

CABIN FEVER

THE SIZZLING SECRETS OF A VIRGIN AIR HOSTESS

**MANDY SMITH
WITH NICOLA STOW**

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NERO

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you truly are my happy ending*

The names of crew members, airline security codes and crew hotels have been changed where necessary for privacy and security reasons.

CAN ANYBODY FLY A PLANE?

It's not often the captain of a Boston-bound 747-400 collapses two hours before landing, but when he does, it causes one hell of a problem, especially when you're trying to serve afternoon tea to the tip-top Gin and Tonic Brigade in Premium Economy and maintain a pristine "nothing fazes me" cabin crew smile. He went down just outside the flight deck door – in full view of passengers sitting in the first few rows – clutching his chest, eyes rolling, bald head glazed with sweat as he crumpled to his knees and then smashed face-down onto the floor.

Within seconds the cabin erupted into chaos, sparked by a half-cut woman in her thirties sporting cherry-red dyed hair, who started screaming, "Oh my God, the pilot's dead," before hyperventilating and waking up the man next to her, who'd managed to nod off after enduring almost six hours of her repetitive, drunken chat about her fear of flying and a "bastard" ex-boyfriend called Wayne.

She'd been necking red wine from the moment the seatbelt signs had gone out. I'd lost count of the number of times she'd come up to the galley asking for "just one more Merlot to settle my nerves" through magenta-stained lips and teeth. You always get one like her – citing nerves as a convenient excuse to get steamed with the free booze on board. The last glass she'd asked for was "to help with the landing", which was shortly about to happen ... with or without the captain, who it would appear had just had a heart attack in front of her.

Gasps and shrieks filled the cabin. People were clambering over seats and clogging the aisle, trying to have a good look at the captain, everybody talking over one another in panicked tones, some of them trying to help by suggesting various first-aid procedures that might work miracles and help the poorly pilot back to his feet. There were two of us working on the upper deck – me and my friend Felicity – and we swung into action at breakneck speed, flashing our bright-red MAC Ruby Wine smiles while assuring passengers, "Everything's fine."

On electronic route maps embedded in the backs of 452 passenger seats, blinking red dots edged closer to Boston. Time was of the essence. Felicity was closest to the flight deck, so she rushed to the captain's aid while I calmly, but rapidly, wheeled the trolley loaded with sandwiches, scones and rattling pots of tea and coffee back to the galley – a manoeuvre that got some passengers' backs up. "Hey, why are you taking the trolley away?" asked one bloke, who had so many miniatures lined up on his fold-down tray, it looked as though he was running a mini off-licence from his seat. "I'll have another G & T, please, love."

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, "The bar is now closed. If you wouldn't mind waiting a moment ...?"

Premium Economy is renowned for its challenging passengers – people who can't quite afford Upper Class but feel they can click their fingers and demand the world, simply because they've paid a few hundred quid more than an Economy passenger for a little extra leg room and a slightly bigger seat. That's why we nicknamed them the Gin and Tonic Brigade: they believe they deserve as many freebies as they can get their hands on, which most often results in them drinking the complimentary bar service dry.

A gradual dragging sensation indicated that our descent had begun. A patch of turbulence was causing a bit of a bump and a bang, setting the woman with the cherry-red hair off on another

breakdown. As Felicity attempted to revive our captain, I stowed the cart in the galley and used the intercom to make an emergency public address, using our special coded message. This signalled to the crew not present on the upper deck that we needed immediate assistance, including our defibrillator unit and emergency medical kits.

Seconds later our flight service manager, Jane, called on my intercom. “Defib is on its way to the upper deck,” she said. “Is there anything else you need?”

“The pilot has collapsed,” I said calmly. “Do we have anyone on board who can fly a plane?”

Not that we were about to start running *Airplane*-style up and down the aisles begging passengers to jump into the captain’s chair, but we did have a list of off-duty crew on board whom we could surreptitiously approach in the hope that one of them might be a pilot. If not, the air hostesses would need to rely on their pilot-incapacitation training and step in to help with the checklists. Technically the first officer could land the plane on autopilot, on his own. The danger was, however, if he ran into difficulty on approach, he would need another pair of hands at the controls in order to switch to manual operation.

I left the search for back-up to the guys downstairs, because at that moment my assistance was needed on the upper deck. Our captain was now shielded by a curtain so I had no idea how he was doing or how the first officer was coping without him. I straightened my neck scarf and strode confidently, with a slight bum wiggle, back up the aisle. I was fully aware that every single person in the cabin was scrutinising my demeanour with anxious eyes, making sure I was not wearing an expression that screamed, “We’re going to crash.” We know the score: watch the air hostesses, and if we’re not panicking you know everything is okay. That’s why we look so bloody cheerful all the time. Anyone who thinks being an air hostess is all about serving tea and coffee and looking pretty is kidding themselves. It takes stamina, patience, commitment ... and a whole load of acting talent.

As I was nearing the end of my aisle strut to assess my passengers’ reactions, two of our more burly stewards came bounding up the staircase and slipped behind the curtain. At the same time, a sweet elderly woman sitting in one of the aisle seats reached up and lightly tapped my arm. “Excuse me dear,” she said. “How is that poor captain? Will he be okay? Is there anything we can do to help?”

I crouched down to speak to her. She smelled of Murray mints and Palmolive soap and was wearing powder-blue stretchy trousers teamed with a floral top – a typical “Nan abroad” outfit. Her eyes were rheumy and sincere. Thankfully, they’re not all arrogant divas in Premium. Stored in the chair pouch in front of her, next to the laminated 747-400 safety instruction card and token sick bag, was a clear duty-free bag containing a cuddly toy and a giant bar of Toblerone. She was sitting inside an aluminium tube, hurtling towards New England. The plane was descending more rapidly now, bouncing through rainclouds. Very soon the seatbelt sign would illuminate, followed by the double-bell instructing crew to prepare the cabin for landing. Downstairs, our colleagues were discreetly being asked, “Do you know how to fly a plane?”

I placed my hand on the woman’s floral shoulder and said, “I’m sure he’ll be fine. This kind of thing happens all the time – he probably got out of his seat too quickly. He’ll just need a little break ... a cup of tea, maybe a little oxygen.” I pointed at the teddy. “He’s cute,” I said, in an attempt to distract her from the ongoing crisis. “Who’s that for?”

A proud smile lit up her face, instantly knocking a good ten years off her. “It’s for my grandson,” she said. “I’m going to see him for the first time. My son lives in Boston – he’s got ever such a good job – very high up.”

“Oh, how lovely,” I said. “Now, you relax and enjoy the rest of your flight. I’m going to see the captain, so I’ll tell him you were asking after him.” *Christ, little does she know what we’re dealing with here*, I thought, as I strode towards the flight deck. On a positive note, I noticed that the “nervous wreck” lush had slipped into an alcohol-induced slumber.

In the time it had taken me to park the trolley, make the call to Jane and calm the passengers, Felicity and the two stewards had managed to move the captain to the crew rest area within the flight deck. Felicity emerged from the flight deck just as I arrived at the recess.

“How is he?” I asked.

“Not good, Mandy,” she said, closing the curtain behind us. “We’ve strapped him into one of the bunk beds, attached him to the defibrillator and given him oxygen. The cabin service supervisor is monitoring him now. He’s drifting in and out of consciousness. I think he’s had a bloody heart attack.”

“Have you spoken to the first officer?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. He’s going to land on autopilot and he can use one of us to do his checklist with. I hope it’s not me. Fingers crossed there won’t be any complications. There’s nothing else he can do really. He hasn’t got a choice.”

I gave Felicity a reassuring hug. “Jane’s going through the crew list as we speak to see if we have any pilots on board,” I said. And then the curtain swished behind us and our problem was solved. There was a junior crew member from Economy, dressed in his uniform tabard, head held high as he announced: “Hi, I’m Ben. I’ve come to help land this plane.” It transpired that young Ben held a private pilot licence. And although he didn’t have nearly enough flying hours under his belt to officially land a big jet, his knowledge was sufficient for him to assist the first officer better than we could.

“What took you so long?” joked Felicity, playfully slapping Ben’s bum as he made for the flight deck door. Felicity was Miss Popularity of the airline. She had everything: looks, personality, a Jessica Rabbit figure and, above all, she was an outrageous flirt – far worse than me, and that’s saying something.

“I’ll tell you later, over a beer,” said Ben, flashing Felicity a cheeky wink before disappearing into the cockpit.

With touchdown fast approaching, Felicity relayed the good news to our passengers. She kept the message brief and light, explaining that the captain was “resting” but another pilot among our crew had taken over from him. It did the trick; her breezy announcement was greeted by a rousing cheer from the cabin. Even the wine monster, who had stirred from her booze coma, managed a half-smile. The double ding rang, the seatbelt signs were illuminated, tray tables were stowed and seats returned to their upward positions. And so began our final descent into Boston Logan International.

It wasn’t the smoothest of landings; a powerful headwind made for a lumpy drop onto the tarmac. But we’d made it. As we taxied to the stand the weary travellers again cheered and clapped, clearly relieved to be back on terra firma. Their gratitude didn’t last for long, though. Minutes later, many of them appeared to have forgotten about the mid-air drama as they leaped out of their seats and began the usual pushing and shoving to reach the overhead lockers, all desperate to exit the plane, even though the doors were still firmly locked. Some even had the audacity to moan and groan when they wouldn’t be going anywhere until medics had boarded the aircraft to tend to the captain.

“But I’m claustrophobic,” slurred the lush as her fake Hermès tumbled from her lap, its contents including a half-eaten, manky Pret A Manger sandwich, mini vibrator and a bottle of Colee

McLoughlin perfume – spilling onto the floor.

We helped the passengers off the plane as swiftly as possible, but Felicity and I remained on board for the best part of an hour, while paramedics stabilised the captain before carrying him off on a stretcher. We later found out he'd suffered a mild heart attack.

With the captain taken care of and a new pilot on his way for tomorrow's flight, it was time to relax. For the Virgin Atlantic cabin crew a trip to Boston beckoned, and I had a strong inkling it would be a messy one.

"Jeez," said Felicity, as we fell into our seats on the crew bus, "that was some flight."

"Tell me about it," I said. "Always a drama, eh."

"Here," said Felicity, delving into her flight bag and producing two vodka miniatures (courtesy of the lovely Sir Richard Branson), "Get this down your neck."

"Don't mind if I do," I giggled, grabbing one of the bottles. "Bottoms up."

There's nothing like a good stiff drink after a hard day at the office.

HELLO, DOLLY

When I cast my mind back to one summer night in 1999 – the night my then boyfriend, Neil, consumed with jealousy, booze and cocaine, beat me black and blue and left me lying in a bloody heap in a dingy stairwell – I think, *God, he did me a favour*.

Not that I enjoyed being battered: it was terrifying and humiliating. Nor do I condone domestic abuse, but it was the wake-up call I needed to turn my life around. Bizarrely, Neil knocking ten bells out of me was one of the main reasons I decided to fulfil my childhood dream of becoming an international “trolley dolly”.

Back then, I wasn't the confident, take-no-prisoners Mandy I am today. I was naive, vulnerable and a hopeful romantic, with the heart on my sleeve throbbing for all to see. At the time I was working as a planning support officer in Virgin's engineering department in Crawley, West Sussex. I'd moved to the Horsham district not long after my parents, James and Sue, had relocated there from Hartlepool where I was born and bred – for work. I'd recently graduated from the Hartlepool College of Further Education with a diploma in computer science, but there was little work available in the north-east and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do career-wise. I had no ties, so, on a whim, I accepted a six-month contract at Virgin, which is where I met Neil.

Neil was a charmer at first – the flirtatious IT consultant who found every excuse under the sun to fiddle with my computer. Tall and wiry, with Aegean-blue eyes, he had a chivalrous Milk Tray-man nature that I instantly warmed to. After several failed relationships, I thought Neil, with his gallant gestures, flowers and compliments, was a great catch. How could I not be beguiled by this seemingly decent, loving man? We dated for about five months. He was a sexual firecracker, and I swear my orgasmic yelps could be heard all over Crawley. Then, within the last few weeks of our relationship, he turned into a psychopath. The change in his demeanour was as though an ugly monster had taken over his soul; it was frightening. He became aggressive, possessive, accusatory, snapping at the tiniest thing, convinced that every other man fancied me. And I began to think I had a genetic defect, as if a warped part of my DNA had programmed me to reject all the good guys and let only the bad ones in. I actually thought I was to blame.

Neil's final outburst on that sweaty June night came after we left a Jamiroquai gig at the Brighton Centre ... and moments after I ended our relationship. I'd been looking forward to the concert for months, being a huge Jay Kay fan, but Neil vanished to buy drugs at the start of the gig, leaving me alone in the jostling throng of perspiring revellers. He reappeared near the end – halfway through “Virtual Insanity” – eyes black and vacuous, chewing his bottom lip and snaking his gangly arm around my waist. I tried to shrug him off, but there was no room for manoeuvring in the crowd, which was sweeping us from left to right, forwards and backwards. He was clinging onto me like a stranded swimmer to a buoy.

“Where the hell have you been?” I demanded, but my words were drowned by the throbbing music.

I confronted him again as we left the Brighton Centre and made our way to the NCP car park to meet Neil's mate, Darren, who was due to give us a lift home. Neil was clearly off his face, staggering and snarling at passers-by. He tried to force his hand into the back pocket of my jeans, and I flinched.

His voice was sour, cold. "What's the matter with you?"

I stopped walking. Neil carried on, muttering, "For fuck's sake," under his breath.

"I'll tell you exactly what the matter is, Neil."

He spun round, face tight with chemical rage, gnarly veins pulsating at his temples. I thought his shaven head was about to explode all over the pavement.

"Why did you bugger off and leave me? Are you that desperate for Charlie that you can't even stand and enjoy a concert with me?"

"I got lost going to the toilet. No big deal."

"What, for two-and-a-half hours? Face it, Neil, you don't want to spend any time with me late unless it's in the bedroom." Neil's excuse was pathetic, laughable. I knew his routine; it wasn't the first time he'd done a disappearing act on me to feed his habit.

He rammed his fist into a nearby ornamental lamp post, shouting, "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"It's over, Neil," I said. "I don't think we should see each other anymore. I can't handle your temper." Then I continued walking, my shadow bouncing before me on the pavement, tailed by Neil hollering obscenities. He followed me along Kings Road by the seafront, onto West Street and all the way down Russell Road and into the multi-storey car park where we'd arranged to meet Darren by his car on the third floor.

"What do you mean, 'It's over'?" said Neil, kicking the door open behind me. I ignored him and powered up the stairs, Neil's deranged yells echoing throughout the desolate building, scary and hollow. "Come back here, you bitch. I mean it, Mandy ..."

I continued climbing, taking two steps at a time, intermittently grasping the grimy handrail, head banging. Neil was now bounding up the stairs, his heavy thuds chasing the staccato snaps and scrap of my heels on the concrete until he was inches behind me. He grabbed the back of my leg. I clung to the handrail but my hand was so clammy I lost my grip.

It happened in a split second. Clamping my calf with both hands, Neil yanked my leg upwards then downwards with such force that I slammed face-down onto the steps. He dragged me all the way down the staircase, my face and body grazing against the concrete with every agonising bump. I screamed as loud as I could, but he wouldn't stop. At the bottom of the stairs, before I even had a chance to defend myself, he was on top of me, one hand clenched around my throat, the other balled into a fist, raining blows on my upper body. I was fighting for breath. My lungs felt as though they were being punctured, my head grinding into the grimy floor like a giant pestle against stone. Nothing felt or looked real. Beyond Neil's thrashing form, the door to the stairwell blurred in and out of focus, and a little voice in my head was chanting silent prayers: "Somebody, please save me."

I don't know what made Neil finally decide to end his attack. Maybe it was a sudden realisation that he actually might kill me if he continued. He released his grip. I gasped for air, tears streaming down my face. Neil knelt beside me, breathing hard through clenched teeth, wiping trickles of saliva from the corners of his mouth. Then he disappeared up the stairs and I was all alone, foetal on the floor in my jeans and Jamiroquai T-shirt, body rheumatic with pain, windpipe crushed.

A young couple found me and very kindly drove me to the nearest police station, where a sympathetic woman police constable with an agony aunt smile sat me down with a polystyrene cup of sweet tea and told me how she too had just come out of a violent relationship. "None of this is your fault. You do realise that, don't you?" she said.

I nodded, long locks of tangled brunette hair tumbling around my face, heavy with the scent of the

car park stairwell: a dirty, antiseptic mix of stale urine, rubbish bins and Dettol.

After I'd given my statement – and agreed to press charges against Neil – the police officer asked me if there was anyone I could call to pick me up. “A relative, perhaps?”

It was gone two in the morning. I had no money. I'd paid for the concert tickets, and Neil had promised to settle up with me later in the evening. I should've known I'd never see the cash. I lived with my parents, so I had no flatmate to call upon. “I guess I'll have to call me dad,” I said.

We drove home in silence. Dad was heartbroken. Even though I was twenty-five, I was still his little princess. We pulled up in the driveway. The house was in darkness. The engine hushed.

“Mam must be asleep,” I said.

Dad cupped his hands over his face and dropped them to his lap with a groan. “I'll kill him, I'll kill him, Mandy ... I keep telling you: you're too soft. Tell me where he lives.”

Once again I was crying. I couldn't think of anything else to say other than: “I'm sorry, Dad.”

He turned to look at me, his huge brown eyes filled with pain. “Come here, pet,” he said, pulling me towards him. I sobbed into his chest as he wrapped his comforting arms tightly around me, kissing the top of my refuse-stinking head.

“Don't cry, pet. I just can't bear the thought of anyone hurting you, that's all. We love you so much. There are good men out there, Mandy, men who will treat you well, how you deserve to be treated.”

It broke my heart. “I love you, Dad,” I choked.

He squeezed me tighter. “Me too, pet, me too.”

I went to work as normal the next day. Despite the heat, I wore a polo-neck jumper to hide Neil's red handprint on my throat and plastered on the slap to conceal my black eye, busted lip, scrapes and grazes. Fortunately, there was no sign of Neil at the office. *Not so bloody tough now*, I thought.

That afternoon, as I stood at the photocopier, staring blankly at the jellyfish-shaped coffee stain on the wall, my mind flashed back to the previous night. What was I thinking? How on earth did I end up with somebody like Neil? And surely there had to be more to life than gawping at these dribble tentacles. I was so lost in thought I wasn't even aware I had company.

“Hey Mands, how's it going?”

I spun round sharply, my nerves still shot. It was Jonathan, a design engineer who had just landed a job as a Virgin Atlantic steward – a career move he hoped would help him pursue his dream of becoming a pilot. He was tall, of Nordic descent with looks to match: blue eyes, soft and wavy blond hair, sparkling white teeth and the biggest feet I'd ever seen.

“Oh, Jonathan ... you made me jump.”

“Sorry, Mands.” He paused for a moment to observe my wounds. “Ouch, what happened to your face?” Jonathan was probably the nicest person in the office: caring, generous and so sincere – the kind of fella you could take home to your parents.

I looked at the floor, embarrassed. I was a walking advert for a campaign against domestic violence. I could hear the voice-over in my head: “Don't Suffer in Silence,” accompanied by images of my mashed-up face. “It's nothing,” I lied, turning my eyes back to the jellyfish.

Jonathan rested his hand on my shoulder. “C'mon, Mands, speak to me. I might be able to help.”

I glanced up at his face, noticing how incredibly handsome he was. I'd never really looked at Jonathan this way before.

“I mean it, Mands, I'm here for you.”

It was just what I needed to hear. The words avalanched from my mouth. And once I'd started, couldn't stop. I told Jonathan the whole sorry story from start to finish, barely stopping for air.

"I just feel so stupid," I concluded. "And to make matters worse, I can't stay in this job now with him here."

Jonathan shook his head. "What a bastard."

"I can't believe I didn't see it coming."

"You know what?" said Jonathan. "Virgin is hiring stewardesses. You should apply. With your look they'll snap you up. It'll get you out of this place and the perks are the same as here – plus free travel every week with your job, and lots of partying in five-star locations ... you'll have a blast."

"I might have to have some facial reconstruction first," I joked, retrieving my stack of papers from the tray. Secretly, however, I thought it was a great idea. I'd always wanted to be an air hostess, but Dad had done his utmost over the years to discourage me. "You don't want to be a trolley doll, Mandy," he'd say. "Nothing but a glorified waitress in the sky, with men leering at you. You want to get yourself a proper job." I knew Dad was only being protective of me, but I felt like there was a whole world out there to explore and I longed to be set free.

A rose flush washed over Jonathan's dimpled cheeks. "Seriously, Mands, you're stunning. I've got a spare application form. You should go for it."

So I did – I actually went for it. Not that it took much more persuasion. I had one look at the application form Jonathan delivered to my desk and was immediately seduced by the bold text at the top of the page: "You'll work hard but party even harder." I can do that, I mused. After work, I headed straight home to fill out the form in the privacy of my bedroom, glass of wine in hand. By midnight it was in the post.

Life took a turn for the better over the next few weeks. Neil returned to work and was falling over himself to worm his way back into my life, apologising profusely for his behaviour, sending me notes and flowers and blaming his "little flare-up" on drugs. "I've never hit a woman before in my life, Mandy, honest," he said. As far as I was concerned, he could grovel until the bloody cows came home. My mind was firmly made up: no more bad guys for Mandy Smith. In fact, I'd told myself I'd stay clear of all men for a while. But there was one guy who was proving hard to resist: Jonathan.

It happened quickly, during Jonathan's final days at the office before he started his training course. Since I'd confided in him, he'd become my rock: I felt as though I could tell him anything. The wasn't a single aspect of his personality I disliked. He was the epitome of a gentleman. Attentive, caring and courtly, he made me feel good about myself – and wanted. At first the flirting was quite subtle: lots of accidental-on-purpose hand touching, coincidental yet convenient meetings in the stationery cupboard, a few sexual innuendos here and there. We got on spectacularly, even finishing each other's sentences. The build-up was electrifying. I'd gone right off my food, which allowed me to resurrect a slinky Miss Selfridge pencil skirt I'd bought months ago but never worn. I was wearing that skirt the night Jonathan first kissed me, in a cosy corner of a smoky bar down the Lanes in Brighton, as Tracy Chapman's "Baby Can I Hold You" played on the jukebox and life freeze-framed around us.

Once again I was in a relationship. Only this time, it felt solid, secure. It was impossible not to fall in love with Jonathan. He was adorable. I waited a while before I slept with him ... at least a couple of months. But, believe me, once we started, we couldn't stop. Location was a slight problem; Jonathan also lived with his parents, so our romps were confined to quickies in our bedrooms and contorted s

on the back seat of Jonathan's little silver S-reg Renault, normally with a seatbelt clip ramming my bum or a window winder nudging the back of my head.

Our first comfortable encounter happened in my bedroom while my parents were away on holiday. "I want to make love to you, Mands," Jonathan said, a hint of coyness creeping into his voice.

It was a Friday evening, after a scorcher of a day. Even then, as we lay on the bed by the open window, legs braided, kissing and pawing away at each other, I could feel the heat pouring in, bringing scents of lavender, cut grass and freshly lit barbeques.

I reached down to unzip Jonathan's trousers. *Make love?* That was an expression I hadn't heard in a long while. I wasn't quite sure how to respond. "Me too ... to you, I mean – not to myself."

He laughed. "Take off your dress."

We tore off our clothes and re-conjoined on the bed, skin warm and damp, pulses throbbing.

Jonathan rolled on top of me. "You're beautiful," he said, between urgent kisses.

I grabbed his bum and gave it a playful slap as he was grinding against me. "I want you inside me," I whispered.

Jonathan pulled away, slithered between my legs and sat back on his knees. "Not just yet," he said, parting my legs. He pulled me up onto his knees, pushing my thighs even further apart. "Beautiful," he repeated. "I want to make you come."

I closed my eyes, tilted my hips and revelled in the sensation of Jonathan's fingers, circling, tickling until my legs trembled and I came in ripples. That was most certainly one of Jonathan's finest talents; he was extremely good with his hands.

A proud smile spread across Jonathan's face. He reached over to the bedside table for a condom. "Did you enjoy that?" he said, rolling on the condom.

"God, yeah." I was still recovering.

He stretched out on top of me and eased into me, panting heavily as his strokes gained velocity and vigour. I came again, moaning loudly. Outside I could hear our neighbours' voices, which meant they could probably hear me, but I couldn't stop myself. Then, as the final wave crashed through me, Jonathan joined in, a crescendo of, "Ah, ah, ah," as he came in a series of mini convulsions.

We were so loved-up; I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt so happy. The following morning, after more sex, someone else put a smile on my face: the postman. It was the letter I'd been waiting for – from Virgin Atlantic. The interview letter.

I raced up the stairs squealing, clutching the piece of paper. "I've done it, I've done it – they want to meet me. They actually want to meet me."

I was dancing around the bedroom like a mad woman while Jonathan sat up in bed, laughing. I couldn't think straight for the excitement. *What shall I wear?* I thought, already rummaging in my wardrobe and sending a clothes storm in Jonathan's direction as I tossed various outfits over my shoulder.

"Come here, you gorgeous, funny thing."

I turned around to find Jonathan with a pair of my trousers draped over his head. I made for the bed. "Seriously, though, Jonathan. Do you think I have a chance? What if I mess it up and they don't pick me? This opportunity may never happen again and I'll be stuck in engineering with stalker boy for the rest of my life and ..."

Jonathan grabbed my hand and pulled me onto him. "Of course they'll pick you. They'd be crazy not to."

to.”

Bless him, he was so sweet; if I hadn't felt so shagged out I would have gone for round three. “Thanks, Jonathan,” I said, curling up beside him.

“For what?”

“For being here for me.”

I meant every word. At that moment, I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

Despite doing my homework on the Virgin recruitment process, and receiving scores of valuable tips from Jonathan and other staff in the know, I still couldn't contain my nerves on the day of my interview. My legs were hollow, my palms were sweaty and I swear the entire cast of *Riverdance* was performing in my stomach. After much humming and hawing over what to wear, I'd settled on a smart black suit with a sensible just-below-the-knee skirt and black court shoes with a moderate heel. I didn't like wearing tights but I made an exception on this occasion, as I'd been warned by our seasoned hostie that Virgin Atlantic didn't like bare legs. My hair was folded up in a sophisticated French pleat, and my lips and nails painted crimson.

The first part of the interview – the group interview – was held in a basic training room at Virgin Atlantic's HR offices in Crawley town centre. I was among a crowd of about twenty girls who, like me, were all desperate to shine that day. Our interviewing panel consisted of three immaculately groomed, beautiful women – one petite and blonde, the other two willowy brunettes – all dressed in the iconic Virgin uniform. They were tough cookies alright.

“Not all of you will be successful today,” said the blonde. “But try not to be too despondent if you're not chosen this time. It's not easy – some people attend several interviews.”

“Take Jack, for example,” added one of the brunettes, holding up a photograph of a jovial looking guy with heavily gelled black hair. “Jack was selected after his fifth interview. He was so determined.”

She made it sound like we were auditioning for a talent show. I glanced around the room at my fellow interviewees, noting their expressions, their eager smiles and approving nods as Jack's story was relayed.

“He's doing brilliantly now,” concluded the blonde.

Poor Jack. You have to wait six months after an unsuccessful interview before you can reapply, so he must have been attending interviews for years.

After the pep talk, it was over to us. One by one, we were asked to introduce ourselves to the group and explain why we wanted to become air hostesses for Virgin Atlantic. Some of the girls blurted out the wrong answer: “Because I want to travel the world.” Of course they did – I did too, but I knew that definitely wasn't the response the panel was looking for. They didn't want to hire people who just wanted to go globetrotting on Virgin's budget. So I kept my reply to a short, sweet, “I love working in a customer-service based environment, with new challenges every day.”

I also noticed that some of the girls had missed the point on the dress code. One of them, who introduced herself as Michelle from Croydon, was sporting a shiny polyester suit in the most luminous shade of turquoise, the skirt falling a good few inches above her bare knees. She wore a mask of bright orange foundation that clashed with the turquoise and ended in a sharp line around her jaw. She looked like a tropical cocktail. I did feel sorry for her though – she was so keen and bubbly.

Our next exercise was to form into small groups and compose a jingle for Virgin to the tune of a nursery rhyme. We were given newspaper articles from which we had to cut out sections of text

compile the lyrics, and each group was given a different tune. As we worked away the interviewees walked around the room, scribbling on notepads, scrutinising our behaviour. There were a few domineering characters; a girl in my group was trying to take over the task, but I adopted a more affable, helpful approach, since I knew they were looking for team players.

At lunchtime we learned our fate. The tension in the air was so thick I could almost hear a drum roll. The blonde woman delivered the news. "If I call out your name I'd like you to stay behind. Those whose names I don't call out, I'm sorry, but you haven't been successful this time."

She paused for effect – too long for my liking – hugging a clipboard to her perfect boob. Meanwhile, I was convinced my name wasn't on that list and was already planning my journey home. "Amanda Smith."

I was stunned. I'd made it through to the next round ... I was one of the four names called out. That was fucking fantastic. I watched the other interviewees leave the room, flashing faux smiles, no doubt asking themselves, "Will I be the next Jack?"

I gave it my best shot during the afternoon session. After two maths exams, incorporating questions on currency conversion and time zones, I was led into a small office for a one-to-one interview with one of the brunettes. This was actually a lot easier than the group interview, because I no longer had to worry about outshining a room full of beautiful girls. Somehow, my nerves had become overshadowed by a sudden burst of confidence, positivity and determination. As far as I was concerned, that job was mine. I smiled, maintained eye contact and exuded a can-do attitude as I answered every question fired at me.

"Right then, Amanda," said the brunette at the end of the interview, "Let's get you weighed and measured." Back then we were also asked to submit two photographs with our application – a head-and-shoulders shot, and one full-length snap. Thankfully my height and weight matched the figures I stated on my application. A firm handshake and a "we'll be in touch" later, and I was out of there.

It was the most agonising, drawn-out two weeks of my life. Every morning when I heard the post arrive, I'd go charging down the stairs like a maniac, hoping to find the letter that would change my life. When it did eventually arrive I had to pinch myself when I read it, as it seemed so surreal: I'd been accepted. I was going to be a Virgin Atlantic air hostess. The letter I was holding in my trembling hand was my passport out of Horsham, a chance to escape from the dreary nine to five – and most importantly, I'd finally be away from Neil. He had still been skulking around at work, unable to accept that I was now with Jonathan. The police inquiry was no further advanced but, somehow, Neil wasn't too bothered anymore. My revenge was my happiness, my success, and whatever misery had come before was now securely filed away in a far recess of my mind.

It was a double celebration, since my good news coincided with Jonathan passing his cabin crew course – and his subsequent Wings Ceremony at Richard Branson's annual summer party. A weekend of sun, sex, alcohol and generally having the time of our lives was most definitely on the cards.

I'd met Richard Branson a few times in the past on his occasional visits to the engineering department. He was a good boss: fun, personable, fair and renowned for treating his staff well. His generosity knew no bounds; his summer party was, by far, the most lavish do I've ever been to. Held at his then home in the quaint Oxfordshire village of Kidlington, it was like entering a magical kingdom. No expense was spared, with activities such as quad biking, hot air ballooning, go karting and riverboating available. They even had an inflatable quasar arena. There were live bands on a huge centre stage and all the food and drink you could possibly imagine, from every corner of the globe.

Jonathan's Wings Ceremony took place outside Richard's sprawling mansion, on a small stage erected alongside his luxurious swimming pool. Watching Jonathan and his fellow new recruits receive their wings filled me with pride. They all looked so beautiful and polished in their uniforms. It was like being on a movie set. After the ceremony people were stripping off and diving into the pool. Richard was doing his habitual shake-and-spray-the-fancy-champagne-over-everyone routine, the girls pretending to be horrified that the spray had made their shirts see-through. There was a wild yet glamorous vibe among the crowd. Everyone was so sociable and cheery and confident. I was entering a whole new world – a world I knew I was just going to love.

I guzzled champagne and cocktails and numerous vodka Redbulls. I whizzed around on the quad bikes like a crazy person and whipped Jonathan's arse at quasar. That night Richard joined us all for singalong by the campfire. A bevy of gorgeous trolley dollies fawned over him as he attempted to play Oasis riffs on a guitar, consistently stopping and starting as his fingers struggled to find the right chords. It was amusing, in an endearing sense, to see a multi-billionaire business tycoon stumbling halfway through a version of "Wonderwall". He was still entertaining his guests when Jonathan and I retired to our tent in the early hours, staggering like two drunks in a three-legged race.

Beneath the canvas we ripped off our clothes, limbs causing the tent walls to bulge as we tumbled around. I was in one of those take-me-now moods. Fortunately, so was Jonathan. No foreplay, just straight down to business. Admittedly a two-man tent isn't the ideal place for rough-and-ready sex but we seemed to manage just fine, performing all kinds of acrobatics. Heavens knows what it must have looked – and sounded – like from the outside, though. At one point we were going for it with such vigour I thought the tent was going to uproot and collapse. It was one of those drunken romps the kind that starts out with such enthusiasm and passion, and ends with you both crashing into semi-comas halfway through, because you were far too drunk.

The birds woke me up. It sounded as though they were having a good old gossip. Yes, I decided, I'm still pissed. The metal zip of the sleeping bag nibbled icily at my skin and, Christ almighty, I was really bursting for a wee. I nudged Jonathan. "Wake up," I urged.

He stirred, blinking awake with a sleepy moan. "Morning, beautiful."

I giggled, adding to my bladder agony. "Jonathan, I need a wee. I'm absolutely busting for a wee and I'm in a tent. Naked."

"Just go outside," he yawned, rolling onto his side.

It didn't even occur to me to put my clothes on. "Okay," I said, "come and help me." I unzipped the tent door and turned around to face Jonathan.

"What do you want me to do?" he said, wriggling free from the sleeping bag.

I crouched by the door. "Just hold my hands and don't let go."

So Jonathan held my hands while I stuck my bare bum out the tent door and urinated all over our little campfire. Anybody could have walked by and seen my naked arse sticking out the tent. But when you've got to go, you've got to go. And besides, I figured a bit of mooning would seem relatively tame to my uninhibited flying colleagues.

Who cares if they've seen my bum? I thought, as I fell back into the tent giggling. Although, in retrospect, I blame the vodka Redbulls.

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