The multi-million-copy bestselling author

Sophie Kinsella

The Burnout

'Hilarious, sparky and joyful'
Beth O'Leary

She can do anything



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just not *everything*

'THE QUEEN OF ROMANTIC COMEDY' JOJO MOYES

Reader reviews for

The Burnout

'A great mix of comedy, lovable, relatable characters and a heart-warming story.'

'Exactly what I need when the world seems upside down.'

'The ultimate in addictive, joyful, and relatable comfort reading!'

'A great, feel-good Sophie Kinsella knock-out, made me laugh more than I can remember in a long time, absolutely loved it.'

'This book is perfect. I couldn't put it down. The story and characters were brilliant.'

'So many poignant moments that made me feel a swell of emotion or laugh out loud!'

'I finished this book with an emotional calmness & 24 hours later I'm still in a cloud of deliciousness . . . Wonderful book!'

'Sophie Kinsella at her very best.'

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Also by Sophie Kinsella

The Shopaholic Series

Starring the unforgettable Becky Bloomwood,
shopper extraordinaire . . .

The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic
(also published as *Confessions of a Shopaholic*)

Meet Becky – a journalist who spends all her time telling people how to manage money, and all her leisure time spending it. But the letters from her bank manager are getting harder to ignore. Can she ever escape this dream world, find true love . . . and regain the use of her credit card?

Shopaholic Abroad

Becky's life is peachy. Her balance is in the black – well, nearly – and now her boyfriend has asked her to move to New York with him. Can Becky keep the man *and* the clothes when there's so much temptation around every corner?

Shopaholic Ties the Knot

Becky finally has the perfect job, the perfect man and, at last, the perfect wedding. Or rather, *weddings* . . . How has Becky ended up with not one, but two big days?

Shopaholic & Sister

Becky has received some incredible news. She has a long-lost sister! But how will she cope when she realizes her sister is not a shopper . . . but a skinflint?

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Shopaholic & Baby

Becky is pregnant! But being Becky, she decides to shop around – for a new, more expensive obstetrician – and unwittingly ends up employing Luke's ex-girlfriend! How will Becky make it through the longest nine months of her life?

Mini Shopaholic

Times are hard, so Becky's Cutting Back. She has the perfect idea: throw a budget-busting birthday party. But her daughter Minnie can turn the simplest event into chaos. Whose turn will it be to sit on the naughty step?

Shopaholic to the Stars

Becky is in Hollywood and her heart is set on a new career – she's going to be a stylist to the stars! But in between choosing clutch bags and chasing celebrities, Becky gets caught up in the whirlwind of Tinseltown. Has Becky gone too far this time?

Shopaholic to the Rescue

Becky is on a major rescue mission! Hollywood was full of surprises, and now she's on a road trip to Las Vegas to find out why her dad has mysteriously disappeared, help her best friend Suze and *maybe* even bond with Alicia Bitch Long-legs. She comes up with her biggest, boldest, most brilliant plan yet – can she save the day?

Christmas Shopaholic

Becky is hosting Christmas for the first time. With her sister Jess demanding a vegan turkey, Luke insistent that he just wants aftershave again, and little Minnie insisting on a very specific picnic hamper, will chaos ensue, or will Becky manage to bring comfort and joy at Christmas?

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Other Books

Sophie Kinsella's hilarious, heart-warming standalone novels:

Can You Keep a Secret?

Emma blurts out her deepest, darkest secrets to the sexy stranger sitting next to her on the plane. After all, she'll never see him again . . . will she?

The *Un*domestic Goddess

Samantha runs away from her workaholic life and becomes a housekeeper in a country house. But what will happen when her past catches up with her?

Remember Me*?*

What if you woke up and your life was perfect? Lexi's life has fast-forwarded three years, and she has everything she's ever wanted – and no idea how she got there. Can she cope when she finds out the truth?

Twenties Girl

Lara has always had an overactive imagination. But when the ghost of her great-aunt Sadie shows up, asking for her help, Lara wonders if she's losing her mind . . .

I've Got Your Number

After losing her engagement ring and her mobile phone, Poppy takes a mobile she finds in a bin. Little knowing that she's picked up another man in the process . . .

Wedding Night

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Lottie is determined to get married. And Ben seems perfect – they'll iron out their little differences later. But their families have different plans . . .

My *Not So* Perfect Life

When Katie's ex-boss from hell books a glamping holiday at her family's farm, Katie plans to get her revenge on the woman with the perfect life. But does Demeter really have it so good? And what's wrong with not-so-perfect anyway?

Surprise Me

Sylvie and Dan have a happy marriage and are totally in sync. But when they introduce surprises into their relationship to keep things fresh, they begin to wonder if they know each other after all . . .

I Owe You *One*

When a handsome stranger asks Fixie to watch his laptop for a moment, she ends up saving it from certain disaster. To thank her, he scribbles her an IOU. Soon, small favours become life-changing.

Love Your Life

Ava falls in love with a handsome stranger on an anonymous writing retreat. But when they return home, it seems they just can't love each other's lives. Can they overcome their differences to find one life, together?

The Party Crasher

Effie isn't invited to the 'house-cooling' party that her dad and his glamorous new girlfriend are throwing, but it's her last chance to retrieve her precious Russian dolls (safely tucked up a chimney). All she'll have to do is sneak in, making sure no one sees her – especially not her ex-boyfriend. It hardly counts as crashing the party if it only takes ten minutes. How wrong can it go?

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The Burnout

Sasha hits a wall, quite literally, and heads to recuperate from burnout at the Devon beach resort she loved as a child. However, it's off-season, the hotel is falling apart and she has to share the beach with a grumpy, stressed-out guy called Finn. What if they have more in common than they think?

What Does it Feel Like?

An unforgettable novella – by turns heartbreaking and life-affirming – about a renowned novelist facing a devastating diagnosis and learning to live and love anew.
'*What Does It Feel Like?* is fiction, but it is my most autobiographical work to date. Eve's story is my story.' Sophie Kinsella

For Young Adults

FINDING AUDREY

Audrey can't leave the house. She can't even take off her dark glasses inside. But then Linus stumbles into her life. And with him on her side, Audrey can do things she'd thought were too scary. Suddenly, finding her way back to the real world seems achievable . . .

For Younger Readers

The Mummy Fairy and Me Series

Ella's family have a big secret . . . her mummy is a fairy! She can do amazing spells with her Computawand to make delicious cupcakes, create the perfect birthday party and cause chaos at the supermarket. But sometimes the spells go a bit wrong and that's when Ella comes to the rescue!

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Prepare for magic and mayhem in this sweet and funny new series for young readers.

The Burnout

Sophie Kinsella



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For my children:
Freddy, Hugo, Oscar, Rex and Sybella

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ONE

It's not the emails that make me panic.

It's not even the 'chasing' emails. (*Just wondering if you got my last email as I have had no reply?*)

It's the 'chasing-the-chasing' emails. The ones with two red exclamation marks. The ones that are either super-pissed off – *As I mentioned in my TWO previous emails* – or else faux-concerned and sarcastic – *I'm starting to wonder whether you have been trapped down a well or suffered some other calamity??*

Those are the ones that make my chest spasm and my left eye start twitching. Especially when I realize I forgot to flag them. My life is governed by the flagged email, my *life*. But I forgot to flag the latest one and that was days ago and now my colleague sounds pretty pissed off, although he's being nice: *Seriously, is everything OK with you, Sasha?* So now I feel even more guilty. He's a nice guy. He's reasonable. It's not his fault I'm doing the work of three people and keep dropping all the plates.

I work for Zoose, the travel app that's everywhere right

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now. *You didn't use Zoose?* That's our latest ad campaign, and it's genuinely a good app. Wherever you want to go in the world, Zoose finds you instant itineraries, bargain tickets and a great rewards programme. I'm Director of Special Promotions, covering fourteen territories. The fancy title lured me into the job, I'll be honest. And the fact that Zoose is such a buzzy start-up. When I tell people about my job, they say, 'Oh, that! I've seen it advertised on the Tube!' Then they add, 'Cool job!'

It *is* a cool job. On paper. Zoose is a young company, it's growing fast, there's a living wall of plants in our open-plan workspace, and free herbal tea. When I first started here, a couple of years ago, I did feel lucky. Every day I woke up and thought 'Lucky me!' But at some point that transitioned into waking up and thinking, 'Oh God, oh please, I can't do this, how many emails have I got, how many meetings, what have I missed, how will I cope, what am I going to do?'

I'm not sure when that was. Maybe six months ago? Seven? But it feels as if I've been in this state for ever. Kind of in a tunnel, where the only thing I can do is keep going. Just keep going.

I write myself yet another Post-it reminder – *FLAG EMAILS!!!* – and stick it above my computer screen, next to *APP??*, which has been there for months.

My mum's into apps. She's got a Christmas-planning app and a holiday-planning app and a talking clock from her gadget catalogue, which reminds you to take your vitamins every 7.30 a.m. (It also reminds you to do pelvic-floor exercises every night and calls out 'inspirational quotes' randomly throughout the day. I find it very weird and controlling, although I haven't told her that.)

Anyway, I'm sure she's right – if I could just find the right

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app, my life would fall into place. But there are too many to choose from and, my God, they all need so much *input*. I have a bullet journal, which came with coloured gel pens. You're supposed to write out all your tasks, colour-code them and tick them off. But who has time for that? Who has time to select a turquoise pen and write 'Answer those thirty-four furious emails in your inbox' and then find an appropriate sad-face sticker? I've got precisely one entry in my bullet journal, which I made a year ago. It reads: 'Task: work'. And it's never ticked off.

I glance at the clock and feel a nasty lurch. How is it 11.27 already? I need to get on. Get on, Sasha.

Dear Rob, I'm so sorry I have not yet got back to you on this, please accept my apologies. I must type those words, what, twenty times a day? *We are looking at 12 April now, and I will be sure to advise you of any change. Meanwhile, on the subject of the roll-out (Netherlands), the decision was made that—*

'Sasha!'

I'm so preoccupied that when a familiar strident voice breaks into my thoughts, I jump right off my office chair.

'Got a sec?'

My whole body stiffens. A sec? A sec? No. I do not have a sec. I'm sweating through my shirt. My fingers are on fire. I have a million other urgent emails after this one, I need to get on, I do not have a sec . . .

But Joanne, our Empowerment and Wellbeing Officer, is heading towards me. Joanne is in her forties, maybe ten years older than me, although she often says 'Women of *our* age' in meetings, with a glance at me. She's dressed in her usual athleisure trousers and expensive, understated T-shirt, and has a disapproving look in her eye that I recognize all too well. I've messed up. But how? Hastily I grope in my mind for

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crimes I might have committed, but I can't think of any. With a sigh, I stop typing and turn my chair towards her a smidge. Just enough to be polite.

'Sasha,' she says briskly, flicking back her straightened hair. 'I'm a *little* disappointed with your level of engagement in our employee joyfulness programme.'

Shit. Joyfulness. I knew I'd forgotten something. I thought I'd written myself a Post-it – *JOYFULNESS!* – but maybe it fell off my computer? I shift my gaze and, sure enough, there are two Post-its stuck to the radiator: *JOYFULNESS!* and *GAS BILL.*

'Sorry,' I say, trying to sound ingratiating and humble. 'I'm really sorry, Joanne. Sorry.'

Sometimes, if you say 'Sorry' enough times to Joanne, she moves on. But not today. She leans against my desk and my stomach clenches. I'm in for the full lecture.

'Asher has also noticed your lack of participation, Sasha.' She eyes me more closely. 'As you know, Asher is *particularly* committed to the joyfulness of employees.'

Asher is Head of Marketing and therefore my boss. He's also the brother of Lev, the founder of Zoose, the famous one. Lev is the one who came up with the idea of Zoose. He was arriving at an airport when the notion came to him, and he sat in a cafe in the terminal all day, missing six flights to Luxembourg, while he sketched out the first concepts. That's the story, anyway. I've seen him tell it on a TED Talk.

Lev is wiry and charismatic and charming and asks everyone questions all the time. Whenever he's in the office, he walks around, a distinctive figure with his wild hair, asking people 'Why this?', 'Why that?', 'What are you doing?', 'Why not try it this way?' During my interview, he asked me about my coat and my university tutors and what I thought of

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motorway service stations. It was random and fun and inspiring.

But I never see him now, I only see Asher, who could be from a different planet than Lev. Asher has this thin layer of polished charm, which bowls you over at first. But then you realize he's really self-important and prickly about Lev's fame and very sensitive to anything he sees as criticism. Which is pretty much any response apart from 'That's a ground-breaking idea, Asher, you're a genius!'

(In every meeting, whatever stupid thing he says, Joanne exclaims, 'That's a ground-breaking idea, Asher, you're a genius!')

Anyway. So you have to be careful around Asher, and equally careful around Joanne, who is Asher's old friend from uni and strides around like his henchwoman, looking for heretics.

'I fully support Asher's joyfulness programme,' I say hastily, trying to sound sincere. 'I attended the Zoom lecture by Dr Sussman yesterday. It was inspirational.'

The Zoom lecture by Dr Sussman ('Downwards Can Be Upwards! A Journey to Personal Fulfilment') was compulsory for all employees. It was two hours long and was mostly Dr Sussman talking about her divorce and subsequent sexual awakening in a commune in Croydon. I have *no* idea what it was supposed to teach us, but at least because it was on Zoom I managed to get some work done at the same time.

'I'm talking about the online aspirations mood board, Sasha,' says Joanne, folding her toned arms like a scary gym teacher who's about to make you do twenty press-ups. (*Is* she about to make me do twenty press-ups?) 'You haven't logged in for ten days, we notice. Do you *have* no aspirations?'

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Oh God. The online bloody aspirations mood board. I completely forgot about that.

'Sorry,' I say. 'I'll get to it.'

'Asher is a very caring head of department,' Joanne says, her eyes still narrowed. 'He's keen that each employee takes time to reflect on their goals and note their everyday joyful moments. Are you making notes of your everyday joyful moments?'

I'm dumbstruck. An everyday joyful moment? What would one of those look like?

'This is for your own empowerment, Sasha,' continues Joanne. 'We at Zoose *care* about you.' She makes it sound like an accusation. 'But you have to care about yourself, too.'

Out of the corner of my eye I can see that six more urgent emails have arrived in my inbox while we've been talking. I feel nausea rising as I see all the red exclamation marks. How am I supposed to have time to reflect? How can I feel joyful when I'm constantly gripped by panic? How am I supposed to write down my aspirations when my only aspiration is 'stay on top of life' and I'm failing at that?

'Actually, Joanne . . .' I take a deep breath. 'What's most bothering me is, when are Seamus and Chloe going to be replaced? I asked that on the aspirations board, but no one answered.'

This is the biggest issue. This is the killer. We just don't have enough staff. Chloe was a maternity cover who lasted a week, and Seamus stayed for a month, had a flaming row with Asher and walked out. As a result, everyone is overloaded, and there's still no news on any replacements.

'Sasha,' says Joanne condescendingly, 'I'm afraid you've rather misunderstood the function of the aspirations mood

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board. It isn't about technical HR matters, it's for personal goals and dreams.'

'Well, it's my personal goal and dream to have enough colleagues to do the work!' I retort. 'We're all snowed under, and I've spoken to Asher *so* many times, but he just won't give me a straight answer, you know what he's—'

I cut myself off dead before I can say anything negative about Asher that she'll report back to him and I'll have to retract in a cringy meeting.

'Are you twitching?' says Joanne, peering at me.

'No. What? Twitching?' I put a hand to my face. 'Maybe.'

She's blanked my actual question, I notice. How is it some people can do that? I can't help glancing at my monitor – and Rob Wilson has just emailed yet again, this time with four exclamation marks.

'Joanne, I have to get on,' I say, in desperation. 'But thanks for the empowerment. I feel so much more . . . powered.'

I need to do something, I think frantically, as she finally walks away and I resume typing. *I need to do something.* This job isn't what it was supposed to be. Nothing like. I was so excited when I got it, two years ago. Director of Special Promotions of Zoose! I started off at a sprint, giving it my all, thinking I was on a solid path towards an exciting horizon. But the path isn't solid any more. It's mud. Deep, gloopy mud.

I press Send, breathe out and rub my face. I need a coffee. I stand up, stretch my arms and wander over to the window for a breather. The office is silent and intent; half of my team are working from home today. Lina's in, but she's typing furiously at her workstation, her headphones clamped over her ears and a murderous scowl on her face. No wonder Joanne left her well alone.

Do I leave? Change jobs? But, oh God, it takes so much

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energy to change jobs. You have to read recruitment ads and talk to headhunters and decide on a career strategy. You have to dig out your CV and remember what you've achieved and choose outfits for interviews, then somehow secretly fit the interviews into your working day. You have to sound sparky and dynamic while a scary panel quizzes you. Smile brightly when they keep you waiting for forty minutes, while simultaneously stressing out about how behind you're getting with your *actual* job.

And that's just one job application. Then they turn you down and you have to start again. The prospect makes me want to curl up under the duvet. I can't even seem to sort out my passport renewal right now. Let alone my life.

I lean against the glass, my gaze drifting downwards. Our office is situated in a wide, functional street in north London, full of nasty eighties office blocks and a disappointing shopping centre and, totally randomly, a convent, right opposite. It's a Victorian building and you wouldn't know it's a convent if it wasn't for the nuns coming in and out. Modern nuns, who wear jeans with their veil and catch buses to God knows where. Homeless shelters probably, to do good work.

As I'm watching, a couple of nuns emerge, talking animatedly, and sit on the bench at the bus stop. I mean, look at them. They lead a completely different life to mine. Do nuns have emails? I bet they don't. I bet they're not even *allowed* to email. They don't have to reply to 103 WhatsApps a night. They don't have to apologize to angry people all day. They don't have to fill in online aspirations mood boards. All their values are different.

Maybe I could lead a different life, too. Get a different job, move flat, change everything up. It just requires impetus. I need *impetus*. A sign from the universe, maybe.

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Sighing, I turn away and head to the coffee machine. Caffeine will have to get me through for now.

I walk out of the building at 6 p.m., breathing in the cold evening air in large gulps, as though I've been suffocating all day. Our company is located above a Pret a Manger and I head there straight away, as I do every night.

The thing about Pret a Manger is, you can buy *all* your meals there, not just lunch. This is allowed. And once you have that revelation, then life becomes manageable. Or at least, more manageable.

I don't know when cooking became so daunting. It kind of crept up on me. But now I just can't face it. I cannot face buying some piece of . . . whatever . . . food, I guess, from the supermarket. And peeling it or whatever, cutting it up, getting out pans and looking for a recipe and then washing up afterwards. Just the thought overwhelms me. How do people do that every night?

Whereas the falafel and halloumi wrap is a nice warm, comforting supper which goes nicely with a glass of wine, and then you just chuck the wrapper in the bin.

I collect my wrap, a choc bar, some kind of 'healthy' drink in a can, and a bircher muesli – which is tomorrow's breakfast – along with an apple. That's my five a day. (OK, one a day, if you're being pedantic.)

As I reach the till, I get out my credit card. And I'm expecting the usual silent electronic transaction, but when I touch my card on the reader, nothing happens. I look up and see the Pret guy smiling at me, his dark eyes warm and friendly.

'You buy the same thing every night,' he says. 'Wrap, bircher muesli, apple, drink, choc bar. Same thing.'

'Yes,' I say, taken aback.

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'Don't you ever cook? Go to a restaurant?'

At once, I stiffen. What is this, the food police?

'I usually have work to catch up on.' I smile tightly. 'So.'

'I'm training to be a chef,' he replies easily. 'I'm into food. Seems a shame to eat the same thing every day.'

'Well. It's fine. I like it. Thanks.'

I glance meaningfully at the card reader, but he doesn't seem in any hurry to process the transaction.

'You know what my perfect evening would be?' he says. 'It would involve you, by the way.'

His voice is low and kind of seductive. His eyes haven't left mine, this whole conversation. I blink back at him, disconcerted. What's happening right now? Wait, is he hitting on me? Is he *flirting* with me?

Yes, he is. Shit!

OK. What do I do?

Do I want to flirt back? How *do* I flirt back? How does that go, again? I try to reach inside myself for my flirting moves. For the light, fun version of Sasha Worth who would smile or say something witty. But I've lost it. I feel empty inside. I don't have a line.

'We'd walk round Borough Market,' he continues, undaunted by my lack of response. 'We'd buy vegetables, herbs, cheese. We'd go home, spend a few hours cooking, then eat a beautiful meal . . . and see where that took us. What do you think?'

His eyes are crinkling adorably. I know what he expects me to say. How do I tell him what I'm really thinking?

'Honestly?' I say, playing for time.

'Honestly.' His smile broadens infectiously. 'Be as honest as it gets. I'm not scared.'

'The truth is, it sounds kind of exhausting,' I say bluntly.

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'All that cooking. Chopping. Clearing up. Potato peelings everywhere, you know? And some always fall on the floor and you have to sweep them up . . .' I break off. 'It's not really for me.'

I can tell he's taken aback by my answer, but he recovers almost at once. 'We could skip the cooking,' he suggests.

'So, what, straight to sex?'

'Well.' He laughs, his eyes glinting. 'Maybe move in that direction.'

Oh God, he seems a really nice guy. I need to be completely frank.

'OK, so the issue with sex is, I'm not really interested in it at the moment. I can see how *you* would be into it,' I add politely. 'But for me, not so much. Thanks for the approach, though.'

I hear a gasp behind me and turn to see a woman in a purple coat staring at me. 'Are you nuts?' she exclaims. 'I'll come,' she adds huskily. 'I'll come and cook with you. *And* the rest. Any time you like. Say the word.'

'I'll come!' chimes in a good-looking man standing in the other queue. 'You're bi, right?' he adds to the Pret guy, who looks freaked out and ignores both of them.

'You're not into sex?' the Pret guy says, eyeing me curiously. 'You're religious?'

'No, just gone off it. I broke up with someone a year ago and . . .' I shrug. 'Dunno. I find the whole notion unappealing.'

'You find the whole notion of sex *unappealing*?' He gives a loud, incredulous laugh. 'No. I don't believe that.'

I feel a flash of annoyance, because who is this stranger to tell me what I might or might not find appealing?

'It's true!' I retort, more vehemently than I intended. 'What's so great about sex? I mean, when you think about it,

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what *is* sex? It's . . . it's . . .' I cast wildly around. 'It's genitals rubbing together. I mean, *really*? That's supposed to be enjoyable? Genitals rubbing together?'

The entire shop is silent and I realize that about twenty people are staring at me.

OK, I'm going to need to find a different Pret.

'I think I'll pay now,' I say, my face blazing hot. 'Thanks.'

The Pret guy is silent as he takes my payment, fills my bag and hands it to me. Then he meets my eye again. 'That's just sad,' he says. 'Someone like you. It's sad.'

His words hit a sensitive place, deep inside me. Someone like me. Who is that? I used to be someone who could flirt, have sex, have fun, enjoy life. Whoever I am right now, it's not me. But I don't seem able to be anyone else.

'Yup.' I nod. 'It is.'

Usually I take my Pret supper back up to my desk, but I'm feeling so deflated by now, I decide to go straight home. As soon as I get inside my flat, I sink down on a chair, still in my coat, and close my eyes. Every night, I arrive back here and feel like I've just run a marathon, dragging an elephant behind me.

At length I open my eyes and find myself surveying the array of dead plants on the windowsill that I've been intending to chuck out for about six months.

I will one day. I really will. Just . . . not right this second.

Eventually, I manage to shrug off my coat, pour myself a glass of wine and settle on the sofa with my Pret bag at my feet. My phone is flashing with WhatsApp messages and I log on to see that my old uni friends are all chatting about some new plan where we all hold dinner parties in turn with movie themes, wouldn't that be fun?

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There is no way I'm having anyone round for a dinner party. I'd be too embarrassed. My flat is a shambles. Everywhere I look, I see the evidence of some task I've been intending to do – from the unopened tester paint pots, to the exercise bands I was going to use, to the dead plant, to the magazines I haven't read. It was Mum who gave me the subscription to *Women's Health*. Mum, who works at an estate agency and does Pilates and has a full face of make-up on before 7 a.m. every day.

She makes me feel like a complete failure. How does she do it? By my age she was married and making lasagne every night for Dad. I have one job. One flat. No children. But still life feels impossible.

The WhatsApp group has now moved on to the subject of the latest box set and I feel like I should probably join in.

Sounds amazing! I type. *I'll definitely watch that!!*

I'm lying. I won't watch it. I don't know what's happened to me – maybe I have 'box-set fatigue'? Or 'box-set-discussion fatigue'? Conversations light up at work like bushfires taking hold, and it's as if everyone's suddenly in a secret club, outdoing each other with their expert analysis. 'Oh, it's totally underrated. It's *Shakespearean*. You haven't seen it? You *have* to.' Whoever is furthest ahead in the viewing behaves like they're Jed Mercurio, just because they know what happens in episode six. My ex-boyfriend Stuart was like that. 'You wait,' he would say proprietorially, as if he'd invented the whole thing. 'You think it's good so far? You wait.'

I used to watch box sets. I used to enjoy them. But my brain has gone on strike; I can't cope with anything new. Instead, after I've finished eating my wrap, I turn on my TV, scroll down my planner, call up *Legally Blonde* and press 'Play movie again' for maybe the hundredth time.

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I watch *Legally Blonde* every night and no one can stop me. As the opening song begins, I sag against my sofa and take a bite of choc bar, watching the familiar scenes in a mesmerized trance. This opening sequence is my downtime. It's a few minutes when I don't do anything, just gaze at a pink, marshmallow world.

Then, as Reese Witherspoon appears onscreen, it's my cue to move. I come to, and reach for my laptop. I open my emails, take a deep breath as though surveying Mount Everest, then click on the first flagged one.

Dear Karina, I'm so sorry I have not yet got back to you on this. I take a swig of wine. *Please accept my apologies*.

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TWO

The next morning, I wake up on the sofa. My hair is still in its elastic, the TV is still on and there's a glass of half-drunk red wine on the floor. I can smell its stale aroma, like some kind of noxious air freshener. I must have fallen asleep while I was working.

As I shift uncomfortably and remove my phone from under my left shoulder blade, it lights up with new messages, notifications and emails. But for once, I don't start scrolling, heart thumping in anxiety, wondering what fresh hell is about to greet me. Instead, I roll back on the sofa and stare at the ceiling, feeling a resolution forming in my brain. I'm going to take action today. Big action. Proper action.

As I rub some belated Olay Total Effects Night Cream into my skin, I catch my reflection in the mirror and shudder. My winter-white, freckly skin looks like cardboard. My straight, dark hair is lifeless. My pale-blue eyes are bloodshot. I look *haggard*.

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But weirdly, this sight galvanizes me. Maybe I was more stung by the Pret guy's comments than I realized. He's right. It *is* sad. I should *not* be this person. I should *not* be in this situation. I should *not* look so stressed out and haggard. And I should *not* have to leave my job because the department is badly run.

I try to go through my options logically. I've tried talking to Asher. Doesn't achieve anything. I've tried approaching various other senior types – they all said 'talk to Asher'. So I need to try further up. Talk to Lev. I don't have a direct email contact for him, only his assistant. But I'll find him. Yes.

I arrive at the office early, feeling wired, and take the lift straight up to the top floor, where Lev's office is. His assistant, Ruby, is sitting at her glass desk, in front of a massive graphic of the distinctive orange Zoose icon, and my business brain registers that it's a really well-designed and impressive space. This company has so many brilliant aspects. Which is what makes it so frustrating that other parts are so crap.

There's a huge image of Lev, looking as charismatic as ever, with his wild, unbrushed hair and intent gaze. We use his photo a lot in marketing, because he's so distinctive. So cool-looking. He's dating a fashion designer called Damian, and the pair of them look like some sort of *Vogue* shoot.

But cool-looking only takes you so far. I need the real thing. The real man. Some real answers.

'Hi, I'd like to talk to Lev, please,' I say as I approach Ruby, trying to sound matter-of-fact. 'Is he in?'

'Do you have an appointment?' She glances at her screen.

'No.'

Somehow I force myself to leave it at that. This is what you

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have to do in life: just say 'no', without explaining further. I'm not saying I feel comfortable doing that, but I've seen it on Instagram. It's what successful people do.

'No appointment?' She raises her perfectly tweezed eyebrows.

'No.'

'Well, you should make an appointment.'

'It's urgent.' I try to sound polite. 'So perhaps my appointment could be right now?'

'I'm afraid he's not here.' Ruby lays the information down like a winning card. '*So*.'

Her eyes have a snide glint to them, and I feel a prickle of antagonism. Since when did everyone in this company become such a bitch?

'Well, maybe you could reach him for me,' I say, as pleasantly as I can. 'It's to do with a crisis in his company, so he might want to listen. He might want to know what's going on. Because it's not great, actually. It's not great at all. And if it were *my* company, which I'd started from scratch, you know, I'd want to know. So. Maybe you should give him a call.'

I've lost my pleasant veneer, I realize. In fact, I sound weirdly intense. But that's OK. That's good. It shows I mean business.

Ruby surveys me coolly for a few seconds, then sighs.

'And you are . . .?'

I feel a surge of rage. She knows exactly who I am.

'I'm Sasha Worth,' I say politely. 'Director of Special Promotions.'

'Special Pro-mo-tions.' She draws out the word elaborately, wrinkling her brow and nibbling on a Zoose-branded pen. 'Have you tried discussing this issue with Asher?'

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'Yes,' I say shortly. 'Lots of times. That hasn't worked out for me.'

'Have you talked to anyone else?'

'Several people. They all tell me to go to Asher. But you see, talking to Asher doesn't achieve anything. So I want to talk to Lev.'

'Well, I'm afraid he's not available.'

How does she even know that? She's been sitting right here, making no attempt to reach him.

'Well, have you *tried* him? Have you *called* him?'

Ruby rolls her eyes, making no attempt to disguise her contempt.

'There's no point calling him,' she says, in a super-slow, patronizing tone, 'because he's *not available*.'

Something strange is happening to me. All the noises in the surrounding offices are getting louder. My breath is coming faster and faster. I don't feel quite in control of myself.

'Well, there must be someone,' I say, taking a step forward. 'OK? In this entire company, there must be someone. So please find them. Now. Because I have a problem and Asher hasn't fixed it and no one seems able to fix it, and I'm losing the plot. I. Am. Losing. The. Plot. I've gone off sex, do you know that?' My voice is getting shrill. 'That's not normal, is it? To go off sex? I'm thirty-three!'

Ruby opens her eyes wide and I can already see her relaying this whole conversation to her mates over drinks later, but I do not care. I do not care.

'Oooooo-kay,' she says. 'I'll see what I can do.'

She types busily, then pauses, and I see her register some new piece of information on her screen. Then at last she looks up and shoots me a cold smile.

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'Someone's coming to talk to you. Would you like to take a seat?'

My head churning, I sit down on the nearby sofa, which is covered in an orange and green retro print. There's a bowl of vegan snacks on the coffee table, several tech magazines and a new brand of filtered water in an eco-paper bag. I remember sitting here when I interviewed for the job. Double-checking my outfit. Running through all the reasons why I would be *thrilled* to join such an exciting, dynamic company.

'Sasha. What's up?'

My chest clenches as I hear the familiar, strident voice. *This* is who Ruby has summoned? *Joanne?* I can hardly bring myself to look at her as she plonks herself down on the sofa in her casual blazer and flared jeans combo, and shakes her head reprovingly.

'Ruby says you've become a little over-emotional?' she says. 'Sharing too much? Losing your temper? As you know, Sasha, I did warn you about the consequences of neglecting your personal reflections. It's up to you to check in with yourself.'

I can't speak for a few seconds. My throat feels choked with rage. Is she saying this is *my* fault?

'It's not a question of personal reflections,' I manage at last, my voice trembling. 'It's a question of staffing, of management failure . . .'

'I suggest you bring any specific problems up with Asher, as your department head,' Joanne cuts me off crisply. 'But in the meantime, I *do* have some news, which Asher will be announcing later: Lina is no longer working for the company.' She shoots me an icy smile. 'So everyone in Marketing will need to pull together! If you could personally take on Lina's projects, just temporarily, that would be helpful. And

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obviously, any other issues you have may need to wait, as Asher is somewhat stretched as a result.'

I stare at Joanne in disbelief.

'Lina's left?'

'She sent an email this morning indicating that she was not returning.'

'She just *left*?'

'It was quite a shock for Asher.' Joanne lowers her voice. 'Between you and me, I've never known such disrespectful treatment. And quite a rude email, I can tell you!'

I can barely hear Joanne, my thoughts are whirling so fast. Lina got out. She'd had enough and she got out. And now I'm supposed to take on her projects? On top of everything else? I'll collapse. I can't do it. I won't do it. But who do I turn to? Who can I talk to? This place is hell. It's a circular hell with no way out . . .

I need to do the same as Lina, it comes to me in a powerful realization. I need to escape. Right now. This minute. But carefully. Warily. No sudden moves, or else Joanne might tackle me to the floor.

'I'll just pop to the Ladies,' I say in a stilted voice, picking up my bag. 'And then I'll be back. I'll be back in, like, three minutes. I'm just popping to the Ladies.'

Trying to keep a steady pace, I walk self-consciously towards the Ladies. At the door, I pause and look around to see if I'm being observed. Then I dodge into the stairwell and start running like lightning down the stone steps, my heart pumping furiously. I emerge on to the street and stand on the pavement for a few seconds, blinking.

I'm out.

But what do I do now? Where will I work? Will they give me a reference? What if they don't? What if I'm unemployable?

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My stomach squeezes in fright. What have I done? Should I go back in? No. I can't, I just can't.

For a few moments, I'm transfixed. I don't feel right. Everything seems blurry. Blood is pumping in my ears. All the cars and buses sound like juggernauts. I should go home, I dimly think. But what's home? A messy, dishevelled, depressing flat. What's my life? A messy, dishevelled, depressing nothing.

I can't do life. The stark truth lands in my brain with a thud. *I can't do life any more.* If I just acknowledged this simple fact, everything would be easier. Life is too hard. I want to give up . . . what, exactly? Working? Being? No, not being. I like being alive. I think. I just can't be alive like this.

My phone buzzes with a message and out of habit I open it, to see a text from Joanne.

Sasha, where have you got to??

In a spasm of panic, I glance up at the office windows and move slightly down the street, out of sight. I should go home, but I don't want to go home. I don't know what I want to do. I *don't know*.

As I'm standing there, coughing on bus fumes, my eyes focus on the convent opposite, and through my brain fog I feel a weird, creeping sensation. A kind of yearning.

What do nuns do all day, anyway? What's the job spec? I bet all they do is pray and knit vests for the poor and go to bed at 6 p.m. every night in their nice basic cells. They have to sing hymns – but I could learn those, couldn't I? And how to put on a wimple.

It would be a modest, healthy life. A manageable life. Why didn't I think of this before? Maybe it was all meant to be.

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There's a sudden, blissful release inside my mind, so intense I almost feel giddy. This is my calling. At last!

Feeling more serene and purposeful than I have for years, I cross the road. I head to the big wooden door, ring on the bell marked 'Office' and wait for an answer.

'Hello,' I say simply to the elderly nun who opens the door. 'I'd like to join.'

OK. Not to criticize the convent at all, but I will admit I'm disappointed by my reception. You'd think they'd *want* nuns. You'd think they would have welcomed me in with open arms and a chorus of *Hallelujah!* But instead, a senior sort of nun called Sister Agnes, wearing cords, a sweater and a bright-blue veil, has sat me down in her office, made me an instant coffee (I was expecting a medieval herbal tincture) and has started enquiring about my background. Who I am and where I work and how I found out about the convent.

Why does any of that matter? It should be like the French Foreign Legion. No questions asked, just put on your headdress and begin.

'So you work for Zoose,' she says now. 'Are you not happy there?'

'I used to work for Zoose,' I correct her. 'Until about half an hour ago.'

'Half an hour ago!' she exclaims. 'What happened half an hour ago?'

'I realized I wanted this life.' I make a simple but telling gesture around the plain little room. 'A pared-back existence. Poverty. Celibacy. No emails, no phones, no sex. *Especially* no sex,' I clarify. 'You don't need to worry about that. I have zero libido right now. I probably have less libido than you do!' I

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break into a shrill laugh, before realizing that Sister Agnes isn't joining in. Nor does she look amused.

It's probably bad form to refer to a nun's sex drive, I think belatedly. But never mind. I'll learn these things.

'We have emails,' says Sister Agnes, giving me an odd look. 'We have iPhones. Who's your parish priest?'

'You have *iPhones*?' I stare at her, thrown. Nuns have iPhones? That doesn't seem right.

'Who's your parish priest?' she repeats. 'Do you worship nearby?'

'Well.' I clear my throat awkwardly. 'I don't exactly have a parish priest, because I'm not exactly Catholic. As yet. But I totally can be. *Will* be,' I correct myself. 'When I'm a nun. Obviously.'

Sister Agnes stares at me for so long I start to feel uncomfortable.

'So, when can I start?' I try to move the conversation on. 'What's the procedure?'

Sister Agnes sighs and picks up the landline phone on her desk. She dials a number and murmurs something into the handset which sounds like, *We've got another one*. Then she turns to me.

'If you want to explore the religious life, I suggest you start by going to church. You can find your local Catholic church online. Meanwhile, thank you for your interest, and God bless.'

It takes me a moment to realize that this is a dismissal. She's sending me away? Not even 'You can try it out for a day or two'? Not even 'Fill out this application form'?

'Please let me join.' To my horror, I feel a tear trickling down my cheek. 'My life's all gone a bit pear-shaped. I'll knit vests. I'll sing hymns. Sweep the floor.' I swallow hard and rub my face. 'Whatever it takes. Please.'

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For a minute, Sister Agnes is silent. Then she sighs again, this time a bit more kindly.

'Perhaps you'd like to sit quietly in the chapel for a while,' she suggests. 'And then perhaps you could ask a friend to come and take you home? You seem a little . . . overwrought.'

'My friends are all at work,' I explain. 'I don't want to bother them. But maybe I will sit in the chapel, just for a little while. Thank you.'

I follow Sister Agnes tamely to the chapel, which is small and dark and silent, with a big silver cross. I sit on one of the benches, looking up at the stained-glass windows, feeling a bit surreal. If I don't become a nun, what will I do with myself?

Apply for another job, obviously, says a lacklustre voice in my head. *Sort my life out*.

But I'm so tired. I'm just so *tired*. I feel like I'm skating over life because I can't get traction. If only I weren't so tired all the time—

'. . . quite bizarre!' A strident voice makes me stiffen and I swivel round on my bench, my skin prickling. No. I'm imagining things. That can't be—

'I *do* appreciate you contacting us, Sister Agnes.'

It is. It's Joanne. Her voice is getting nearer and I can hear the sound of footsteps coming this way.

'At Zoose, I must assure you, we do prioritize wellbeing, so I am rather surprised that *any* of our employees should be distressed . . .'

That nun is a *traitor*. This place was supposed to be a sanctuary! I'm already on my feet, looking desperately for an escape, but there's no way out. In panic, I duck behind a wooden statue of Mary, just as Sister Agnes and Joanne appear at the door to the chapel, like a pair of prison wardens.

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The chapel is quite dim. Maybe I'll get away with it. I suck my stomach in, holding my breath.

'Sasha,' says Joanne after a pause. 'We can see you quite clearly. Now, I know you're in a bit of a state. But why don't you come back to the office and we'll have a little talk?'

'Don't think so,' I say curtly, stepping out from behind the statue. 'Thanks a *lot*,' I add sarcastically to Sister Agnes. And I'm striding past them both, out of the chapel, when Joanne grabs my arm.

'Sasha, you really *must* prioritize your own wellbeing,' she says sweetly, her fingers clamped round my flesh so tightly I know I'll bruise. 'You know we all care about you very much, but you need to look after yourself! I suggest you come back with me now and we'll look at your aspirations mood board—'

'Get off!' I wrench my arm out of hers and walk briskly away down the wood-panelled corridor, then break into a run, suddenly desperate to get out of this place.

'Catch her! She's unstable!' exclaims Joanne to a nearby nun, who looks startled, then makes a swipe for my sleeve, but misses.

Seriously? OK, I am never taking refuge in a convent again. With a spurt of adrenaline, I hurtle to the front door, wrench it open and make it out on to the street. I glance back as I run – and to my horror, Sister Agnes is hurrying after me in her cords and trainers, her blue veil fluttering behind her like some sort of miniature superhero cape.

'Stop!' she calls. 'Dear, we only want to help you!'

'No, you don't!' I yell back.

I've reached a group of people clogging up the pavement at the bus stop and frantically I try to push past. 'Sorry,' I say breathlessly, almost tripping on feet and bags. 'Excuse me . . .'

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'Stop!' calls Sister Agnes again, her voice like a clarion. 'Come back!'

I look back again and feel a jolt of horror. She's only a few feet behind me now, and gaining on me.

'Please!' I say desperately, trying to dodge through the bus queue. 'Let me through! I need to get away from that nun!'

A burly guy in jeans glances at me, then at Sister Agnes – then he sticks out his arm to block her path.

'Leave her alone!' he bellows at Sister Agnes. 'Maybe she doesn't *want* to be a nun, thought of that? Bloody religious nutters!' Then he turns to me. 'You get away, girl. You run!'

'Run!' chimes in a nearby girl, laughing. 'Run for your life!'

Run for my life. That's what it feels like. My heart pumping, I pick up speed and get through the crowd. Now I'm sprinting along the pavement with only one aim: to escape. Get away from . . . everything. I have no idea where I'm heading, apart from away . . . away . . .

And then, with no warning, everything goes black.

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THREE

The *humiliation*. The humiliation of your mum being called away from a viewing of a four-bedroom semi in Bracknell, because you had a flip-out at work and ran straight into a brick wall.

I'll swear that wall came out of nowhere. I'll swear that corner didn't used to be there. One minute I was running as though wildebeest were after me, then the next minute I was on the ground with people staring down at me and blood trickling into my eye.

Now it's five hours later. I've been released from A&E and my forehead is still sore. I've also had a 'chat' with my GP over the phone. I explained the whole story and she listened quietly and asked me a load of questions about my mood and thoughts and sleep patterns. Then she said, 'I think you would do well to have a break,' and signed me off work for three weeks. It turns out I get a week's sick leave at full pay, so that's a silver lining.

'But then what?' I look despairingly at Mum, who came to

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the hospital and escorted me back home in an Uber. 'I'm in a lose-lose. If I go back to the office: nightmare. But if I just walk out like Lina, I'll be unemployed. Nightmare.'

'You're burned out, darling.' Mum puts a cool hand on mine. 'You need to think about getting better. For now, don't make any big decisions about your job. Just rest and relax. *Then* worry about everything else.'

She sits down, hitching up her tailored work trousers and glancing at her Apple watch as she does so. Mum became an estate agent after Dad died, and it suits her down to the ground, because it's basically one big authorized gossip. 'The vendors spent a thousand pounds on the kitchen splashbacks alone', 'The couple require a master bedroom with soundproofing capability.' She gets paid to relay nuggets like that. I mean, she'd do it for free.

'I had a little word with that hospital doctor,' Mum continues. 'Very sensible woman. She said she thought you needed a proper, complete rest. It's social media I blame,' she adds darkly.

'Social media?' I peer at her. 'I hardly ever go on social media. I don't have time.'

'Modern pressures,' reiterates Mum firmly. 'Instagram. TikTok.'

'I will just say one word,' says my Aunt Pam, coming in with three cups of tea. She pauses meaningfully. '*Menopause*.'

Oh my God. Save me now. Pam recently became a menopause coach and she's obsessed. 'I don't think it's the menopause,' I say politely. 'I'm only thirty-three.'

'Don't suffer through denial, Sasha.' Pam gazes at me earnestly. 'Maybe you're perimenopausal. Are you having hot flushes?'

'No,' I say patiently. 'But thank you for asking about my body temperature every time we meet.'

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'I make your body temperature my business, my love,' Pam says impassionedly, 'because nobody talks about menopause! Nobody *talks* about it!' She looks around the room as though disappointed the sofa hasn't shared its menopause symptoms.

'I don't think the menopause is the point, Pam,' says Mum tactfully. 'Not in Sasha's case.' She turns to me. 'The point is, we must get you some proper R and R. Now, darling, you *can* come home with me, but I'm having the bathroom done and it is a little bit noisy. But Pam says you can go to her house, if you don't mind the parrots. Isn't that right, Pam?'

I don't mind the parrots, but I'm not living with the menopause coaching.

'The parrots might be a bit much,' I say hastily. 'If I'm trying to rest or whatever.'

'I'm sure Kirsten would have you—'

'No.' I cut her off. 'Don't be silly.'

My sister has a baby and a toddler, and her mother-in-law is living in the spare bedroom for a bit while she has her heating repaired. It's chocka there.

'I don't need to go anywhere. It's fine. I can stay here. Chill out. Rest.'

'Hmm.' Mum looks around the flat. 'Is this restful, though?'

We all silently take in my unlovely little sitting room. As though to prove the point, a lorry clatters by outside and a dead leaf falls off a plant. I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket and take it out to see Kirsten is calling.

'Oh hi,' I say, standing up and heading out to the hall. 'How are you?'

'Sasha, what the hell?' she exclaims. 'You ran into a brick *wall*?'

I can tell she's on speaker phone and I picture her in her

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