

The Year of Saying Yes

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For my Papa

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Part One

It Started with a Dare

Chapter One

January: It's time to break up with your old look

If I cock up the next few hours of my life then I'm going to have to admit defeat. You know, give up on men for good and become a mother of cats, allergies be damned. So ... no pressure. I grimace at my reflection in the mirror and accidentally jab myself in the eye with my mascara wand.

Balls.

Grabbing a cotton bud from my chest of drawers, I poke at the offending smear. A black eye is not part of tonight's look. I'm going for Victoria's Secret model. Not that I plan to wear nothing but my undies and a pair of wings, *obviously*. Being almost naked at a sedate family gathering is not cool, and besides, I ate 127 sausage rolls this Christmas, so I'm more #carbby than #beastmode right now.

But let's not dwell on the fact that I had to squat *and* lunge to entice my jeans up my thighs earlier. Because today is New Year's Eve and you only have to scroll through the empowering mantras on Instagram to see that absolutely everybody is feeling positive.

New beginnings, new ideas, new energy!

A new year is coming and the possibilities are endless.

Yeah! I am feeling totally fired up for tonight. The man of my dreams is coming over, and this is going to be the year that he falls helplessly at my feet, moved to tears by my brilliance and desperate to be my eternal man slave. I've had

several dry runs at making him mine, and so far the brute has remained steadfastly blind to my charms.

Attempt 1. Three years ago tonight. He winked at me, then passed out.

Attempt 2. Two years ago tonight. He slurred what I believe to have been a compliment about my boobs, then passed out.

Attempt 3. Last year. He did actually grab my arse, but then he passed out.

It's possible that I'm not painting a great picture of the object of my desire. Let me rectify this. His name is Gorgeous George. He is, in fact, gorgeous. And aside from drinking too much whisky at my family's annual NYE party, he is literally the perfect specimen. As well as being a high-flying advertising executive, he has this incredible knack for making you feel super-special. When he shares a joke with me, his eyes light up and it's like I'm the only person in the room. He's also seriously hot, is so grown up that he owns a house in London, loves nothing more than a game of Scrabble and, this is the clincher, he's single!

The only downside is that we're sort of related. He's my brother-in-law's brother. Is there a catchier name for that? Is it illegal to bonk your brother-in-law's brother? Please don't tell me the answer to this until tonight is over and he is powerless to resist me, relative or not.

How The World's Most Annoying Sister, aka Olivia, ever managed to bag Gorgeous George's equally lovely brother Sam I will never know. Sure, she's attractive and clever and blessed with the shiniest golden hair you've ever seen, but she is also SUCH a penis. She kidnapped my favourite My Little Pony when we

were kids and still hasn't given it back, plus there was that time when my heart was smashed into tiny smithereens all because of her. Not that I ever, *ever* think about that these days. Anyway, absolutely no one likes a girl who is best at everything.

'Didn't you wear that last year?'

Oh good, here she is now, casting a critical eye over my outfit. She knows very well that I did not wear this last year, the utter swine.

'No, Liv, this is new,' I sigh.

'Huh,' she shrugs, standing behind me to admire her own reflection in the mirror. I'd like to say that she looks like Khloe Kardashian pre-makeover, but that would be grossly inaccurate. Olivia looks heavenly. She's wearing a light-as-a-feather grey cashmere jumper tucked into a pleated skirt flecked with silver thread that falls just below her knees. Her legs are lightly tanned thanks to her annual winter sun break – *I simply can't function without it!* – and her black pointed heels match the black band around her impossibly tiny waist.

She spins around, letting her skirt fan out, and then, evidently satisfied, she and her perfect ponytail turn and swoosh out of my room. 'I'm going down to help Mum with the canapés,' she calls back. 'Try not to make a total knob of yourself tonight.'

The evil genius. She bloody knows I'm hoping to win George over this evening. So what if I spilled white wine all over my top and inadvertently entered a very sad and solitary wet T-shirt competition last New Year's Eve? There's no need to passive-aggressively remind me about it.

‘Just rise above it,’ I tell my reflection, readjusting the white lace top I bought for tonight. With the subtlest hint of bust on show, I hope it strikes the right note for a family party where your sole purpose is to bag a hot guy.

‘Be cool,’ I add. My two remaining My Little Ponies, still taking pride of place in my childhood bedroom, whinny their encouragement.

I guess you could say that my New Year’s Eve has followed a similar pattern for quite some time now, though it’s not like I don’t have other offers. My best friend is currently losing her shit at a rave and asked if I’d go too (with the caveat that I absolutely could not wear my ballet pumps). And some of the girls from work decided to stay in London and watch the fireworks. I *love* fireworks. But NYE at my family home has become a tradition, and I’ve been extra keen to make an appearance since George was added to the guest list three years back, after he thoroughly charmed my mum at Sam and Olivia’s wedding. Besides, it’s in my phone calendar on repeat, and deleting an annual event is the worst, right?

Anyway, tonight is going to be totally different to all the other New Year’s Eves I’ve spent at home over the past few years. Normally they run like clockwork. For example, it’s now 7.02 p.m., which means that Mum will be frantically assembling canapés for the next eighteen minutes. A dash upstairs to ‘gussy up’ will follow, while Dad goes off to fetch Grandpa. Gorgeous George and Sam are due at 7.30, and they will arrive with the faint smell of beer lingering on their coats following an afternoon in the village pub. Mum will emerge just in time to circulate

the canapés – I bet that pigs in blankets are on the menu. Dinner starts at 8 p.m. sharp, and Dad will have been dispatched to Waitrose the day before to pick up a large hunk of meat. Probably beef. Grandpa will ask me something mortifying about my love life and I will bluster away, singing the praises of my fabulous job, which will be stretching the truth no end. Pudding at 9 p.m. A cheeseboard in the kitchen from about 10. The parents will giggle at Grandpa for being asleep and then drop off themselves, allowing me the chance to attract George with a mix of come-hither eyes and repeated offers to cut him another slice of Cornish Yarg. By 10.30 we will all be totally shit-faced. My folks will snore themselves awake at 11.40, we will sing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ together, then the boys will pass out and I will slink despondently off to bed just after midnight.

Well not this year, my friend! I’ve listed in my trusty notebook all the times when things seem to go wrong for me and called it Things Not To Do On New Year’s Eve You Buffoon. I’ve highlighted a particular danger area between the hours of 9 and 10.30 p.m., when I usually take on too much champagne. I believe that this and using a cheese that smells like feet to lure in the man of my dreams are my two main mistakes.

I stride downstairs with as much sass as my ridiculously high new heels will allow.

‘You look nice, darling,’ says Dad, waving a king prawn in my direction.

‘Thank you, Dad,’ I smile, turning to smirk at my sister, but she is adept at ignoring any praise that isn’t directed at her.

‘Richard, please concentrate! Those vol au vents won’t stuff themselves, you know.’ As predicted, Mother is beginning to get stressy.

‘Izzy, now that you’re down, could you put together another tray of pigs in blankets?’ She waves in the direction of the oven. ‘That batch will be done any minute now.’

I crouch down – no mean feat given the height of these heels – and peer into the oven.

‘There are seven people coming tonight and you’ve already cooked, like, seven thousand pigs,’ I point out.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. It’s New Year’s Eve! Now, I really must go and gussy up.’

Do you have your phone on you or have you swapped it for 10 glow sticks? I need help. The plan is not going well.

I glumly press send on my message, drop my phone in my lap and shovel a bit of roast beef into my mouth. Olivia is boring us all to death with a story about how she found herself during a sunrise yoga class one morning in Sri Lanka.

‘It really put things into perspective. I feel so lucky to have you guys,’ she beams beatifically around the table. ‘And of course Sam. Babes, I don’t know what I would do without you. Next year is going to be wonderful for us.’

I roll my eyes and pour another slosh of wine into my glass. Honestly, a week-long yoga break and she thinks she’s Gwyneth Paltrow. I note that she has

conveniently forgotten to mention that she got a tummy bug and spent half the trip on the loo.

‘It wasn’t just about losing that last stubborn pound,’ she continues. ‘Which I totally did, of course!’

‘That’s because you got the sh—’

‘As I was saying,’ she interrupts, glaring at me. ‘It was about learning to appreciate the simple things. I truly am blessed.’

‘Sounds like mumbo-jumbo to me,’ butts in Grandpa, my ultimate hero. ‘Now, Izzy, are you courting yet?’

Oh. Hell.

‘You know me, Grandpa.’ I force a broad smile. ‘Work is so busy right now, guys aren’t really my priority.’

‘That magazine, it’ll steal the best years of your life if you’re not careful,’ he replies. ‘What are you, twenty-four?’

‘Umm ... twenty-five,’ I wince.

‘Your gran and I were married and having a good practice at baby-making by twenty-five. She was quite a frisky little lady, your gran,’ he chuckles.

MY EARS!

No one in the whole wide world wants to hear the words ‘your gran’ and ‘frisky’ in the same sentence. Thankfully my phone beeps just in time to distract me from thoughts of Grandpa’s sex drive, and I race off to the loo.

Totally sober. LOL. What’s up? Has GG fallen at your feet yet?

It's Jamie, my best friend in the whole world and the coolest person I have ever met. Don't be confused by the name; she is in fact a girl. Only the sassiest of girls can rock a boy's name with such aplomb.

PS Just met a photographer who wants to take pictures of me naked!

She is also something of a liability.

DO NOT AGREE TO THAT. No, GG has not fallen at my feet. We've hardly spoken, I've had too much to drink and Grandpa just asked about my love life. History is repeating itself.

I add six sad-face emojis and a smiling poo for good measure.

So what are you doing now?

Sitting in the downstairs loo texting you.

Stop that immediately. You don't want people to think you've got a bladder infection. Get back in there and be brilliant!

I'll try.

Good luck! Keep me posted.

Dad's snoring. Grandpa's snoring. Mum is doing that gentle putter noise that is the dainty female equivalent of snoring.

'More drinks!' announces Sam, looking from one in-law to the next as they snooze away in the living room.

'Yes!' cheers George.

'No, no, I'm good,' I say, feeling decidedly tipsy. But George has put his

hand on the small of my back and is shepherding me back into the dining room.

‘To the booze cabinet!’ he orders. I can’t tell if the fizzing in my fingers is down to physical contact with George or if all the bubbles I’ve consumed are gradually paralysing me.

Olivia lifts the lid of the globe-shaped drinks cabinet that my parents have owned for so long it’s actually come back into fashion, and grabs the whisky. Barf. She fills our tumblers while I check my phone. It’s gone 10 p.m. ... right in the middle of the danger area. I need some alone time with GG, and fast.

Think, Isobel, think!

‘So, George.’ I turn to him. ‘Have you seen that clip of the baby pig that really loves to roll around? It’s so cute, he just rolls and rolls. Shall I show you?’

Hmm ... In hindsight, offering to watch YouTube footage of a pig with the man of your dreams might not be the sexiest opener to a fabulous life together. Still, I wave my phone at him enticingly.

‘Maybe later?’ George suggests. ‘I’ve actually got some news for you all, and now that we’ve got full glasses, it seems like the right time.’

He thrusts his whisky into the air and beams at us.

Ohmygod, this is it. He’s going to announce that he’s in love with me! I *knew* that hand-on-the-back manoeuvre felt different to last year’s arse-grabbing. More meaningful, more hot as Hades.

I fidget with my own drink, unsure whether I’m going to be able to look him in the eye when he finally admits his true feelings. Do I play it cool, even

though I've been in love with him for the best part of my twenties?

'I've started seeing someone,' grins George.

'Oh George, I had no idea!' I clasp my hand to my heart and ...

Wait. What?

'Sorry ... what?' I stumble.

'Yeah, got myself a girlfriend. She's called Temple and she's awesome. We met on a flight to Barcelona last month. I was travelling on business, she was going to explore the city on a whim, and it turned out we were staying at the same hotel.'

George beams.

'Whoa, so it was fate?' chimes in Olivia. It's a good job I've necked my whisky, otherwise she would now be wearing it.

'I guess,' replies George. 'It's early days, but I'm pretty keen. She's incredible ... so carefree and spontaneous. Probably something to do with her being Australian.'

In my head, I am doing quite a bit of shouting ... *I'm carefree and spontaneous!*
Well ... I could be. And who the hell is called TEMPLE?

'Mate, that's great news.' Sam is patting his brother on the back. 'Can't wait to meet her.'

'Me too,' adds Olivia. 'I bet she's beautiful. Aussie girls are, right, Izzy?'

But I'm staring off into space, crushed.

'Iz?' presses Olivia.

'Huh? Oh, absolutely. Aussie girls ... total stunners,' I say, shakily resting

my glass on the table and puffing a wayward strand of blond hair out of my face.

‘Are you okay?’ asks Sam, concern written on his lovely friendly face.

‘I’m feeling a bit ...’ I start backing out of the room. ‘Think I might be pooped.’

Note to self: stop using the word pooped. Not cool. I bet Australian girls never say it.

‘I’m going to call it a night,’ I add.

‘But it’s not even midnight,’ George says, frowning.

‘Sorry to be a party pooper,’ I mutter. ‘Night.’

If I could stay under this duvet for the next 365 days, that would be smashing. Ruining my dreams for the new year before it began is impressive even by my standards. I pull my quilt up until only my eyes are poking out and reach for my phone. It’s time to accept my destiny.

I’m typing ‘can you buy hypoallergenic cats’ into Google when my phone buzzes into life.

RADIO SILENCE last night. Please tell me it’s because you spent the whole soiree shagging GG.

Blurgh. Messaging my best friend with last night’s sorry events is going to make them even more real, but I’m going to have to rip that Band-Aid off at some point.

It did not go well. I offered to show him that cute video of the baby pig rolling around as

an icebreaker ...

Long pause.

Interesting choice. Did it work? Jamie taps back.

He took the opportunity to announce that he's got a new girlfriend. Australian called Temple.

TEMPLE? WTF? Are you okay?

Not really. I used the words 'pooped' and 'pooper' in consecutive sentences then ran upstairs before midnight. I missed watching the fireworks on TV and everything!

I feel a solitary tear trickle down my cheek. I really do love those fireworks.

And are you currently googling cats for spinsters?

Yes.

Bloody hell. Come back to London immediately. Jamie will look after you.

The unicorn emoji she tags on to the end of her message makes me feel one per cent better.

After a brutal breakfast, in which the rest of my family seemed genuinely excited about the year ahead, and Princess Perky Pants, aka Olivia, took every opportunity to grill George about his new girlfriend, I scarpered, grateful for the train tickets I'd booked before the holidays. I couldn't even muster up the energy to put in my contact lenses, so now George has seen me looking like the ultimate dork in my ancient prescription glasses. Good-o.

Still, Grandpa slipped me a tenner before I left, and here I am at

Nottingham train station piling raspberry muffins and chocolate brownies onto the counter at Costa.

‘Diet starts tomorrow,’ I mutter at the cashier.

It’s bitterly cold and the greyest day ever, which seems fitting for my mood, so I burrow into the cashmere scarf I may or may not have stolen from Olivia before I left and head down to the platform. At least my train is in and I can build myself an impenetrable muffin fortress before the journey starts.

But of course there’s an angry woman in my reserved seat who refuses to budge. I’d love to be the kind of confident babe who can stand up for herself in situations like this, but Izzy hates a scene, so I find an empty seat in the next carriage. Chucking my bag overhead, I slump down and gaze out of the window as my home city starts to whizz by. I should feel excited about getting back to London and the start of a new year, but today I can’t look on the bright side.

Maybe some New Year’s resolutions would help?

I open the tatty notepad I’ve been carrying around for ages and squint so that I don’t have to look at the last entry, which failed spectacularly last night. Does anyone else do that when they don’t want to focus on stuff? I’m convinced the habit is giving me premature eye wrinkles.

Quickly turning to a new page, I start scribbling.

Stuff to Say No to in January

1. Muffins/brownies/crap. You will only eat quinoa and spinach. Side note: Find

out what an alfalfa sprout is.

2. Alcohol. It makes you say things like pooped and you developed a very uncool Baileys habit this Christmas that needs to stop.

3. Your landlady. You're already paying way too much for a tiny shoebox in Brixton.

4. Men. Specifically stop thinking about George. Remember, you're a mother of cats now.

5. Sitting on your arse. Join a gym.

6. Tallulah. Stop fetching her coffee and start insisting on writing juicy magazine features instead.

I add a couple of doodles and admire my handiwork. I'm already feeling better. I've got a to-do list! Maybe this year won't be so bad after all.

Schlepping along the streets of London Bridge the following day, I come to a halt outside the towering office block where I work and grab the lift up to the eighth floor. I'm one of the first in, because #keen, so I settle in at my desk and munch the last morsels of yesterday's ~~second~~ third muffin while my computer chugs into life. There's an ideas meeting for the first issue of the year in less than one hour, and despite my good intentions, I did no work when I got in yesterday. But that is not my fault. I blame Jamie and the debrief she insisted on having when she came over last night, armed with what she called 'emergency doughnuts'.

I grab a biro and scratch my forehead. Think, Isobel! What will the readers of *Pulse* want to sink their teeth into next week? We're a glossy weekly mag and our 'core demographic' is career girls in their twenties. They juggle amazing social lives with dating cute guys and are fabulous as hell. Just like me! If only the picture of two avocados telling each other to 'avo-cuddle' on my desk didn't beg to differ.

'Everyone is in a post-Christmas slump in January, so I should start there,' I tell the empty office.

I pull my notepad out of my battered old satchel and reread yesterday's list of things not to do. Hmm ... obviously the muffin ban starts tomorrow. I'm guiltily pawing the last crumbs into my mouth when my work phone rings and I knock my notebook on the floor as I reach to pick it up.

It's the editor. HELL.

'Good morning, Tallulah,' I say in my best phone voice.

Given her name, I wouldn't blame you for thinking that Tallulah spends her days skipping through fields in a crocheted dress, but you'd be wrong, because this Tallulah is a hard-nosed devil boss who makes flowers wither and treats me like her PA even though I am features writer here at *Pulse*.

'Yes, Isobel, yes. My driver has taken at least three wrong turns and now we're in stationary traffic. I'm going to be late, so wait another ten minutes before you fetch my coffee. And it's January, so make it skinny.'

After three years at the magazine, I've learned that waiting for a P or a Q to escape the editor's lips is like waiting for Kanye to stop talking about himself in the

third person. If it wasn't for my immediate boss, our lovely features editor Emma, I'd have spontaneously combusted under Tallulah's hellish gaze years ago.

'Happy New Year!' cheers Emma as she practically bounds into the office. 'Was that the she-devil?' she adds with a grimace.

'Yep. She's demanding coffee, but I need to get myself ready for this meeting,' I wail.

'Don't worry, I'll fetch the drinks while you get your shit together. Latte?'

'You are an angel,' I say gratefully. 'Oh, and she's insisting on skinny because it's January.'

Right, brainstorming! I scoop my notepad off the floor and notice that it's fallen open at a much earlier entry.

New Year, New Me!

Well that was a shit NYE, wasn't it? Apart from the bit where GG grabbed your arse, obvs. You've put on five pounds made entirely of mince pies and you're still single. Here's your new to-do list ...

1. Eat healthily. No more sausage rolls.
2. Stop drinking. It's making you flabby around the edges.
3. Stop pining over George. Get a boyfriend by next NYE.
4. Get fit! Maybe join a gym?
5. Find a new flat, preferably one where you can actually stand up in the shower.
6. Demand tasks at work more exciting than compiling the TV listings page.

I glance at the date I've scrawled at the top of the page: 1 January last year. Then I stare at the list again. It's practically identical to the one I wrote just yesterday. I flick back and forth between the two entries, and suddenly it dawns on me. Despite my good intentions at the start of each year, nothing has changed for a long, long time. Not my relationship status, not my poxy flat, not my junior job, not my weight ... nothing. Wow. Surely something's got to give soon?

'If I wanted histrionics, I would have invited one of my ex-husbands to the meeting.' Tallulah rolls her eyes at Lucy, our beauty writer, as she sobs into her flatplan. 'Getting dumped on New Year's Eve is absolutely no reason to come to this meeting poorly prepared.'

'S-sorry, Tallulah,' gulps Lucy. 'It's just that ... I thought he was going to p-propose. He'd booked a table at Heston Blumenthal's new restaurant. Think of the waiting list! And then after I'd eaten my starter, which looked like fruit but tasted like meat, he paused and I was like "here it comes", but then he told me it was over and now I'm starting the new year as a spinster instead of a bride-to-beeeeeeeeeeeeeee.'

Our esteemed editor, who had her feelings surgically removed as a child, stares in disdain at Lucy's outburst. Everyone else around the table shifts uncomfortably in their seats. I want to give my friend a cuddle or at the very least a tissue, but one wrong move and Tallulah may well decapitate me with her coffin-

shaped talons.

‘Sweetheart, that is awful.’ Emma, thankfully, has bigger balls than me.

‘People can put so much pressure on themselves at New Year, can’t they? I know it’s easy to say, but it sounds like you’ve had a lucky escape from that knob-end.’

‘Yeah, think of it as a fresh start,’ nods subeditor Fran.

‘I think we all need a fresh start,’ I chime in, feeling uncharacteristically brave. ‘I just realised that I’ve made the same boring New Year’s resolutions as last year. You know, stop eating crap, stop falling for unattainable men, blah blah blah.’

Silence. I *knew* I shouldn’t have piped up. But then I see that Tallulah is looking thoughtful, or at least her best approximation of thoughtful, given all the injectables swimming around her forehead.

‘January does appear to be a month for failed resolutions,’ she muses, her eyes looking up to the ceiling.

Emma and I nudge each other under the table, because we know what’s coming. For all her fearsomeness, Tallulah absolutely loves sharing too much information when it comes to her private life. Literally anything can trigger it. Suddenly her eyes glaze over and we all know we’re about to be hit by something that will no doubt make us want vomit.

‘Last year I promised myself I’d get rid of my Turkish lover,’ she begins. ‘He’s terribly dashing and actually very well endowed, but I do worry that he’s becoming rather expensive. How many first-class shopping trips to Milan can one man really need? Of course I tried to ditch him, a bit like you tried to stop eating

crap, Isobel, but by February my resolve had waned and he'd wormed his way back into my life again.'

And there it is. On the plus side, she did actually remember my name today.

Tallulah leans back in her chair and examines her bony arms. I suck in my breath and hope she can't tell that I'm in my emergency chomper jeans, the only ones that fit post-Christmas.

'Sometimes it's hard to put ideas into action, isn't it?' I tentatively reply while the rest of the staff swap grimaces. 'Christmas is all about saying yes to fun things, like wine and mince pies and, um, Turkish lovers. Then January turns up, all the fun of the festive season is over and you start making extra demands of yourself. When I was rereading my list of hopes for the past few Januarys, I realised that we've all been choosing the dreariest month of the year to say no to things.'

Tallulah looks at me. Then she looks at the empty flatplan. 'Ideas into action,' she repeats. 'Saying no to things. That's actually an interesting point. The new year brings a fresh start, so why do we all insist on depriving ourselves? What would happen if we stopped saying no and started saying yes?'

She drums her nails on the desk.

'You,' she barks at me. 'Can you write?' She doesn't wait for me to reply. 'Emma, can she write?'

'Izzy is a fantastic writer,' Emma replies, adding 'like I've been telling you for years' under her breath.

‘We will soon find out,’ scowls Tallulah. ‘I see a year-long feature coming out of this. Isobel and her Year of Saying Yes. Your dreary list of stuff not to do will become a thing of the past, and instead you’ll agree to take on new and exciting challenges. I’m thinking ... one piece a month, where you’ll chart your progress.’

‘Great idea,’ agrees Emma. Tallulah’s raised eyebrow tells us that she needn’t state the obvious. ‘We could get readers to help come up with suggestions, or maybe even dares. You know, things that you would normally say no to.’

I gaze at her like a frightened lamb.

‘Dares? But, um, I’m quite an organised person and I do like to plan ahead. Maybe sticking to a healthy diet or completing a 10K run would be enough?’ I offer.

‘Dull. No. Bollocks,’ announces Tallulah. ‘Isobel, you will be saying yes to things more interesting than a loaf around your local park in some dusty old trainers. Emma, yes, readers should get in touch. We’ll pick the dares at random for impartiality. No is not an option, Isobel. I want to run the first Year of Saying Yes article in our last January issue. In it you will cover the premise for the feature and explain how your very first dare went, so you’d better start reaching out to readers on our website to find your first challenge. Give them a little hint of the feature to come, tell them how shit your life is and how things need to change.’ She peers over her designer glasses at me. ‘Shouldn’t be too hard. Okay?’

Bloody hell, this all sounds a bit BAT-SHIT SCARY. I pick up my biro and

draw a tiny star on my latest January to-don't list. And then I remember all the failed resolutions of my past. All the times I have said no when I could have said yes. I could have sailed around the Med on a billionaire's yacht with Jamie. I could have gone on a date with that cute guy from the coffee shop downstairs, but I was too busy focusing on my plan to be a career girl. Jokes. Hell, I could even be the proud owner of a stunning blue jumpsuit that Jamie said looked fierce on me. I'd bolted from the shop because I was convinced I wasn't cool enough to pull it off.

Just how long have I been too scared to be brave and to take chances?

Forever, whispers the voice in my head.

'OKAY?' booms Tallulah.

'Um ...' I dither.

Her eyebrows are attempting to rise again.

Oh sod it, what have I got to lose?

'Sorry. Yes. Definitely yes!'

'Can I tell you something?' I ask, looking around the bar conspiratorially.

'Is it that you love me?' asks Jamie.

'How did you guess?' I point my finger at my best friend and accidentally poke her tiny button nose.

'Because Four Wines Izzy always tells me she loves me.'

'Oh,' I reply, deflated. 'Am I really that predictable?' At least I *try* and say predictable but it comes out as predickable.

‘Predickable,’ I repeat, snorting with laughter.

‘You are a little bit predictable, but there’s nothing wrong with that. You like a plan and you like to stick to it. Like tonight ... you call it Wine Wednesday and it’s in your calendar on repeat.’

‘But that’s because I like to see you and I like wine and ...’ Unable to come up with another reason, I bop Jamie on her button nose again.

‘And I love you for it.’ She pats me on the head with her perfectly manicured hand.

Jamie is one of the few things that is absolutely right in my world. Just being friends with her makes me feel like the planet is a lovelier place. We met in a lecture during our first year at uni, when she marvelled over my colour-coded collection of felt tips and I coveted the way she wore brogues *and* a trilby without looking like a dick. We spent the next three years disagreeing about whether we should stay in and watch both showings of *Neighbours* (me) or go out and stalk the rugby team (her).

‘Anyway, HOT NEWS,’ I shout. ‘I’m not going to be predickable at least once a month from now on.’ I can see that I’ve piqued her interest, so I add ‘Five Wines Izzy?’ before tottering over to the bar to order another bottle.

‘Well? Tell me more!’ Jamie insists when I return, unscrewing the new bottle with indecent haste. Patience has never been a thing for Jamie.

I fill her in on my new feature and watch her face break into a huge smile.

‘NO. WAY. Izzy, this is going to be so good for you,’ she shouts. No one

else is shouting in here, because the music isn't loud, but that's what happens when you drink too much midweek.

'I thought you said that you love me for being predictable?'

'Um ... yes, I do,' Jamie chews her lip while she thinks of a way to backtrack. 'But a bit of spontaneity would be good for you. I mean, when did you last say yes to a date with an actual man?'

'What do you mean, an actual man? It's not like I have a plastic man doll in my flat. There's no room for one, to start with. And you already know I haven't been on a date in years,' I shout back.

And now the whole bar knows that I have not been out with a guy in forever. Winning.

Jamie grabs my hand excitedly. 'I hope someone dares you to go on Tinder! You are the only twenty-something I know who is not on Tinder. You know what, this feature might even help you get over Gorgeous George, who totally needs a rename, by the way.'

'Gangrenous George?' I offer.

'Gross George.'

'Gassy George?'

'Gonorrhoea George. Nailed it,' Jamie laughs.