let's Call the Whole Thing Off

'Annie Lyons has proven to be a skilled and extremely talented writer with this book, it truly is something special. She hits on so many emotions all at once that you honestly don't know if you are coming or going.' - The Book Geek Wears Pajamas on Dear Lizzie

'Not Quite Perfect is such a page turner... I couldn't put this book down and found myself crying with both laughter and sadness at this touching and thought-provoking story.' - Bookaholic Confessions

'...a humorous, lighthearted read' - Fiona's Book Reviews on Not Quite Perfect

'Not Quite Perfect is a great title for this book. The writing is bubbly and vivid and very entertaining. It's a story about trying to find out what is important in life and also that life can't be perfect all the time.' - Sky's Book Corner

'I thoroughly enjoyed this book and struggled to put it down. The chapters were engaging and funny, with characters that seem to bounce straight off the page and into your imagination.' - Book Chick City on Dear Lizzie

'Not Quite Perfect is a mixture of heartwarming situations and light comedy. I found myself having a giggle and thinking 'that's so like my family', on several occasions and that was nice and refreshing. Also, I will admit that I even cried in a few places because it pulled on my heart strings so much.' - A Book and a Tea

Also by Annie Lyons

Not Quite Perfect
A Not Quite Perfect Christmas

Dear Lizzie

Life or Something Like It

Annie Lyons

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ANNIE LYONS

decided, after leaving university, that she 'rather liked books' and got a job as bookseller on Charing Cross Road, London. Two years later she left the retail world and continued rather liking books during an eleven-year career in publishing. Following redundancy in 2009 she realised that she would rather like to write books and having undertaken a creative writing course, lots of reading and a bit of practice she produced *Not Quite Perfect*. She now realises that she loves writing as much as coffee, not as much as her children and a bit more than gardening. She has since written three more novels and is about to start work on her fifth. She lives in a house in south-east London with her husband and two children. The garden is somewhat overgrown. One day she hopes to own a chocolate-brown Labrador named John and have tea with Mary Berry.

Thank you to my brilliant editors - to Sally Williamson for being the voice of calm
~~and editorial wisdom in my frenetic brain and to Victoria Oundjian for her~~
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Cat Nightingale owes you a mojito.

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For Lily and Alfie

Contents

Cover

Blurb

Praise

Book List

Title Page

Author Bio

Acknowledgement

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt](#)

[Endpages](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter One

Cat Nightingale strode confidently through the bar and took a seat on an elegant tan leather sofa by the window. She placed her Kelly bag next to her and took out her iPhone. Ava was always late and Cat was always early. Cat liked things this way. It gave her time to check e-mails, Twitter and anything else that required her attention. She swiped a neatly manicured finger over the screen and flicked her way through her correspondence. Cat had a relationship with her iPhone that was more serious than any she had ever experienced with a man. It was always by her side, faithful and reliable, except when its battery ran down.

As Deputy MD at Hemingway Media, keeping in touch and up to date was vital, but she also knew that it was something of an addiction - a good addiction. She had to get that digital hit throughout the day. She had to be on top of everything. Their portfolio of celebrity clients was impressive and her relationship with each and every one of them had to be maintained with a delicate mix of discretion, professionalism and a smattering of the friendly banter that she was known for.

Cat was good at her job and she knew it. Her boss, Jesse, worshipped the ground beneath her feet. She had helped him set up the company three years after they graduated from university and the combination of his easy charm and her sharp intellect had meant that they quickly attracted a host of high-profile clients through word of mouth alone.

You need to launch your new range of perfume? Call Cat. You're flying to New York and need a go-to for the best clubs and restaurants in town plus reservations to boot? Call Cat. You've been caught in a compromising position with your wife's sister? Call Cat.

Her phone buzzed with a call. She glanced at the ID and swiped to answer immediately.

'Will. How are you?'

'I'm hoping I'll be a lot better after this call.' Will Bateman didn't do niceties. He was the most powerful football agent in the country and time really was money in his world. Hemingway Media was organising the launch of a new coffee for the Daily Grind coffee shop chain and Will's biggest football star, Alvarro Diaz, was going to front it.

'I'll do my best.'

'Can you assure me that there will be no cock-ups on Thursday? I'm taking a big punt using Hemingway and if it goes pear-shaped, it will be my arse on the line.'

too.'

Cat took a deep breath. 'Everything is in place. Daily Grind love working with Alvarro and we're already getting a huge response on social media to the "From Bean to Cup" promo film.'

'I'm more concerned about Alvarro behaving himself,' admitted Will.

Cat shared these concerns. Alvarro was the latest in a long line of footballing bad boys. He was young, had too much money and since moving from his native Costa Rica, was making the most of his freedom by hitting the London nightlife hard. He was a journalist's dream and a publicist's nightmare. 'I've organised dinner with some journalists for the night before the launch and we'll make sure there are no detours on the way back to the hotel afterwards.'

'Okay. Let's hope you can keep him in line,' said Will. And with that he was gone.

'Bye then,' said Cat to the silent phone.

'Who you gotta screw to get a cocktail round here?' cried Ava sweeping through the bar towards Cat. People turned to stare and Ava smiled and waved like the Queen. Cat grinned and stood up in readiness for their air-kiss greeting. Ava Jackson liked to make an entrance; she loved the attention almost as much as the celebrities she featured in her magazine. She was a pint-sized New Yorker with a fearsome reputation and immaculate hair. She had landed in the UK twenty years ago, forging an impressive career as a red-topped paper journalist before founding her own celebrity gossip magazine called Mwah!

A handsome, slick-haired waiter appeared by their side. Ava gave him an approving smile as they ordered their drinks. 'So,' she said, fixing her gaze on Cat, 'tell me everything.'

Cat smiled. She was used to Ava's ways. She was an important contact in the world of celebrity gossip magazines and probably the closest thing Cat had to a best friend, but she didn't trust her. Not really. Ava would sell her grandmother and probably Cat's too for a good story. They had playfully named these informal monthly get-togethers as 'The Tuesday Night Mojito Club', but Cat was careful to be measured in both her drinking and divulging. Still, they enjoyed each other's company and for the most part the relationship was mutually advantageous. Cat gave Ava the stories that would help her sell magazines and Ava gave Cat the publicity her clients required. It was beautifully simple. Most of the time.

'Saffy Bridges's agent has asked me to find the right home for her engagement pictures,' said Cat, casually. The waiter delivered their cocktails and Cat nodded her thanks.

Ava sat up in her seat. 'I'm listening.'

Cat smiled. Saffron Bridges was the pop sensation of the moment and she had recently announced her engagement to the floppy-fringed song-writing star Sam Taylor. As soon as it had been announced #SaffSam had trended worldwide and the Tiffany's engagement ring that Saffy had posted on Instagram short

afterwards now had a six-month waiting list. Cat had overseen the entire thing. 'The problem is, there are obviously a number of other channels interested,' said Cat, studying her fingernails.

Ava didn't blink. 'What do you need?'

'Positive coverage for the Paradise Rivers perfume launch.'

'Done.'

'No bitchy comments about her being a limelight-grabbing drama queen?'

Ava put her hand on her heart. 'By the time we've finished with her, she'll be more popular than Kate Middleton.'

Cat raised an eyebrow. Paradise Rivers was a former reality TV and now wannabe pop star. She was headline-hogging and about as far from paradise as a person could be but her agent had a number of other top celebrity clients so Cat had to ensure that she got the best coverage possible. 'Just a few hours trending on Twitter for all the right reasons will be fine.'

'You got it,' said Ava taking a sip of her drink. Cat sat back in her chair feeling satisfied. 'So, how are you doing?'

Cat smiled. 'I'm good. Busy but that's how I like it.'

Ava fixed her with a look. 'Too busy if I know you.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I mean, sweet-cheeks, that you gotta look after number one. Listen to your Auntie Ava. Trust me, I know this. All work and no play will burn you out in the end.'

Cat shrugged. 'I signed up to this job. It's just the way it is. And besides, I enjoy it. It makes me happy. But I appreciate you looking out for me, Mum,' she joked.

Ava blew a raspberry. 'I'm serious. I worry about you.'

Cat shook her head and laughed. 'Why would you worry about me?'

Ava counted on her fingers. 'One: you work too hard, two: you're never off the phone, three: when was the last time you had sex?'

Cat nearly choked on her mojito. 'What's sex got to do with anything?'

Ava fixed her with a knowing look. 'Sex has got everything to do with everything.'

'I have sex,' insisted Cat.

'When?'

'Last month. With that comedian.'

'The one with the awful hair and sweat-patches? Euw!'

'He was very funny.'

'A funny comedian? There's a thing.'

Cat stuck out her tongue. 'Well what about you and all the sex you're having?'

'I do pretty well and anyway I've got Sergio.'

'Oh yeah, your "friend with benefits",' laughed Cat making speech marks in the air. 'You're so old school, Ava.'

Ava shrugged. 'You may mock but it works. You should get one instead of rejecting every male because he's not Jesse Hemingway.'

Cat folded her arms. She cursed the day she had told Ava about Jesse. They hadn't known each other long; it had been after the launch party for Mwah! Cat remembered that tequila and Ava's nose for an excellent story had been to blame.

'So he's the man of your dreams and yet you've never slept with him?' Ava had slurred, reaching over to top up their shot glasses with expensive golden tequila.

'We had a moment,' Cat had said wistfully.

'A moment? Oh well, that's almost as legally binding as a marriage.'

Cat wished she'd never mentioned it but Ava had the memory of an elephant and was fond of bringing up the subject whenever their talk turned to affairs of the heart. Fortunately this didn't happen very often; the celebrity world kept them more than occupied and Cat had no desire to air her innermost feelings to herself, let alone the editor of the country's favourite gossip magazine.

Still, Ava was right in that there was no-one who ever came close to Jesse and as the years went by, this never changed. Cat enjoyed the odd flirtation and night of passion but nothing ever lasted and it suited her fine. Jesse was now married to an ex-model but it was still Cat who got to spend the majority of time with him. He even called her his 'PR wife'. This suited her fine as well.

'I am not rejecting anyone. I'm just not looking because I'm happy as I am.'

'Really?' said Ava with narrowed disbelieving eyes.

'Really,' declared Cat. 'This single life works for me. I think I might be the one.'

Ava gave a hollow laugh. 'If you say so, honey. And for the record, it works for me too. I don't know what I'd do if you got hitched and popped out a couple of kids.'

Cat shook her head. 'You know me. That's never going to happen. Let other people repopulate the world. Between you and me, I've got a woman working for me who was the best in the business but since she's had a baby, I've had no end of trouble.'

Ava nodded. 'Tell me about it. The kid's sick and suddenly it's your problem. Am I right?'

'Pretty much. I mean it's the twenty-first century so women should be able to go out to work but you've got to be responsible for your own life and get organised for heaven's sake. The number of times I've had to let Nancy have time off because of childcare issues. It's not on. You've got to take control and if you can't then find another job.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Ava draining her glass. 'Want another?'

Cat nodded. 'Please.' Her phone buzzed with a call and she glanced down to see her brother's number. 'I need to take this,' she said, excusing herself from the table and making her way out into the lobby away from Ava's gaze.

'Andrew? Are you okay?'

'Hey, Cat. That's not like you to answer your phone to me first time.'

'Ha ha. What's up?'

'Just calling to catch up with my favourite sister. I expect you're somewhere posh and up itself.'

She smiled. 'Always. How are Melissa and the kids?'

'Well actually Mel's got to go to Australia. Her dad's not well.'

'Oh shit. Is it serious?'

'Cancer. They're giving him weeks to live.'

'Oh God, I'm so sorry. Poor Melissa.'

'I know. She's leaving first thing tomorrow so we're just trying to sort out the childcare.'

'Let me know if there's anything I can do to help.'

'Ah thanks, Nanny McPhee. Could my children come and stay with you?'

'Well er - '

'Cat? I'm kidding. You're so easy to wind up. Much as I relish the thought of you dragging my six- and ten-year-old to the Ivy and the management looking on in horror as Ellie and Charlie ask for ketchup with their caviar, we should be fine.'

'They don't have caviar at the Ivy so ha! Anyway, I would help you out if you needed me to. You know that.'

'Thank you but luckily Mel's sorting it so you're off the hook. I'll call you at the weekend, okay?'

Cat gave a shiver of relief as she ended the call. It wasn't that she didn't like her nephew and niece; it was more that she'd hardly spent any time with children. She recalled how Andrew had recently guilt-tripped her into attending Ellie's sixth birthday party. Cat had turned up with the biggest teddy bear she could carry ready to play at being the world's best auntie. She rang the doorbell and could hear small feet stampeding down the hall before the door was flung open and a small voice squeaked, 'Eeeee!'

Cat peered around the bear into the chocolate-smudged face of her niece. Ellie was wearing a white and blue princess dress. She was flanked by two girls in similar outfits with a small boy dressed as a slightly lopsided snowman trailing behind. Cat was good at dealing with most situations but being faced with these sugar-crazed miniature humans immediately caught her off guard. She wa

relieved when she heard her brother's voice.

'Ellie, what have I told you about opening the door to strangers? Oh Cat, you made it! Come in.' Andrew smiled. Cat's heart surged with love and gratitude.

'Is that for me?' demanded Ellie, gesturing at the bear.

'Ellie! Don't be rude. Say hello to your Auntie Cat.'

'You told me not to talk to strangers,' said the six-year-old baldly. 'Who is Auntie Cat?'

Andrew looked embarrassed but Cat dismissed his concerns with a small shake of her head. 'You're very clever to be careful and I'm sorry I haven't seen you for a while but Daddy is right, I'm your auntie and this,' she said, handing over the bear, 'is for you. Happy birthday.'

Ellie took the bear, which was much bigger than her. 'What do you say, Ellie?' coaxed Andrew.

'Thank yoo,' said the small girl looking up at her aunt suspiciously.

'Andy!' shouted a voice from upstairs, which Cat recognised as Melissa's. Andrew glanced up at the frowning face peering over the banisters. 'Oh hey, Cat,' said Melissa as she spotted her sister-in-law. Cat could tell that she was surprised and a little irritated by her presence.

'Hey,' said Cat. 'I just popped in with a present for Ellie but I can see you're busy.'

'Oh no you don't,' said Andrew, grabbing her arm and pulling her over the threshold. 'Are you okay, Mel?'

'I need you to come and talk to your son,' said Melissa with meaning. Cat could hear her ten-year-old nephew rampaging like a wild animal upstairs.

A shadow of embarrassment passed over Andrew's face as he glanced at his sister. 'I'll be back in a sec. Ellie, take your aunt through to the other room and don't let her leave, okay?' He disappeared up the stairs leaving Cat standing in the hall with her four minders.

She smiled down at them cheerfully. Use your PR charm, Catherine, she told herself. 'Which princesses are you?' she asked the three girls. 'I always used to like Sleeping Beauty.'

Ellie rolled her eyes. 'Duh. I'm Elsa and they are Anna,' she declared, gesturing at her friends. A look of confusion passed over Cat's face. 'From Frozen,' continued Ellie as if she were addressing an idiot. 'You know - Let it go, Let it go, ooo,' she sang tunelessly, dancing the gigantic bear round and round. Her two friends joined in and they were soon spinning down the corridor with giggling glee. Cat and the snowman were left staring at one another. She recoiled in horror as a thick slug of snot seeped from his carrot-covered nose.

'I'm Olaf,' he declared before pushing his tongue up his lip and licking experimentally at the snot. Cat did her best not to gag and looked desperately up

the stairs, praying that her brother would come back soon and rescue her. However, Ellie had not forgotten her father's request. She plonked the huge bear on the floor and spun back down the hallway towards her aunt. Grabbing Cat with one hand and dragging the bear with the other, she pulled her towards the dining room. 'Come on. You have to meet Finn,' she said.

Cat followed reluctantly, expecting to be introduced to another grubby little boy with limited hygiene. She was surprised to find a man, sitting on the floor of the dining room, strumming experimentally on a guitar. The chairs had been cleared to the sides of the room and the table was pushed against one wall. It was covered with pieces of half-chewed pizza, curling sandwiches and what looked like strawberry jelly, all of which made Cat's stomach flip. She was used to politely nibbled canapés and bento boxes containing neat parcels of sushi. This was cuisine carnage.

Ellie plonked herself very close to the man, whilst one little girl sat the other side of him and the other stood behind him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He obviously had some sort of magnetism for children. To be honest, Cat couldn't quite see the attraction. He was heavily bearded with messy hair, a scruffy T-shirt bearing the words 'I like Biscuits', and an even scruffier pair of jeans paired with some ancient Converse trainers. He looked so at home on the floor with these pint-sized princesses, almost as if he were one of them. They clearly adored him.

Ellie put an arm round his neck and looked up at her aunt. 'This is Finn,' she said proudly as if she were introducing the Dalai Lama. Finn nodded up at Cat but didn't seem to see her. He was intent on the chords he was playing, lost in a musical moment. Cat found this quite rude. 'Come and sit down and we can sing,' ordered Ellie. Cat looked around her. The floor was worse than the table. It was covered with crushed cheese puffs, squashed fondant fancies and pools of sticky juice. Cat glanced down at her Stella McCartney jeans and picked up what she hoped was a clean paper napkin. She placed it on the floor and sat down next to Ellie.

She glanced up to see Finn watching her with obvious amusement. For some reason this irritated Cat. How dare he laugh at her? She held out a manicured hand. She wouldn't stoop to his ill-mannered level. 'Good to meet you, Finn. I'm Andrew's sister - Cat.'

Finn leant over his guitar and took her hand. She noticed how cool his touch was. 'I didn't know Andy had a sister. Pleased to meet you.'

'It's because she doesn't come over very often,' said Ellie, rolling her eyes conspiratorially at Finn.

Finn glanced over at Cat, suppressing a smile. 'Is that because you're a right royal pain in the bum, Ellie?' he laughed.

Ellie glared up at him and then started to laugh. 'Finn, you are so funny. I am lovely,' she squeaked. 'No, it's because she doesn't like children. That's what Mummy says.'

Finn raised his eyebrows at Cat. 'How does the guilty party plead?' he asked.

Cat was incensed by his interrogation. 'I really don't think this is appropriate' she said, trying to keep her cool.

Finn regarded her for a moment. This man infuriated Cat. Who was he to judge her? She stared straight back at him with cool indifference. His face broke into a knowing grin as he turned back to the children. 'And now, would Mr Bear like to sing a song?' he added, gesturing at Ellie's newest friend.

'He would,' said Ellie, handing him over.

Finn reached his arms around the gigantic toy and started to play the guitar giving a rendition of 'The Bear Necessities' in a gruff, teddy bear type voice. The children giggled, hugging themselves with delight.

Cat was done. This man was a judgemental show-off and she was ready to leave. She had delivered Ellie's present, put in an appearance. What more did she need to do? She didn't have children, didn't want children and going on today's performance, this would never change. She was about to get up and leave when she felt someone standing next to her. She turned to see Olaf the snowman grinning at her, the plug of snot still very much in place on his top lip. Before she could move, he placed a hand on her knee and nestled down next to her. It was impossible to leave because he was now leaning on her lap and she watched in horror as he rested his head on her leg, leaving a slimy trail of mucous on her pristine jeans.

She could see that Finn had spotted what was happening, a wide grin of satisfaction spreading over his face. However, he didn't realise that Cat was an expert at getting the best out of bad situations. She leant forward and whispered into the boy's ear, 'Why don't you see if Ellie and the girls fancy a dance?' she whispered. At these words, the little boy leapt up and started to bounce up and down with delight. He looked over at Cat who nodded with smiling encouragement. Before long the others had joined in and Cat found her moment to make an escape. She glanced at Finn imperiously but he merely smiled and nodded. She left the room feeling irritated and annoyed that she had allowed a stranger to wind her up so easily. She met her brother in the hall.

'Sorry, Cat, that took a bit longer than expected. Charlie's been a tad challenging of late. Are you going?'

Cat looked pained. 'I have to. I've got somewhere I need to be but I'll call you in the week, okay?'

Andrew did his best to mask his disappointment. 'Okay. Thanks for coming.'

She had smiled and waved as she walked swiftly back to her car, before driving back to her real life without a backward glance.

Cat felt a similar sense of relief now after ending the call with Andrew. She didn't worry about her little brother and was sorry for Melissa. She resolved to get some flowers delivered to Melissa and her mum, send the kids an extravagant present

and take Andrew out for lunch next week.

Family taken care of, Cat made her way back through the bar to Ava and another round of mojitos. She smiled and waved at the various people she knew. She felt at home here. It was full of like-minded individuals - vibrant and creative people, getting on with the important business of life. Cat loved this world and despite Ava's reservations, she was as happy as it was possible to be. Work hard. Have fun. No drama. That was Cat Nightingale's mantra and she followed it to the letter.

Chapter Two

Cat stood on the platform waiting for her train, phone in hand, flicking through the morning's news. Checking Mail Online, Cat was relieved that there were no overnight pictures of Alvarro stumbling out of a nightclub or posing with another Page Three model. She took a sip of her coffee and glanced up as the packed Tube pulled in to the station. Tucking her phone in her bag ready for the imminent loss of signal, Cat boarded the train, making her way down to the middle of the carriage where there was always more space.

A woman struggled aboard behind her with a pushchair, trilling thanks as people stepped back for fear of bruised ankles. The carriage was silent but Cat could guess people's thoughts as their bodies bristled with irritation at the unwelcome intrusion into their fast-moving, adult world. Who brings a baby onto the Tube at this time of the morning? The woman was breathless with exertion but managed to park her buggy by the opposite door and bundle the fretful baby into her arms.

A man in his early twenties, neatly bearded and obviously terrified of anything under the age of ten, leapt up from his seat right by where Cat was standing. The woman beamed at him with weary gratitude, flopped down into the vacated seat and planted a reassuring kiss on the baby's ear. The baby was looking all around wide-eyed and alarmed by the serious, unsmiling faces surrounding her. Cat did her best to ignore the baby but it started to make an insistent noise and stare at her as if she were the only one who could answer its highly complex gurgling question. Cat had little experience of babies but from the time she'd spent with her brother's children, she knew that this sound was unlikely to decrease and therefore action was required.

She glanced down at the baby and gave it a warm smile, something akin to the look she might give a celebrity client who had come to her with an image problem: sympathetic, empathetic and wholly reassuring. It was a look that said 'Everything is going to be okay.'

The baby stared into her eyes as if trying to glean the truth, a frown hovering on its brow like a question mark. Cat held her breath. The baby raised its eyebrows and then lifted its mouth in a smile before issuing forth a small giggle.

The baby's mother smiled. 'Oh, have you made a new friend?' she cooed. Cat assumed she was talking to the baby and hoped that her work was done. The baby giggled again, her eyes fixed on Cat, hungry for more interaction. 'Aww she loves you,' said the mother encouragingly, her face open and ready for Cat to say how

much she loved her too. Cat looked at the baby. It reminded her of a miniature Winston Churchill but she was pretty sure you weren't meant to say these things out loud. Besides, she was a PR professional, practised at diplomacy.

'She's gorgeous,' she proclaimed with a sincere smile.

The mother was delighted. 'How many do you have?' she asked. And there was. That presumption. It wasn't the woman's fault and Cat was used to it. Barely a week went by without her having to tell someone that she wasn't married, didn't have children and had no plans to. It had begun when she'd hit thirty. During her twenties, it was seen as a mistake to have children but as soon as she had reached thirty, opinion began to shift. People started to get married, have babies, and she was left having to justify herself. At first, she had been quite huffy about the whole thing but she soon realised that this was pointless. People had their opinions and you rarely changed their minds. She had various stock responses ready depending on the person she was talking to.

'I'm terrified of childbirth.' This one worked well on men as it usually nipped the conversation in the bud immediately because they were terrified too, particularly if they had experienced their other half going through the whole eye-popping process.

'It's fine. I'm going to work for Google and they'll freeze my eggs for me,' she would say to anyone who used the phrase 'biological clock'.

If she encountered more persistent or belligerent questioning she sometimes used statistics about divorce or an overpopulated world. This was a last resort and it sounded preachy but it usually did the trick.

However, talking to mothers like the one questioning her now required a different strategy. This woman had assumed that Cat, who had bonded so convincingly with her own baby, had to be a mother. There was no other explanation and Cat couldn't bear the disappointment and pity she would have to endure if she told the truth. Cat could see that this woman was a fully paid-up member of the motherhood club and she wanted Cat to swear her allegiance too. To pretend blithely that life was better with children, that sleepless nights were good for the soul or that having children completed you.

Cat didn't believe this. She liked Hermès bags, not eye-bags and she didn't think this made her a bad person. Of course, she rarely uttered this sentiment out loud. People who worked in Cat's world or enjoyed the lifestyle she did were easily dismissed as shallow and superficial. Cat was neither of these things. She simply knew what she liked. She loved her job, the lifestyle it afforded her, her two-bedroom house in a cool but edgy corner of Shoreditch, the weekends away, five-star holidays to the best resorts, first-class travel. She had it all.

If Cat spoke of her long-held assertion that she needed neither a child nor a man to complete her existence or of the fact that she was happy without either she knew how it would end. The woman would try to convince her otherwise or, worse, she would go quiet and Cat would know that this silence merely shrouded

a smug conviction that women in their mid-thirties who had chosen careers over families were missing out. Cat had more sense than to wander down the particular conversational cul-de-sac. She had argued in the past but there was no point. People projected their own lives onto other individuals. It was understandable. It was the only frame of reference that they had.

The woman was looking at her expectantly now, longing for them to bond over tales of traumatic C-sections and problems with breastfeeding. Cat smiled.

'I have three children,' she lied. 'Jean, Paul and...' don't say Ringo '...Georgie. They're adorable.'

'Three! Wow, that must keep you busy,' said the woman admiringly. 'She's my first and I'm exhausted. I can't imagine how you manage with three.'

'You just manage, don't you?' Cat smiled. She noted with some relief that the train had reached her station. 'This is my stop. It was lovely meeting you.' She paused to place a hand on the baby's big head as she turned to leave. 'Well goodbye - Winston, Winston, don't say Winston.'

'Winnie,' said the woman. 'Named after my granny.'

Cat choked down a giggle as she reached the door. 'Goodbye, Winnie,' she said wearing her best PR smile. As soon as the train reached the station, she stepped off onto the platform and disappeared into the crowd, her mind already fixed on the day ahead.

She glided along with the flow of commuters out of the station and along the street towards the Hemingway Media offices. It was a short walk to the modern brick building, designed by an overexcited architect who had wanted to give it a minimalist, warehouse air. She recalled the day that she and Jesse had come to view the offices. They had expanded since the company was formed at the start of the noughties and Jesse wanted them to move somewhere more central and happening as opposed to the top floor of his Mews house, which he had inherited from his wealthy grandparents. She had remembered her feelings of frustration as the architect, fresh from college, droned on about conceptual space and creative oxygen.

'It's totally designed with the Creative in mind, yes? The space is huge, airy, light and filled with creative oxygen, yes? You can breathe it in and - '

Fart out the ideas? Cat had thought. She glanced at Jesse who was lapping it all up like a newborn kitten. That was the problem with Jesse. He got so caught up in an idea that he just ran with it. She had to rein him in sometimes but he loved this. They were a good team.

'And the glass is integral to the creative process, yes? It enables you to look in and out, yes?'

Yes, thought Cat. Windows tend to do that.

'We'll take it,' said Jesse. 'It's perfect. Isn't it perfect, Kit Kat? Don't you just love it?' he had cried, throwing out his arms and dancing her round the empty room.

She had looked into his clear green eyes, bright like a cat's, and given in immediately. 'I think it's great,' she said only telling a half-lie. For she always gave in to Jesse. She couldn't help it. She loved him and would do anything for him. She sometimes wondered what would have happened if that 'moment' at university had become a reality; would they have stayed together and been happy? She couldn't picture it somehow but that was just fine. It was academic and this set-up was perfect. They could enjoy harmless flirtation without the complication of a relationship. It was like a perpetual first date with the delicious air of hope and possibility still lingering, unlikely to be quashed by the inevitable reality of sex, feelings and all the drawbacks these threatened to bring. For a woman who kept her heart tucked far away from her sleeve and had stopped believing in romance a long time ago, it suited Cat perfectly.

She had been sorry to leave their snug little offices though. The new building was drafty and the goldfish bowl meeting rooms energy-inefficient, but it did give them a more professional air in a bid to become real players in the PR world.

'Morning, Stan.' Cat smiled as she strode with confidence through the revolving doors. 'How's Maud doing?'

'Better thanks, Miss Nightingale. The new tablets seem to be working,' said the septuagenarian security guard, grinning up at her from the front desk.

'Glad to hear it. Give her my love, won't you?'

'I will. She said to thank you for the flowers. Said she's going to send you some of her jam once she's back on her feet and up to making a pan.'

'Tell her not to overdo it,' said Cat with a kind smile.

'I will. Have a good day, Miss Nightingale.'

'Thank you.' Despite her protestations, Stan always addressed her in this way. She rather liked it deep down. It made her feel as if they were on the set of *Mad Men*. She rode the lift to the second floor and rounded the corner into reception. Jenna, their vivacious receptionist, was already in full flow.

'Hemingway Media. Good morning! Please hold, Mr Oliver; I'll put you through to Mr Hemingway? Mr Oliver for you. You're welcome. Hemingway Media. Good morning!'

Cat nodded hello and strode down towards her office, which was located next to Jesse's. She could see him through the window, feet up on the desk, casual blue shirt unbuttoned at the neck, his hand running through his dark brown hair as he laughed at what the caller was saying. He grinned and waved as he spied her walking past. She smiled and made her way into her office. Despite her reservations about the building, she loved this office. It was a perfect space and she had made it her own. Her wide weathered oak desk and specially designed ergonomic chair sat in the centre of the room. Two Lissoni sofas faced each other with an Oka glass coffee table nestled in between. On one wall hung a huge photograph of Grace Kelly, which Jesse had bought for her when they moved here. Grace stared down at Cat with a look of cool indifference. She was the

woman Cat admired most in the world. She'd really had it all and had even become a real-life princess. Not that Cat wanted to be a princess but she admired her style and the way she had glided through life with serenity and grace.

As Cat put down her handbag and placed her iPad into its docking station, her phone began to ring. She glanced at the caller ID before answering.

'Andrew? Are you all right?' Her brother rarely phoned her during the day.

'Well actually I've got a bit of a problem.'

'What is it?'

'Work want me to fly to Brussels this afternoon.'

'Oh?'

There was a pause. 'And I've got no-one to look after the kids.'

'Oh.'

Andrew's words came thick and fast. 'I wouldn't normally ask but it's the summer holidays and I can't get hold of anyone. If I could drop the kids to you late afternoon, could they come and stay with you for just one night? I'm due back first thing tomorrow morning so I could pick them up from the office and then they're going to a friend's. I'm really sorry to ask but they can amuse themselves until you've finished for the day.'

Cat's mind raced with thoughts of tonight's dinner with Alvarro and tomorrow's launch but she could also hear the desperation in her little brother's voice. It was the same pleading voice he'd used as a little boy.

'Please can Bear and me sleep in your bed with you?' he'd asked, face forlorn, his knitted lopsided teddy tucked under his arm.

Her heart melted now as it had done then. 'All right then. Just for tonight though.'

'Thank you, Cat. You're my favourite sister,' he joked.

'It would be more of a compliment if I weren't your only sister but I'll take it.'

'I'll drop them off around three, okay?'

'Okay,' said Cat with a rising sense of dread. 'Do you think they'll be okay with me?'

There was a pause before Andrew said, 'They'll love it. Staying with their Aunt. Cat? They'll be so excited.'

'You never were a very good liar.'

'I will give them strict instructions to be very excited then. Honestly, it's only one night. They'll be fine. You might even enjoy it.'

Cat doubted this very much. 'I better get some work done. I'll see you later.'

'Okay and thanks again. You've saved my life.'

Cat picked up her office phone and dialled a number. 'Lauren? Could you be a

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