

## Introduction

*I'm 27 years old. I've no money and no prospects. I'm already a burden to my parents. And I'm frightened.'*

My jaw dropped as the scene from the film *Pride and Prejudice* echoed round the cinema.

In it Charlotte Lucas was 'fessing up to her friend Lizzie Bennett that she would be marrying her odious cousin Mr Collins because, being of spinster age, she didn't want to be left on the shelf.

My sister Sofie and I turned to look at one another. I was grimacing. Sofie was giggling. Exactly the same thought racing through our minds.

My name was Charlotte. I was 27. And I too, in Jane Austen speak, was yet to 'command a high price in the marriage market'. It was almost as if the film was talking to me.

Shoulders shaking, my 19-year-old sibling let out a snort.

But then, at eight years my junior and with all of her 20s stretched out in front of her, as alluring and inviting as the Yellow Brick Road, she bloody well would do.

'Just you wait,' I whispered crossly. 'Your twenties will pass by in a twinkling, just like with me.'

'Yeah, but you'll be nearly forty then,' she sniggered.

She had a point. It seemed time was running out and it made me think.

Throughout my 20s, I'd gone out with two serious boyfriends. But here I was again, single at 27, my biological clock ticking (well, according to every health article I read anyway) and not a potential husband in sight.

When I boarded the train plodding its way through my 20s, I assumed I had all the time in the world to get my life sorted.

Somewhere in the far, far distance was a well-sign-posted destination called 'The One' – conveniently located around my late 20s.

But I didn't have to worry about that for a long time. I had an open ticket with as many stops thrown in as I wanted. I could jump off for parties, I had time to meet unsuitable men, enjoy drunken and even comedy snogs, be relentlessly single and bounce back if my heart was broken.

As the train trundled along through my mid-20s, I'd find a great bloke, no sweat. He'd tick all the boxes and of course I'd know instantly he was the chosen one. Naturally, after a whirlwind romance, he'd propose and I'd get a rock that made Victoria Beckham's pale in comparison.

Cue marriage, babies and bliss. After all, it's not like I'm a freak or anything.

However, my path to happiness wasn't exactly lined with gold. By the time my mid-20s were well underway, it dawned on me that finding 'The One' was actually pretty tricky. And the more I panicked about it, the harder it got.

All around me friends were seamlessly meeting great men, tying the knot and producing offspring. Yet I would repeat the same pattern of spending ages with a boyfriend I wasn't destined to marry time and time again. The pressure was on.

I realised that although you can try to take the scenic route, meandering through your carefree days on a slow, old-fashioned steam train, sometimes you accidentally board the express train and then you're stuffed.

So what caused this hysteria? I'm not the type of girl who spends her life reading books like *The Rules* or *He's Just Not That Into You* and following them to the letter. To be honest, I'm just not that arsed.

While there is an element of logic in such guides, they are all a bit serious and it's important to be sceptical. No two men are the same and where's the romance in following a manual?

It's not like I hated being single either. My single spells were some of the most fun-packed times of my life. The unpredictability and excitement of going out and meeting different people is fab.

Undoubtedly, one of the most rewarding things that being single can bring is being able to plough all your energy into nurturing your great female friendships that are there through thick and thin. Although we'd all be loath to admit it, time with good friends can so often get a tad neglected when a man is on the scene.

No, the hysteria began with the realisation that ever since I met my first serious boyfriend, almost half my life ago, every single man I've dated long-term has settled down very quickly with the girlfriend after me.

While I've drifted on searching for a soul mate, I have routinely and unwaveringly become the one before 'The One'.

Although I've only stayed in touch with half of my significant exes, word-of-mouth, seasonal correspondence with family members and some bored Facebooking and Googling has kept me abreast of their romantic lives.

Fairly soon after the Charlotte Lucas episode, the startling and terrifying truth dawned on me – every past love had a life partner, was smitten and settled, happily cohabitating or procreating.

But where were my rewards? I'd earned my stripes spending many a weary hour trying to kick these, often wayward, boyfriends into shape. Then off they'd trot with their new-found man skills to enjoy some kind of happy ever after with another lady. *How selfish.*

In I'd breezed, like Supernanny, cracking the whip and setting the rules, until eventually we'd parted company and they'd gone off to be a model citizen for the next girlfriend.

It hadn't been an easy journey. During each individual's own personal 'naughty step' experience there were whisperings of malcontent. Words such as 'high maintenance', 'wears the trousers' and 'control freak' may have been bandied about. However, after resisting at first, they'd listened carefully, and the knowledge I installed had obviously set them up for life . . . but not life with me.

Recently, when I shared this revelation with friends on a night out, it was met with amusement.

I drunkenly recounted how my eagerness to change chaps, hopefully for the better, could be sourced from the

fallout of the failed relationship I'd had with my first serious boyfriend, Patrick, who had been very overbearing and had left me feeling deeply insecure.

From quite early on, I was paranoid he'd cheated on me. It was pretty obvious that he had his eye on other girls and he regularly belittled me. As the relationship progressed and I grew more and more suspicious, I'd lowered myself to snooping.

I examined his phone bill, read letters he'd hidden away and questioned his housemates.

Trying desperately to rein in his wandering eye, I frequently confronted him with what I'd discovered, in the hope I could catch him out before he even considered straying.

But my self-esteem finally hit rock bottom after he chatted up a girl in front of me in a nightclub, took her phone number and told me to get over it.

He claimed pathetically that he was setting her up with his friend. But when he, despite my protests, invited her and her friend back to his home, I caught him and this girl having what looked rather like 'a moment' as they made eyes at each other in the back garden.

We broke up soon after and it eventually filtered back to me that he was sleeping with the girl, just as I'd feared.

I was inconsolable and convinced I'd never get over it. But eventually my broken heart healed and I vowed never to let a man have a hold over me like that again. From then on I had a zero tolerance approach to relationships.

When I met Jack, a lad I went to college with, he had a novel attitude to dating.

‘There’s time spent with the bird and time with the lads,’ he told me, romantically. ‘Never shall the two meet.’

I was instructed that if he ever caught me frequenting the same drinking establishment that he was in with the boys, all hell would break loose.

The rules were unshakeable. ‘What if I unwittingly stumble in there, not knowing that’s where you are?’ I enquired. We’d both go out with our respective friends in a town centre with about ten pubs, so it was possible.

Jack’s steely gaze said it all, warning me, in no uncertain terms, that it should never happen.

I had my work cut out. There was going to be a power struggle. After all, this was the man who also announced he’d never spend New Year’s Eve with ‘any bird’.

But while I listened to his rules at first, I was already hatching a plot to shift the balance of power.

So I started playing some games of my own. I countered Jack’s boys’ nights out with my own girls’ shindigs. My friends and I took it in turns driving all over the West Country to different clubs for raucous nights out.

Now Jack would have to vie for my time and, as I’d hoped, he didn’t like it one little bit.

To my satisfaction his attitude began to change and soon his priority revolved largely around ‘us’. The boys’ nights out became infrequent as he opted for romantic nights with me instead.

When he mentioned New Year’s Eve plans I scoffed: ‘I’m not invited though, am I?’

‘I’ve changed my mind, I want you to come,’ he told me sheepishly.

However, ironically, just as I became the most import-

ant thing in Jack's world, I buggered off to university 300 miles from home.

Because of the geography, my interest in keeping up a long-distance romance wavered, and like a complete cow I unceremoniously dumped Jack just when he'd become his most dedicated.

Despite my cruelty, we stayed in touch and within a year he told me he'd met someone new – and it was serious. It seemed that after all my efforts to beat the laddishness out of Jack, he was now getting there of his own accord.

He dated the next girl for yonks and they are now happily married with a daughter.

Again, it was a similar scenario with Tom, my boyfriend throughout university. At the start he'd insisted on heading home to Manchester every weekend for hedonistic nights out, only to return to our university accommodation on a Sunday night tetchy and exhausted, with me bearing the brunt of it.

After being in the firing line one too many times, I told him either his lifestyle changed or we were over. Thankfully, Tom recognised that I was now so weary of the situation that I was teetering dangerously on the clifftop of indifference and a sudden maturity kicked in.

But, mirroring the relationships before, after Tom changed, we eventually and amicably headed our separate ways. Like his predecessors, Tom met someone else soon after and several years down the line they've bought a house together.

It was the same with the next boyfriend, Adam. During the course of our romance I'd curtailed his penchant for

casinos, bookies and boozers and we'd settled into domestic bliss until the inevitable break-up. It had come down to one thing: I'd invested years, but I didn't want to marry him. The girl after me thought differently though. Within a year they'd bought a flat together and marriage may soon be on the cards.

How many times would I repeat this cycle?

The tale of my exes tickled my friend Caroline somewhat. 'You know what you are?' she concluded. 'You're a wedding fluffer!'

A fluffer, to explain to the more innocent among us, is a term used in the porn industry for someone who – how can I put this politely? – has the sole purpose of ensuring the 'adult entertainers' are, er, standing to attention before their big performance.

So, in other words, I was there, at the side of the stage, warming my ex-boyfriends up for the main show.

But where was *my* moment in the limelight?

I'd always assumed that having the strength of character to tell boyfriends to shape up or ship out was a good thing. But had I been too demanding and militant? Did I make every relationship that followed my reign of terror seem like a walk in the park for my poor hen-pecked victims? Equally, maybe my search for perfection meant ultimately I'd be the one who'd end up lonely and bitter?

I was worried that the answer might be yes, but then I was offered a reprieve.

I met a chap, The Beau – my man du jour.

We started seeing each other seriously a few months after the Charlotte Lucas episode. He seemed lovely, and,

during these early stages, I wasn't sure whether The Beau was 'The One' or not. Indeed, I tried desperately not to obsess about it.

However I was feeling pleasantly optimistic and was certainly looking forward to going on lots of nice dates with him to find out.

I just hoped that this time I wouldn't make a complete pig's ear of it – and here lieth the foundations of this book.

Let's cut to the chase: show me a woman who claims she has a perfect dating history and I'll show you a pathological liar.

Quite frankly, I don't have all the answers and I'm not a dating guru. In fact, I'm the polar opposite.

I shell out the advice to my friends, but do I have the same unwavering willpower I ask them to summon up in times of crises? Sadly not – I have all the self-control of an obese, PE-hating, gluttonous kid in a sweet shop.

But either way, I'm not sure I believe in quick fixes, methods and rules.

Dating is more like your ghastly maths homework. Once you've made enough errors, you'd think you could finally get the hang of it. But it's all too easy to forget what you've learned and find a brand-new tricky equation that you have no idea how to solve.

Over the years, my friends and I have made some colossal mistakes and found ourselves in some ridiculous situations. We've been there, crying bitter tears of humiliation, and occasionally, along the way, we've been responsible for hurting someone else too.

If you're looking for a kindred spirit, you've found one. Once you've read some of life's most excruciating dating

stories, you'll feel like the most empowered woman on earth.

If you think you've ever embarrassed yourself, you have no idea. By the time you finish this book, you'll feel like the sanest person ever and the biggest romantic success story **IN THE WORLD**.