

# PART ONE

The body is deeper than the soul and its secrets  
inscrutable.

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# I

Every self-respecting young woman needs two essentials to navigate the sea of life. I learned this lesson young. At the age of twelve I went to boarding school, where I quickly learned a survival strategy that was dependent on copious amounts of chocolate and a pair of tatty black patent stilettos from Oxfam. The chocolate provided a sedative cushion against the brutal reality of life away from home in an ocean of teenagers, while the high heels convinced the proprietor of the local off-licence that I was old enough to purchase the alcohol and cigarettes that proved vital bartering tools in a world where prefects charged punitive penalties for the slightest misdemeanour.

There's a whole list of luxuries that sweeten life's taste: hair straighteners, black eyeliner, sex, a girlfriend who can be relied upon to appear with a box of tissues and a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc in moments of high stress – to mention just a few. But without chocolate and high heels, I imagine the world itself would stop turning. I don't know. I've never tried to live without them.

Today boarding school is a distant memory, obscured by the mists of time. But I'm still tottering in high heels. This time, they're not second-hand black patent stilettos, though. This time, they're a pair of impossibly high platforms made of navy-blue silk. And the tottering is not

because I'm a stiletto-virgin carrying too many bottles of cheap German Riesling. This time, the stumbling gait is because I've spent the evening drinking my way through an expensive bottle of New Zealand Sauvignon at a charity fashion show on the rooftop of one of Kensington's posh clubs.

The event had been a mecca for rich kids, offspring of the great and the good, jumping on the philanthropy bandwagon and strutting their stuff for a noble cause while an assortment of hacks and hangers-on stood around and engaged in less noble pursuits – namely, drinking and smoking. These were the halcyon days before the smoking ban compromised all paens to hedonism.

My taxi vomited me into the thin night air outside my fashionable Marylebone address just after midnight. Now I'm unsteadily making my way towards the front door of my pied-à-terre. I fumble around for my key. My clutch bag has become a veritable cavern hiding a multitude of sins – but not my front-door key, it seems. Eventually, I find it. I try to fit it in the lock – without success. I crouch down until my face is inches from the door so I can see what I'm doing more clearly.

Suddenly it's opened.

I'm level with my boyfriend's crotch – a scenario whose potential is not lost on him.

I look up. Dusky blond hair. Iridescent blue eyes. A flicker of a smile crossing a face that is bending towards me. Edward Montgomery effortlessly scoops me up into his arms, kicking the door shut behind us.

He strides through the flat – a homage to minimalism,

beige, cream and Bang & Olufsen – and tosses me on to the immaculate bed. Smiling eyes. Laughing lips hungrily searching for mine. He undoes his belt with one hand and pulls up my baby-pink mandarin dress with the other. He's in a hurry. I gasp involuntarily as I feel him inside me, taking me. He moves fast, sighs in my ear. I can't keep up. My initial excitement gives way to inertia, the fog of inebriation suffocating my heavy limbs.

'Ah,' he sighs.

'Um,' I say, willing myself to join in.

'Yes,' he whispers. 'Baby,' he says, more urgently now.

It's no use. It never is. I lie back and replay the evening in my head.

Lying in bed half an hour later, he sports what I believe is called a post-coital glow while I nurse a consolatory cup of tea and a couple of blocks of Green & Black's.

'Are you sure you don't want a coffee?' Edward had asked wryly as he sauntered off to the kitchen while I admired his taut, naked physique.

I'm telling him about my evening; he's half listening.

'Prince Harry turned up halfway through the catwalk show,' I say. 'Everyone stopped talking and turned to watch him walk to the VIP section. The Ladies was full of screaming debs who'd worked themselves up into a complete frenzy. I've never seen anything like it: very uncool star-fucking,' I pronounce with derision.

Edward doesn't respond. Instead, he picks up a book I'm reading. A simple card pamphlet slips off the top of it; he catches it during its journey to the floor. On the front is a picture of a filthy teenager wearing a brightly coloured

square hat and a wide smile, and holding a lamb in the crook of her arm.

‘Discover Peru, the “land of smiles”,’ he reads out loud, raising an eyebrow. ‘I thought Thailand was the land of smiles,’ he adds sarcastically.

He turns the leaflet over and studies the blurred photo of a stout, middle-aged woman with dark skin, dishevelled black hair and an even broader smile than the young girl’s. Then, for the first time in the conversation, he turns to face me.

‘Are you *still* thinking about this?’ he challenges.

‘It’s an idea,’ I shrug defensively.

‘It’s an idea!’ he guffaws. ‘How on earth would you manage in the Third World, Anna?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I hiss, grabbing the offending flier.

His words cut me dead after the intimacy we’ve just shared.

‘Darling,’ he begins, adopting the supercilious tone of voice parents reserve for petulant children, ‘London is your home. You interview celebrities for one of the highest-selling newspapers in the country. Most evenings you’re out at a party or a restaurant opening. You have expensive tastes . . .’ He pauses. ‘You never even did the gap-year backpacking thing.’

I smile, remembering turning down the opportunity to go InterRailing around Eastern Europe with four Cambridge chums during our first summer vac in favour of swanning around Saint-Tropez instead.

‘Peru is primitive and dirty,’ he snorts. ‘God alone knows what diseases that child has! You wouldn’t even be

going with friends,' he adds. 'It would just be you and this Gabby woman – and you don't know her properly. *I* don't know her properly either.'

In this, Edward has a point.

Gabby Barazani, a forty-something psychologist with a successful practice on Harley Street, is in the throes of a midlife crisis. Disillusioned with life in the Great Smoke, she's decided that she wants to organize yoga trips to her native Peru instead. Unfortunately, yoga and South America aren't immediately obvious bedfellows, and the inaugural trip has so far resulted in a single booking – mine. She's asked me if I'd like to go trekking with her for three weeks instead and, on an impulse, I've told her I'll think about it – even though we've only met each other twice.

'Anyway, I thought you were going to visit Hels at that spa in India,' Edward is saying.

'I was,' I reply defensively.

'So, why are you now planning on heading to the other side of the world? Hels is one of your best friends, and you haven't seen her since she left London on sabbatical six months ago.'

'I don't know,' I shrug. 'The leaflet caught my eye . . .' I pause. 'I want to do something different, I suppose.'

Suddenly I catch sight of a huge black shadow above my head.

'Ugh!' I squeal, jumping out of bed and spilling tea everywhere.

'What?' Edward asks. 'What is it?'

'There's a spider!' I scream.

He raises his eyes heavenwards, nonchalantly reaches

up and grabs the offending creature in his palms.

‘See what I mean?’ he says, when he’s thrown the arachnid out of the window, I’ve changed the soaking duvet cover and we’re finally back in bed.

‘Look, I need a break, Edward,’ I retort. ‘I’ve burned out –’

‘Burned out?’ he sneers. ‘Where *do* you get this crap, Anna? You’ve read too many of those self-help books.’

‘I’ve read *one* on my doctor’s advice,’ I reply. ‘The diet he put me on to try and sort out this candida hasn’t worked, so he’s told me I need a break,’ I repeat. ‘And he’s right, Edward. I can’t remember the last time I woke up feeling well and enthusiastic, as opposed to exhausted and stressed and with these dreadful tummy cramps all the time. My life’s all work, work, work – and I’m only twenty-nine. I can’t face another thirty years like this.’

‘You have a great life, Anna,’ Edward scoffs. ‘You love your job, you’re bloody good at it, and we have a great relationship. What more could you want? A lot of your problem is in here.’ He taps the side of his head.

I look at him incredulously, momentarily stunned into silence.

He doesn’t notice.

‘One thing’s for sure,’ he continues. ‘Slumming it in some God-awful Peruvian backwater isn’t going to do you any favours.’ He speaks with authority.

Finally, I find my voice.

‘Well, I’ve got to do *something*, Edward,’ I retort. ‘I’m not well and I can’t believe it’s my destiny to feel like this for the rest of my life.’

He looks at me. Raises an eyebrow.

‘Destiny?’ His laugh is hollow. ‘Destiny is dead, Anna. You’re in control of your life, not some imaginary guy with a grey beard upstairs . . .’ He pauses. ‘Next you’re going to tell me you’re searching for some kind of spiritual epiphany.’ He sighs. ‘It’s the twenty-first century, Anna, not the bloody Dark Ages.’

We glare at each other for a while. Edward breaks the silence.

‘What you need is a bit of pampering,’ he announces airily. ‘We should go on holiday for a couple of weeks. That’ll sort you out.’

‘We *are* going on holiday. But you can’t take any time off until Christmas.’

‘Can’t you wait?’ he presses.

I shake my head. ‘No. Christmas is over six months away. I need to do something sooner. And I need more than a two-week holiday. I can’t go on like this.’

‘Oh whatever, Anna,’ he mutters in exasperation, rolling over and ending our tête-à-tête preemptorily.

Edward’s high-handedness has had the effect of pissing me off and sobering me up, with the result that now I can’t sleep. I lie on my back and stare at the ceiling. My mind begins sifting through our conversation. It’s true, I have a great life. It’s the life I’ve always wanted – the life I thought would make me happy.

I think back to myself at the tender age of twelve. At the same time as I pioneered my stiletto and chocolate mantra, I also decided that happiness would be living in London with a boyfriend blessed with good looks, intelligence and the Midas touch. A man who earned a cool £500k a year doing a job that left ample spare time for

jet-setting, shopping and shagging would be the perfect partner for the hotshot journalist I was set to become. Edward isn't a shopping aficionado, but experience has taught me that you can't expect everything in one package. And besides, he ticks all the other boxes.

What I wasn't to know at twelve, however, was that those boxes come at a price. And I'm no longer sure it's a price worth paying.

Edward flings his arm over to my side of the bed, making me jump. He's now sprawled across the mattress. And he's snoring. Loudly.

As I roll over in exasperation, my thoughts drift to our first jaunt abroad together – a long weekend in Rome. No visit to the Eternal City is complete without a visit to St Peter's, and no visit to St Peter's is complete without a few minutes in the presence of Michelangelo's beautiful Pietà. In my mind's eye I hold the image of Mary's alluringly gentle dignity as she cradles her crucified son in her arms. The sculpture is one of my favourite works of art, and its quiet poise moves me to tears every time I stand in front of it. Even now, years later, I cringe with embarrassment as I remember Edward's response to my emotion. Horrified, he'd started sniggering into his hand. I hug my knees to my tummy as I remember how hurt I was.

It dawns on me that I've hidden my true feelings from Edward ever since, burying my emotions and my romantic nature in places where he won't find them. Unfortunately, it's a strategy that no longer seems to be working. Sacrificing a huge part of who I am for the greater good of our relationship and our 'successful' life isn't feeding me any more. Instead, I just feel bereft,

like an empty eggshell that's somehow misplaced its yolk, its reason for being.

My thoughts drift to our perfunctory sex earlier this evening. Edward's the proud possessor of the highest libido I've ever come across. During our first few weeks together, this was a thrilling discovery and I couldn't get enough of my new lover. But we've been together for two years now and I'm craving some variety, some intimacy. Edward's a head-turner – with the confidence that comes from knowing it – and he's yet to realize the importance of technique, let alone actually learn some.

My sigh becomes a smile as I turn over to face him. Gabby's leaflet wasn't the only flier I'd picked up at my yoga studio a few days ago. An advert for a tantra workshop promising to improve sexual intimacy between couples had also caught my eye. In a moment of naive optimism, I'd popped one in my handbag. But I'd thrown it away once I got home. Trying to talk to Edward about our sex life is impossible. My boyfriend isn't blessed with the ability to listen, and his libido is more than matched by his stubbornness. Edward can't take being contradicted. And I'm not up for yet another fight. Secretly I'm scared that once we open that particular Pandora's box, we won't have anywhere else to go. And my relationship with Edward and his certainty about everything and everyone is the glue that's holding my life in London together.

Without that glue – well, I don't want to think about it.

It dawns on me that Edward's certainty is the reason he's so anti-Peru. In entertaining the possibility of taking some time out – especially time out in the company of someone he doesn't know – I'm making a decision for

myself without him. I'm refusing to be controlled by his ideas. Worse still, I'm making an emotional choice, not a rational one – something Edward will never understand. Or respect.

To tell the truth, I don't know how I feel about it either. My approach to life has always been responsible and measured, and I've never entertained the idea of doing something on a whim before. But there's something utterly compelling about the idea of hitting the pause button on my busy, unsatisfying life and rediscovering my *joie de vivre*. About turning my back on the status quo and going somewhere completely different for a decent amount of time with someone new – as opposed to spending a couple of weeks in yet another plush but soulless hotel with a dear friend. About opting for surgery to clear the malaise that's infected me – as opposed to grabbing a plaster and hoping that it will do.

Thoughts continue to play around my head and so, grabbing my book, I decide to get up and make a pot of lapsang souchong. Edward, who is always in a rush, can't understand my love of a loose-leaf tea. He dismisses it as a waste of time. But Edward can't distinguish between Taylors of Harrogate's Afternoon Darjeeling and bog-standard PG Tips. Alone in my kitchen in the early hours, I indulge my love of the tea-making ritual, waiting patiently until the steaming water has the appearance of molten molasses before pouring myself a cup. I'm carrying it into the sitting room, when I stop myself. Smiling, I turn tail and head into the spare bedroom. Three bright-yellow Selfridges bags stand in a neat line behind the door. I eagerly haul out of their crisp papery depths a new dress,

a pair of thigh-high boots and a pair of red patent stilettos. I'd had a particularly ferocious attack of the butterflies and the blues earlier that morning, and a shopping spree had been my self-prescribed 'pick-me-up'. I'd hidden my purchases from Edward in an effort to avoid the 'Why are you such a compulsive shopper?' conversation.

I try on the shoes and admire their ability to transform my kimono into a thing of elegance, bathing in that rush of excitement known to any woman who has ever bought a pair of stilettos with a hefty price tag. Shoes are my self-help bible of choice. And they're foolproof. My confidence has taken a beating from Edward's put-downs and cynical questioning. The stilettos restore my self-belief. Instantly. By the time I snuggle up in the spare bed with my book, my lapsang souchong and the rest of the chocolate, all is once again right with the world.