

CABIN FEVER

THE SIZZLING SECRETS OF A
VIRGIN AIR HOSTESS

MANDY SMITH
WITH NICOLA STOW

*To my darling husband, Glenn,
you truly are my happy ending*

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

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PROLOGUE

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 tipsy 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 then smashed facedown 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 Woo 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 ding 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. It 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 PA 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 told 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 Coleen 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.

CHAPTER ONE

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 arms 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 stay 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 lately 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, heart banging. Neil was now bounding up the stairs, his heavy thuds chasing the staccato snaps and scrapes 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 dribbled 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, I 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 looks 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 dolly, 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 steer 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. There 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 sex 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 barbecues.

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."

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 one 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 it definitely wasn’t the response the panel was looking for. They didn’t want to hire people who just wanted to 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 to compile the lyrics, and each group was given a different tune. As we worked away the interviewers 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 boobs. 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. This 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 out-shining 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’d 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, I 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 magic 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 Red-bulls. 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 a 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 his way 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.

CHAPTER TWO

AB INITIO

The noise was deafening: the sound of sheer terror in the face of death. People were screaming and sobbing and wheezing and choking. Some chanted desperate prayers. There were babies wailing, overhead lockers smashing open and items crashing around the cabin. Outside the air whined murderously past, ascending to an alarming pitch.

This was the sound of a Boeing 747, hurtling, like a missile, into the Atlantic Ocean.

The cabin was in darkness except for the strips of light on the gangway floor and the green glow from the emergency exit signs overhead. The only passengers vaguely visible were the ones sitting in the row facing me – a shaky line of deathly white faces searching my own for reassurance as we dropped from the sky. One woman hyperventilated and passed out in her seat. The man next to her shook uncontrollably, whimpering, “Please God, no.” The aircraft shook and rattled furiously in the assault. Over the horrific noise the pilot announced: “Brace, brace,” and even though I knew this meant we were thirty seconds from impact and the chances of survival were slim, I had to remain calm.

I pulled my seatbelt as tight and low as it would go, sat on my hands, pushed my head into the back of my seat, into the rear-facing brace position, and shouted my commands: “Heads down, feet back, heads down, feet back.” There’s a good reason for pushing your feet backwards: if you were to sit normally, your shin bones would shoot up through your knees on impact. I glanced across at my colleague

Angela, who was now also hollering, “Heads down, feet back,” in synch with me.

The plane smacked violently into the sea, skidding and crashing through the waves. I could hear the water assailing the fuselage, ripping away the underside of the plane. The aircraft crashed across the sea for miles before coming to a shuddering halt. I unclipped my harness, grabbed the intercom and shouted over the PA: “This is an emergency, evacuate, evacuate.”

Pandemonium spread through the cabin as passengers charged from their seats and fought their way to the emergency exit in the dark, screaming and tripping over one another. The woman in the front row, who had passed out but since recovered, fainted again as she tried to stand up, landing in a heap by my feet. The praying man was now on my shoulder, sobbing, “Please do something, you have to help us, please get us out of here.” I shoved him to one side and peered out of the emergency exit porthole window. I couldn’t see any flames. “Open the door,” yelled the praying man.

I lifted the handle, swung open the door and immediately pulled the red tag to inflate the slide-raft. It was my job to get everyone onto the raft safely – and ensure no one had any sharp objects. Just one tiny stab of a heel would puncture the inflatable raft. People were climbing over me as I bent down to move the unconscious woman on the floor. I grabbed at the nearest passengers and shouted at two of them to take her with them. “You and you: grab her and take her to the end of the raft with you.” One man cupped her shoulders with his arms and dragged her to the door, while the other grabbed her feet, pushing and shoving her as they shuffled along. *Better unconscious than dead*, I thought. In seconds the plane could break up or fill with water. We had precious little time. As Angela helped the remaining passengers off the plane, I carried out a final check of the cabin. Shining my torch down the aisle, I spotted an arm poking out from behind one of the aisle seats. “We’ve got a casualty,” I shouted, making my way down the aisle, kicking bags and other debris aside. Angela followed. It was a woman, out for the count, still strapped into her seat. I unbuckled her.

“We’ll have to carry her,” I said, hooking my arms beneath the limp woman’s armpits and heaving her upwards. “I’ll get her legs,” said Angela, pulling off the passenger’s shoes. I could hear the ocean roaring and

hammering against metal as we half-dragged, half-carried the woman to the emergency exit and eased her out onto the raft. Angela handed her to the passengers at the end of the raft, while I gathered all the provisions I could find – bottles of water, food, first-aid kit. Then, satisfied there was no one left on board, I could leave the aircraft. I threw the supplementary survival kit onto the chute and pulled the hooked knife from a pocket within the slide for my final task: cutting the raft free from the plane. Kneeling at the aircraft end of the raft, Angela and I unclipped the flap that was hiding the shoelace-woven rope keeping us attached to the sinking plane. I pulled at the cords as quickly as I could, my training kicking in and autopilot taking over – this was the hardest part, remembering which raft you were on – then at last we were separated. I could cut through the cord, and, just as the slide-raft detached itself, a monstrous yawning sound, followed by the creak of tearing metal, filled the air as the fuselage broke in half.

“So, how do you think Mandy did there?” said our Safety Emergency Procedure (SEP) instructor, Julie, as I took my position on the raft. The crowd replied with an animated round of applause.

Of course, this wasn't a real crash, but I had just passed the commands part of my SEP exam with flying colours. We were at the Rig – a makeshift plane in a warehouse at Gatwick Airport. The SEP exam is deliberately tough, to weed out any people who can't handle the pressure. Inside the Rig, sound effects are blasted through amps and footage is played on monitors behind the windows. It's very dramatic and you don't have a clue what kind of scenario is going to be thrown at you. Just before the ditching-in-water incident I'd also dealt with an engine fire. Smoke had filled the cabin, flames raged at the windows and I was responsible for getting everyone off the plane – even though the fire was blocking two of the exits. You have 4.3 minutes to evacuate in an aircraft fire, even when wearing a protective smoke hood. After that, it becomes an inferno. The plastic fixtures and fittings are also extremely toxic once they start burning, and you can die from inhalation alone.

I was one week into my Ab Initio training course, and already I felt overwhelmed by the information overload. There was so much to learn, and we were sitting exams nearly every day. As for the people I was

meeting: I've never encountered so many drama queens in my life. The passengers on board my ditching exercise were all fellow students, and you won't find a more over-the-top group of actors than a classroom full of trainee Virgin cabin crew. There were some real divas. The first woman to faint during my crash scenario was Sarah, a stage-school graduate still waiting to see her name up in lights. Petite and proportionately curvy, with wavy blonde hair and American cheerleader looks, she demanded constant attention, her every gesture wildly theatrical. Then there was Ruth, the woman Angela and I had to carry off the plane, a part-time Posh Spice lookalike who had also been to drama school but was less vocal about it than Sarah. The third diva in the group – the praying man in the front row – was Scott, a flamboyant queen with greased-back black hair. Above all, he was a proper gobshite – always stirring and winding people up.

Angela was the person I really bonded with during the six-week course. Unlike the prima donnas, she was fairly timid for an air hostess in the making, but a good laugh all the same. She had a mane of glossy black hair, which she wore scraped back into a neat bun, and welcoming coffee-coloured eyes.

In addition to my new workmates, I'd also acquired some housemates. About ten days before my course started I moved into a house in Horley – literally a stone's throw away from the Flight Centre – with three other Virgin employees: Becky, an in-flight beauty therapist and bitch from hell; Jeremy, a senior air steward who spoke with a German accent even though he wasn't German and racked up huge phone bills calling boy bondage chat lines; and Karen, a Virgin Holidays brochure writer who was really sweet but rarely came out of her room.

Our house – a pebble-dashed semi – was like a seventies paradise inside, with woodchip wallpaper, Artex ceilings, garish patterned carpets and a strong avocado-green theme throughout. I was given a large room on the ground floor with patio doors leading out to a small weed-infested back garden. Most of the time I had the place to myself because everybody else was away on work trips. You sure knew about it if Becky was around, though. Territorial and possessive, she liked to think she was head of the household. I'll never forget her guided tour of my new abode.

“TV is mine, the remote control is mine, that coffee table and that magazine is mine. Lamp, candles, potpourri – and the bowl it’s in – all mine,” she’d said, gesturing at the items one by one with sharp jabs of a perfectly manicured hand. “I’m in charge of the bills and you’ll pay me your share – by cash or cheque, your choice.”

Becky was one of those girls who looked prettier than she actually was, because she knew every beauty trick in the book. Her make-up was always immaculate, eyebrows perfectly shaped and her red-brown hair styled in a sophisticated Meg Ryan-esque shaggy bob. Becky was also the proud owner of a spanking new red MX5 sports car. There were a number of dollies driving red MX5s at that time, the standing joke being they were post-coital thank-you presents from Richard Branson. We used to love winding Becky up over this.

I was surrounded by glamour. The Flight Centre was also used to coordinate staff travel and as a check-in point for Virgin crew flying out of Gatwick, so every day we’d see staff coming and going, looking so sleek in their uniforms, the girls gliding effortlessly in heels like models on a catwalk, impeccably made-up, not a hair out of place. Grooming rules were incredibly strict at Virgin, especially for the girls. As ambassadors of the brand we were expected to look spick and span at all times: in the air, on the ground, at the training centre ... basically, whenever we were in uniform. Long hair – any length below collar level – must always be worn up. Nails should be spotless and well-manicured. Neck scarves tied to the front, never on the side or at the back (although they are these days). Heels should be worn at all times while on the ground. A smart evening dress should be taken on every trip, just in case Richard Branson was in town and required you to attend a publicity function. And probably the most important rule on the list: never, ever be seen in uniform without sporting lashings of red lippy. This rule came with its own set of sub-rules. It couldn’t be any red lipstick; there was a list of acceptable shades from top-of-the-range brands – all available in our own little duty-free shop at the Flight Centre, so there was absolutely no excuse for breaking this rule.

To help us look the part, we were given grooming lessons by two overly made-up, bitter-faced women in black suits, whom we nicknamed Bitch One and Bitch Two. They were harshly critical and mocking, constantly

pointing out our faults, pulling us up for wearing the wrong make-up and making snide jokes about people’s imperfections and blemishes. I’d been looking forward to grooming classes, excited about experimenting with make-up, trying out new hairstyles and being all girly and glamorous. Alas, it wasn’t to be. During our very first lesson “the bitches” not only insulted me, but also reduced another poor girl to tears.

It was Bitch Two who had a pop at me, just after we’d taken our seats around the poisonous duo’s sprawling make-up counter. The bottle blonde zoomed right in on me, narrowing her glacial eyes and forcing a tissue into my hand. Her voice was vinegary. “You’ve got the wrong lipstick on. Take it off.”

“It’s Clinique,” I said, “It’s on the list ... it’s allowed.”

“That may well be the case, but it doesn’t suit you. Off, wipe it off.”

Bitch One nodded in assent. “You need a different tone of red.”

I patted my lips with the tissue.

It got worse. As the class got underway, the bitch twins asked for a volunteer to be made up “Virgin-style”. Sarah and Ruth’s ears pricked up, and they both shifted in their seats, pushing their boobs out and flashing expectant looks that screamed “me, me, me” at the black-suited women.

“How about you,” said Bitch One, pointing at Sabrina, a stunning girl with feline eyes and skin the colour of golden toffee.

Sabrina shrugged. “Okay.” She made her way to the front of the room and sat on the stool by the make-up counter.

“So, we’re going to start by taking the hair right back from the face,” said Bitch One, aggressively scraping an Alice band over Sabrina’s head.

“Indeed,” said Bitch Two, squirting a generous blob of makeup remover onto a cotton wool pad, “We don’t want to get foundation in her hair.” Bitch Two removed Sabrina’s make-up, tut-tutting under her breath while her lacquer-stiff mousey-haired partner in crime rummaged through the mountain of cosmetics.

The demonstration began, both women painting and drawing all over Sabrina’s beautiful face while providing a running commentary of their work.

“A little problem area here beneath the eyes,” said the mousey-haired artist, loading more and more foundation onto Sabrina’s face. “Your complexion is very uneven ... very, very uneven.”

“Just a light dusting of blusher – less is more,” added her colleague, colouring Sabrina’s cheeks sunset orange. Poor Sabrina was being attacked from all angles.

“Blend, blend, blend,” they nagged until they finally put down their tools and moved away from their model so we could all admire their work. My God, they’d made a mess of her. Sarah gasped, cupping her mouth. Bitch One handed Sabrina a mirror. “So this is the look we’re aiming for, girls,” she said.

Sabrina held the mirror up to her face and immediately burst into tears. Our so-called make-up artists had turned Sabrina’s skin porcelain white. The foundation they’d used was clearly about ten shades too pale for her skin. Sabrina slammed the mirror down on the table, sending pots and tubes crashing onto the floor, and stormed out of the room sobbing.

The room fell silent. “What’s the matter with her?” asked Bitch Two.

Bitch One shrugged her shoulders, her face swathed in a look of confusion. “Search me.”

Understandably, Sabrina assumed the two women were deliberately being racist, although I’m sure this was more a case of *Dumb & Dumber*.

There was a drama almost every day. During our first SEP lesson, another instructor, Sophie, came a cropper while demonstrating how to use the emergency slide. Sophie was like a life-size Barbie doll: tall with slender limbs, perfectly sized pert boobs and a whittled-away waist you could comfortably fit your hands around. Her hair was ash blonde, swirled into a classic French pleat, and her huge swimming-pool blue eyes slanted upwards slightly at the outer corners. We all gathered round her on the Rig and watched as she placed her perfect bum onto the slide. “So, once your shoes are off you sit on the slide like so, arms crossed at your chest, and, staying in an upright position, you’re ready to go down the slide.” Sophie adjusted her weight forwards and she was away, her shiny French pleat getting smaller and smaller as she bobbed down the slide. Only, for some reason, Sophie seemed to be falling backwards instead of sitting upright as she’d instructed. She landed with a thud, her right foot crumpling and cracking beneath her. Sophie let out a little giggle. “That’s how not to do it,” she said. Then she rose to her feet and took a couple of steps before collapsing on the floor. Sophie had fractured her foot in

three places and spent the next few months in plaster, hobbling around on crutches. But she had made no fuss when it happened. Sophie may have looked delicate and doll-like, but mentally, she was tough as old boots.

I was discovering that you have to be made of hard stuff to survive in this game. Ab Initio was highly intense – one minute I felt like I was at army boot camp; the next, a finishing school. It’s extremely hard work and, quite often, people drop out within the first couple of weeks. Becoming an air hostess is not just a matter of learning how to look pretty. There’s a lot of hard work that goes on behind the scenes, which people don’t know about. The first two weeks are the toughest. That’s when we do all our SEP training. In addition to this, we also had to sit through hour upon hour of air-crash investigation programmes, viewing reconstructions of some of the world’s deadliest crashes in aviation history. The idea of this exercise was to see how and why accidents occur, and learn from any mistakes made in order to prevent them happening again. By the time we’d seen the twentieth video, we were all quite immune to the graphic images.

We also had to undergo fire safety training. The main perk about this was that our lessons were taught by a group of muscle-bound firemen from the local station. It’s a wonder we learned anything; most of the girls – and some of the lads – were too busy swooning over them. One of our tasks was to find a dead body and rescue a baby – in this case a mannequin and a doll in a bassinet – from a mock-burning aircraft. Like the ditching exercise, it was terribly dramatic and very claustrophobic trying to navigate your way around the tight spaces in thick smoke while wearing a smoke hood.

Then there was the first-aid course, which involved learning how to help the on-board managers operate defibrillators. We were shown a video featuring an old man who had suffered a heart attack on board a Virgin flight. He was flanked by two gorgeous dollies who had saved his life by following our CPR procedures and shocking him with the defibrillator. “Virgin saved my life,” he said with a false-teeth smile. I had no idea then that I’d end up using one myself one day – and, indeed, saving somebody’s life.

We were also given SAS-style training – with ex-SAS officers and paratroopers – where we were taught how to spot sleeper terrorists, restrain people and deal with hostage situations. Obviously, for security reasons I cannot divulge these secrets.

Lessons in survival techniques entailed acting out every imaginable life-or-death scenario under the sun: how to survive in a snow storm, an avalanche, on a desert island, stranded at sea; hunter-gatherer techniques (eat your heart out Ray Mears); and bizarrely, how to fend off sharks – a good whack on the nose with an oar does the trick, apparently.

With so much to learn, I had no time for a social life. All my time at home was spent studying for exams. I was stressed out to the max and losing sleep because of Becky's annoying habits when she returned from trips. No matter what time it was – normally late at night or in the early hours of the morning – she would slam the front door, pour herself a huge G & T and vacuum the whole house from top to bottom – even if it was clean.

I was missing Jonathan like crazy. He was now flying all over the world as a Virgin steward and training for his commercial pilot's licence in his spare time. Every time that avocado-green phone trilled I'd race down the hallway, hoping it was him calling from America, or Johannesburg, or whatever far-flung destination he was in. Our phone calls were like extracts taken from Mills & Boon novels, I mean real gooey stuff – entire international calls filled with soppy lines such as, “No, you hang up first,” “I can hear your heart beating,” “I miss you so much my heart aches,” “I love you to the stars and back,” “I love you more,” “No, I love you more.” By the time we'd finished exchanging verbal love letters, his money would run out and we wouldn't have time to discuss anything else. Not all of the calls were gushy though – there were a few sexy ones thrown in ... full of explicit descriptions of what we'd like to do to each other.

There was a point – about two weeks into the course – when I thought I was having a nervous breakdown. I was plagued by anxiety dreams and the workload was humungous. Some days we'd be taught something new in the morning and sit an exam on the same subject that very afternoon – and be expected to achieve a grade of at least 90 per cent. There was also a pile of hefty manuals to memorise. I remember sitting on the bottom step of the hall stairs, sobbing down the avocado phone to Mum and Dad, anxiously twirling the coiled wire round my fingers.

“I can't do it – it's so difficult,” I'd cry, gasping for air. “I can't cope. I'm never going to pass.”

Mum was almost crying with me. “Oh baby, I hate to hear you so upset, but I know you can do this. You've worked so hard. We're so proud of you.”

Dad never really offered the same level of encouragement, although he meant well. “They're not paying you enough for all this stress. Tell them it's too much. They're expecting you to do all this work for peanuts.”

To which I'd reply: “Can you put Mum back on, please?” through more tears.

I didn't quit. Of course I didn't. And despite my mini panic attacks, I still managed to pass every exam with flying colours and make it through to week five. Although we still had a week's training left to go, it was a given at this stage that we'd passed the course and could now be fitted for our Virgin uniforms.

It's incredible how a red outfit can cause so much excitement. We were all high as kites on the day of our fittings. Before, everything had seemed like such a hard slog, the fear of failure overwhelming. Now, we could finally begin to look forward to life in the skies, adventures all over the world, wild parties and, of course, working our arses off.

The tailoress in the uniform department waited on me hand and foot. She was so complimentary and enthusiastic, I felt like I was in a posh changing room at Selfridges with my own personal shopper.

“Oh,” she said when I walked into the vast dressing room, “What a beautiful figure.” She clasped her hands to her chest, nodding her head. “Yes, this uniform is going to look amazing on you.”

She pulled the tape measure from around her neck, circled it around my waist. “I think you've lost weight, Mandy.”

She grabbed her clipboard from a nearby chair, scribbled my new measurements down alongside my previous ones. “Yes,” she confirmed, “You've definitely lost weight.”

I laughed. “I'm not surprised – it's been a stressful few weeks. Don't worry ... it's nothing a few pies and pasties won't cure.”

I wasn't the easiest person to fit. Because I'm tall – just over five foot nine – with orangutan arms, I had to get a size-sixteen woollen overcoat for the shoulders and extend the sleeve length, then have it taken in everywhere else. My size-ten skirt and size-twelve jacket and shirt, however, fitted beautifully.

I drew back the curtain and emerged from the cubicle. “How does this look?” I asked, walking towards the full-length mirror.

The kind tailoress’s eyes met mine in the glass. “You look amazing, superb.”

I twirled in front of the mirror, checking my reflection from all angles. “I love it, absolutely love it.”

I was smiling so much I thought my face was going to explode. There was an air hostess staring back at me ... now all she needed was her wings.

CHAPTER THREE

WINGS

The spotlights were burning and blinding. I could feel the foundation melting on my face and the audience was a smudge of fidgety shapes through the haze. The woolly hum of chatter subsided to empty silence, punctuated by the occasional cough or exaggerated throat clearing. I felt giddy and sick – a combination of nerves and excitement ... or was it the five glasses of Asti Spumante I’d just necked kicking in? Stage fright, don’t you just love it? However, the show must go on – and the opening bars of the Bee Gees’ “Tragedy” pumping from the speakers signalled it was “tits and teeth” time.

This was the final hurdle – the show that would earn me my wings and launch me up above the clouds into the glamorous world of high flying. I couldn’t afford to mess this up.

I was on stage with sixteen colleagues from my Ab Initio course. Collectively, we were known as Group 309. We’d completed our exams, made it through the rigorous training exercises, learned how to push a trolley and serve coffee (which, incidentally, is the last thing they teach you at Richard Branson’s School for International Air Hostesses), survived the tears and tantrums, and now here we were, in uniform, dancing to “Tragedy” in front of Richard Branson himself.

We’d spent a week rehearsing for our Wings Ceremony cabaret show, holed up in our classroom at the Flight Centre for hours every night. We’d chosen the seventies-style Brit Awards as the theme for our performance, making up our own lyrics and dance routines to cheesy disco hits. It was