

Chapter 1 *A bad start to a birthday*

I wake up feeling sick. This is partly because I drank so much wine with my friends last night, but mostly because today's my thirtieth birthday.

Thirty years old. I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. How can I be thirty?

OK, OK. I know thirty isn't exactly old, but it's a lot older than twenty-nine, believe me. You see, I had a long list of things I wanted to do before I was thirty. Actually, now I've got two lists, my original list and a new one, because three weeks ago my life changed forever. But I'll tell you about that in a moment. Here are the lists:

List One

1. Travel around the world.
2. Write a bestselling book.
3. Buy a house or a flat, preferably with a garden and a sea view.
4. Give up smoking.
5. Give up headaches due to drinking too much.
6. Give up problem boyfriends.
7. Go skiing this Christmas instead of visiting my family.

List Two

1. Have a conversation with Brad Courtney lasting longer than five minutes and without my knees shaking.

2. Get through a whole day at work without annoying Brad Courtney with my careless mistakes.
3. Tell my boyfriend Barry I do not want to go out with him any more.
4. Tell Brad Courtney I love him.
5. Get married to Brad Courtney.
6. Go skiing this Christmas with Brad Courtney.
7. Have Brad Courtney's children, preferably a girl and a boy, both with his beautiful dark eyes.

By now I think you will have guessed that three weeks ago I met Brad Courtney and fell madly in love with him. You might also have guessed that he's not in love with me.

Yet.

I work for Brad, or at least I do while his assistant, June Weatherby, is in hospital. June broke her leg when she fell off a horse. I wouldn't want you to think I'm happy that she's lying in pain in her bed at the hospital, because I'm not, of course. However, I am very happy that her accident has given me the chance to work for Brad. If June's horse had been a calm sort of horse instead of a wild one called Flame, then I'd never have met Brad and I'd never have fallen in love with him.

I work for a temp agency, you see. They find temporary staff for people like Brad. I've never had a job for longer than two months, and most of them are only for two or three weeks, sometimes even one week. I like the variety, the different people and the different work. Or at least I used to. Now I think I'd be happy to stay at the Courtney Art Gallery forever.

Brad, oh Brad. I know it must be almost time to get up,

but as it's my birthday I'm allowing myself to stay in bed for a little longer to dream about him. Brad's so handsome, so clever, so important. He's also so attached to his perfect girlfriend, Tania. Life just isn't fair.

After a while I carefully open my eyes and look at the clock. Five past ten. *Five past ten!* I'm an hour late!

I jump out of bed and quickly get dressed. Brad Courtney might be handsome, clever and important, but he also has a habit of being cross. I'm in serious trouble.

Again.

In the three weeks I've been working at the art gallery, I've already been late four times. And how will I ever marry Brad and have his children if he asks me to leave my job and I never see him again?

'Shoes, shoes!' I cry as I run from the bedroom, trying to brush my hair and button up my blouse at the same time, almost tripping over as I go. The living room's untidy with the remains of the small party I held last night. There are wine glasses, wine bottles, chocolate papers . . . but no shoes.

'Think, Alex, think!' I tell myself, holding my head. Then I see one shoe underneath the sofa. *One* shoe. Where's the other one?

'Oh hell!' I go back into the bedroom with one shoe on and eventually find the other one hiding under the bed. I quickly put it on and run to the front door. There's a pile of birthday cards on the doormat and I pick them up and run to catch the bus.

I often walk to work. It takes about twenty minutes or so, but it's a nice walk through the park and then along the seafront into the centre of Brighton. I like it at all times of

the year. Last winter there was even snow on the beach! But this morning there's no time for a pleasant walk, and luckily for me there's a bus coming down the hill. I put my hand out to stop it.

'Where are you going, love?' The bus driver smiles at me. So do the other passengers. Either everyone's being very friendly, or . . . I look down at my clothes and realise my coat's buttoned up wrongly: on one side it's dragging on the floor and on the other side it's lifted up to my knees. I smile at everybody, pretending to be perfectly happy to wear my coat like that, and take a seat right at the back of the bus. Then I sigh and close my eyes. What a way to start a birthday: tired, ill, embarrassed and late for work. Still, at least I've been sent plenty of birthday cards. Unless they're all Christmas cards and everybody's forgotten my birthday!

The first one I open is a birthday card from my brother, Rob. 'I can't think of you as being thirty,' it says on the front. And inside is, 'without dying of laughter.' There's a badge attached to the front. 'Thirty today!' it says. Well, I won't be wearing that.

The card from Mum and Dad isn't much better. There's a note inside written in Mum's untidy handwriting. 'Thirty years old! I can't believe so much time has passed. It almost makes me feel old.' Fantastic.

I search the pile of envelopes to find a card that might be a bit more cheerful and recognise the handwriting of my friend Susan. 'Beauty Queen,' it says on the front of the card. That's better, even if it isn't true. I suppose I'm almost pretty, but I'm certainly not beautiful. Especially when I've got a headache and I haven't had time to put any make-up on.

I open the card. ‘Wishing you all you wish for yourself in the year ahead,’ Susan has written.

Frowning, I put the cards back into my bag. My friends have very clear ideas about what they want from life. Susan wants to be an office manager, Diana wants to save the world and Kerry wants to be a famous dancer. They all care about their work a lot. Whereas I just do a little of this and a little of that without ever getting very far.

Perhaps it’s time to change all that. Perhaps I should make up my mind to do the things on both my lists in the year ahead. Yes, why not? After all, I might not be interested in being an office manager or a dancer, but I *am* interested in Brad Courtney. Very interested. OK, so I’ve only known him for three weeks, but what difference does that make? I fell in love with him at first sight, at the job interview.

Yes. This time next year I’ll be married. To Brad. I’ll also be finishing off my bestselling book before going on a skiing holiday over Christmas. With Brad. And while we’re on holiday, we’ll try to make a baby. No, two babies: twins. A son and daughter. A little Brad and a little Bradette.

‘Weren’t you getting off here, love?’ the bus driver calls out to me kindly, and I get quickly to my feet.

‘Oh, yes! Yes, thank you.’ How can I have been so busy with my daydreams that I almost travelled past my bus stop? Aren’t I late enough already?

‘Have a good day, love,’ the driver says just before the bus doors close, and looking back I see he’s laughing.

The Courtney Art Gallery is in Ship Street, just off the seafront. When I get there it’s almost half past ten. I stop a few metres away and take a few deep breaths, then I walk