



On Fire

‘You’ve almost reached Ray . . . if you’re hot, leave a message . . .’

It had been one hell of a week and all I wanted to do was call the best gay friend a straight girl could have, but all I could reach was his voicemail. Ray had been on a shoot all day, which was really bloody inconsiderate of him – office life was just plain dull when he wasn’t around. An Asian babe with a slick London style and a reputation as the best young director in the company, Ray had a tongue which was always as sharp as his haircut. Today I’d missed his witty emails between attending to the whims of my deluded boss Maddy Davenport-Parker, the formidable head of Independent TV production company On Fire. I’d also missed the ‘ciggy’ breaks we usually took together, huddled outside the impressive building we worked in, gossiping. Despite the fact that I didn’t even smoke, fag breaks were the very best way to find out what was really going on and I never missed one. This week, everyone in the five-hundred ‘strong and growing’ company was officially depressed. There’d been a big contract with the BBC we’d been closing and lost, a final edit with the

commissioning editor of our supposed next big hit series which now had to be completely re-cut, and a hardline talk on the company cutbacks being made. The total sum of this had put Maddy in the foulest of moods. And it was only Thursday.

Out in the real world, beyond the big glass doors etched with flames, a tube strike loomed due to a 'security threat', it hadn't stopped raining since Saturday, and my so-called boyfriend hadn't returned my calls all week. To top it all off, I'd just run to the deli at the end of the road for a salad and it had cost me £14.75 and given me a blister from my new heels. How I hated to love Notting Hill.

'Ray, it's Izz, call me when you've wrapped,' I tried to chirp, phone squished under my chin, salad in one hand, broly in the other, pushing the staff-kitchen door open clumsily with my foot.

The kitchen was deserted. The faint smell of microwaved soup and post-lunch scrapings were a familiar greeting. I dodged the overspilling bin stuffed full of empty food cartons and the well-thumbed pile of magazines and papers as I shook off my soggy trench. I unwrapped the white cardboard carton and dipped a plastic fork into a no-fun pile of organic alfalfa sprouts. To liven things up I flicked through the *Daily Mirror* in a pretence of brainstorming new TV ideas for a meeting later that afternoon. Really, I thought, this was not so different to any other week and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad realisation.

'Isabelle . . . get me Conrad's office, Channel Four, on line one.' It was Maddy, standing behind me, interrupting my search for the latest Posh and Becks story. In true D-P style, she'd left her desk and walked down three flights of stairs to find me in the kitchen on another grab-what-you-can lunch break, just to ask me

to dial a number. Before I could turn round, she'd started to sashay back to her office, eating the banana I'd just bought for dessert and clutching the only decent glossy that had been in the pile. That was Maddy. I'd been her PA for three years. I was used to her and didn't flinch. I was used to going to board meetings, hearing about cuts in budgets, before having to convince the accounts department that Maddy's 'Bliss' facials, lunches at Le Caprice and lavish gifts for her daughter were genuine business expenses. I was used to her creative whims – her unpredictable u-turns in edit suites, commissioners' offices and meetings, where a new trend, one-liner in a Sunday supplement or whisper from a rival company fuelled a decision that made everyone gasp at her supposed genius and forgive her snooty behaviour. These ideas were usually self-consciously un-PC, or 'edgy', which really meant that they were ideas for shows designed to humiliate the public they featured. For this reason, I was dreading the three p.m. brainstorm. I peeled myself away from the paper and tottered after Maddy, heels still rubbing, realising that I had just twenty minutes to come up with some killer ideas for the meeting.

'I want a counter-intuitive multi-platform concept,' Maddy announced pretentiously twenty-one minutes later, to blank faces. Every uncomfortable seat around the vast glass boardroom table was filled, the surface littered with skyscraper lattes. 'A big, landmark show.' The faces remained poised for some tangible information. 'Real people don't want to watch derivative programming, car crash versions of ITV shows on Five,' she claimed in her public-school voice, reiterating the mantras of channel executives, before reeling off a list of shows that were just about to be made and sounded exactly like every other show we'd all already seen

before. The faces looked baffled. Then, as she paused to open up the debate, eager executives, producers and directors began a frantic pitching session, jostling to talk, to build on each other's ideas, take something in a new direction, impress the boss, their colleagues, and preen their egos. Maddy gazed at her scarlet Smythson notebook, pouting through poker-straight blond hair, and at every suggestion her expression was as bored as a heavily Botoxed face can manage. Five minutes later, she took a call, turning her back on the table, but it didn't stop the flow of eager conversation.

'So, I was thinking . . .' a particularly unlikeable producer started when he had her attention once more, putting one leg on the table, twirling his BlackBerry in his left hand. 'Why don't we conduct a social experiment, take benefits away from single mums who refuse to work . . . see what they do, how they survive?'

'Yuh, sort of *Wife Swap* casting, with *Big Brother* values, but out of the studio . . . err, out of the home,' added another, hedging his bets.

A female director turned to me to whisper, 'Do these guys hate women or just poor people? I can't tell.' I gave her an apologetic, watery smile and let out a giggle.

'Yes, Izzy, what do you think?' someone asked as the rest of the room fell silent. Oops. The last thing I wanted was to be put on the spot.

'Maybe they could have . . . mentors, famous single mothers, JK Rowling, Kerry Katona – OK, so maybe *not* Kerry Katona, but you know what I mean,' I stammered. It was all I could think of. Maddy caught my embarrassed gaze with her dead-fish stare. It was the first time we'd made eye contact in months.

'So where's the entertainment in the format?' she sneered. 'Three years ago I would have said that a makeover is what they need,' she added, addressing the

room. 'So the question is,' she announced grandly to all, 'what's the new makeover?'

Single mums need a makeover to change their lives? What's the new makeover? I mulled. Was she serious? But the majority around the table were locked in concentration, others furiously scribbled notes.

I gazed out of the window, at the grey sky and the street lined with smart stucco-fronted townhouses. There were times in the office when I got caught up in these questions and thought them desperately important, then times when over a cocktail and 'you won't believe the day I've had' exchanges that I'd realise how ridiculous it all was. To think I'd studied documentary and film-making at Uni and had ended up taking the minutes in meetings where Maddy and her entourage thought how best to tread over the public to create their next big hit and climb their way to the top of entertainment ratings. As I doodled, I reminded myself that Maddy's world was centred completely round a small slice of the elite London media. She claimed to know what 'real people' wanted in these meetings but at other times referred to them as 'civilians'. The simple fact was that Maddy was famous for launching a bitchy 'cheffing' duo five years ago and a TV format that ran for three years, where each episode reduced the homeowners to tears. She was still living off the kudos. Nothing On Fire had produced since had been anything like that hit and word was that she was at the end of her career. Maybe it was the pressure that had created the monster? Or was it years in the industry that had killed off her last humane brain cells? This, after all, was the woman who had to be stopped by the company lawyers from making three hour-long 'revisit' specials, out of the two divorces and one mental breakdown that had emerged once the

cameras had finished filming series twelve of her biggest hit.

My mobile buzzed on the glass table and I glanced at the display panel. Recognising an excuse to leave the room on the pretence of an urgent call for the boss, I made a swift exit. Perfect.

'Izz, what the hell's up, honey? You've jammed my mobile with twenty missed calls. What if someone hot really does want to leave a message?!' It was Ray. I shuffled through to the corridor as quietly as possible, the pristine white walls and battered stripped wood floors a relief from the colourful atmosphere of the boardroom.

'You can only live in hope! Look, can't talk right now,' I whispered back, checking over my shoulder at the boardroom door. 'I'm brainstorming counter-counter-intuitive ideas!' I drawled in my best Maddy impersonation. 'Anyway, when are you back? Can we meet for last orders at the local? My treat,' I added desperately.

'Will try, my best girlfriend, tube strike permitting, but I thought you were meeting that unreliable idiot you call a boyfriend tonight. What happened to dinner?'

'Long story, Ray, long story. We had plans, but he's not returned my calls all week, he's driving me crazy . . .'

'Sorry, caller, can't hear you . . . the line's breaking up,' Ray mocked. He'd heard it all a million times before.

'Oh, you know you're the only decent man in my life, Ray. See you at the bar,' I giggled. Clicking my phone shut, I took a deep breath and headed back to the boardroom. Later, I'd have the task of summarising the brainstorm for Maddy and circulating a document,

so that the relevant people could work up their ideas into possible TV formats. I had to get back to take notes.

‘Isabelle?’ It was Maddy. It was five-forty-five and she was back at her desk, summoning me from mine, placed right outside of her door, which she kept slightly ajar.

‘As you know, I have a nine-thirty at TV Centre tomorrow. Some of the ideas from today might be useful to drop into conversation. I’d like to take them with me,’ she announced whilst writing an email.

‘Sure, I’ll email them,’ I replied, teeth clenched behind a smile, as I realised that my night out had probably just been cancelled. ‘Tea?’ I added, reluctantly.

‘That’s all,’ she replied, signalling that I was to leave. ‘I’ll be going to The Electric at six, dinner at eight-thirty, so please tell the Nanny to feed the kids without me.’

I wasted no time. Carefully closing Maddy’s door behind me, I sent a text to Ray with one hand on my mobile whilst dialling a car to take Maddy a five-minute walk away with the other. Then I tapped out a quick email to the PA at home before starting on the notes. I was fed up with my evenings being taken up with prepping for Maddy’s meetings. I promised Ray I’d be in Zoom by ten and got on with deciphering my scrawl and cutting out the TV talk to get to the nub of the ideas. But it wasn’t easy. By eight, the cleaners were Hoovering the office, clearing the water glasses from the desks and tiptoeing around me. A runner barged through with kit from a shoot and tapes of rushes to take straight to the edit house. My phone beeped with a text from Ray: Just got 2 bar. Cute guy in corner, if ur late, might hv 2 pull!

Great. Just when I wanted Ray to be sympathetic and there just for ME. I sped things up and continued in bullet points.

It was nine-thirty before I finished and I knew that if

I ran, I could still spend five minutes fixing my face in the ladies and make it to Zoom before ten. I darted into Maddy's office for my tidy-up routine, straightening the magazines on her marble-topped coffee table, changing the water in the huge vase of flowers and checking if I needed to buy fruit on the way in tomorrow. Then I had to tackle the desk. Despite her personal appearance and air of organisation, Maddy was chaotic and messy, in a bohemian, creative way. So it was part of my job to keep her in-tray and out-tray in order, her desk tidy, and to save any Word documents before closing down her computer, keeping a blind eye to the contents, of course. This was a routine I had to perform every night, because Maddy's car always beat my bus to the office in the mornings.

First, I checked that my own email with the brainstorm notes had come through, knowing that Maddy would pick it all up at home. It was then that I noticed there was an email in her drafts folder. Maddy never kept drafts. Interesting. I was now running late, but curiosity got the better of me and I spared a minute to look at who she'd composed her un-sent item to: Ian Leighton, BBC commissioning editor extraordinaire, her nine-thirty. She must have prepped it for the meeting tomorrow and had forgotten to send it, I thought whilst glancing at the clock opposite. Very her. Must be important, I figured. I moved the mouse over the yellow envelope icon and without a second thought, clicked send before I shut down. Done.

I finally made it to Zoom just gone ten and found Ray sitting at the never-ending white leather bar. How irritating; despite having come straight from a ten-hour outdoor shoot on the other side of London, he looked immaculate. He was wearing skinny Dior jeans,

a trilby hat at a jaunty angle and a battered vintage T-shirt and was perched on an over-designed stool. He had a Mojito waiting for me on one side of him and someone who I guessed was probably the 'cute guy' on the other.

'Izzy, darling, meet . . . sorry, what was your name again?'

Ray was the only man I knew who could get away with being so cheeky. Of course he knew the cute guy's name, it was so obvious they'd been chatting and he was playing hard to get. The barfly took umbridge and sloped off to the gents in a strop.

'Prima donna!' Ray laughed, his eyes following his butt as he strutted into the crowds.

I took a slug of the Mojito. 'Thanks for this, just what I needed. So how was the shoot?' I asked, clinking the ice in my glass, changing the subject.

'Oh, you know, same old, same old, directing by the book. I find these half-hour formats so frustrating, no room to put your mark on a film. I reckon it's the last one I'll do of these . . . Well, if I can afford not to,' he added with a gloomy realisation, finishing a bottle of Ashai.

The bar was heaving. A group of twenty-something girls in Hoxton-style anti-fashion eyed Ray's good looks greedily. This always happened. And it was usually followed with jibes or 'and what's he doing with *her*' glares. I turned back to him. OK, so I looked a bit rough – I was always on the heavy side, but the blister on my heel wasn't helping my posture, my make-up had mostly rubbed off the face that people told me was pretty, and my mouse-brown hair had turned into a giant frizz ball in the rain, but I was past caring.

'Look, Izz, he's still there, in the corner,' Ray said dreamily, nudging me. 'The cute guy.'

‘Oh, I thought the guy at the bar was the cute guy,’ I exclaimed, wide-eyed.

‘Is he checking me out?’

‘Not sure . . .’ I said. This was getting boring. ‘So how was your day, Izzy? Why twenty missed calls?’ I prompted.

‘Darling, we’re not an old married couple yet, are we? When I can’t pull guys like that we’ll make a pact to marry each other, like in *Friends*, then we’ll have those “honey, I’m home” conversations, OK?’

‘Yeah, sure, you’re so right. But don’t go getting a beer gut and a wife beater vest,’ I added, ordering another round. What I probably needed was to forget about my bad week, the fact that my so-called boyfriend hadn’t called, that I hated my job, and just have some fun.

I ended up back at Ray’s. His apartment was one of my favourite places in the world, much to Marc’s (Ray’s live-in-lover) annoyance. It was a tiny but perfectly formed haven on Portobello Road, each room was bright, white and spotless, with polished concrete floors. The large sash window in the living room overlooked the colourful market stalls and swarms of people below. What made it so Ray was the exquisite sari material draped on battered leather sofas and across beds, the jewelled slippers, statues of the Indian god Ganesh and faded pictures of the Raj. Ray was peeling garlic in the kitchen, whilst ordering me to chop onions, so that he could conjure up a Kashmiri storm. This was always our routine. Curry after the bar with a bottle of wine, whatever the hour. Marc made an appearance at the living-room door in a white towelling robe, raised an eyebrow at me, rubbed his head sleepily, and silently turned to go back to bed. Ray and I filled our empty stomachs with fragrant rice and prawns in a sweetly

spiced sauce and my silly diet was a distant memory. With *Funny Face* on the big plasma screen, I dozed off cocooned in one of Ray's patchwork quilts. I awoke the next morning to the sound of Marc moodily collecting last night's dishes from around me.

'That's a job too big for Touche Éclat,' he piped cattily, as I opened my eyes. A great start to the day: a bitch before breakfast and another to greet in the office.

I pulled the covers back over my head and waited for Marc to leave the flat. When he'd gone, I grabbed a quick shower, a small bowl of cornflakes and an oversized cashmere sweater from Ray's wardrobe to belt over my jeans. Ray was already on location, so there was no hope of a leisurely stroll through the market and a quick coffee and croissant in Portobello with him before work. Shame. It felt strange to be in the flat alone, but the thought of running across Notting Hill in last night's clothes without the thrill of a one-night stand as an excuse was a bit sad. Luckily, Ray always insisted I make myself at home (as long as I picked up the dry-cleaning bill for anything I borrowed, of course) but, still, I felt uncomfortable hanging around. So, for the first time ever, I found I was early for work and although the thought of spending an extra hour in the office out of choice made me check my pulse, I still headed off, grabbing a skinny soya cappuccino en route.

A surprising number of people were already at work when I arrived and they all eyed me with suspicion. Nikki the receptionist actually stopped chewing her gum, looked up from a copy of *Heat* magazine, and checked the clock on the wall behind her. She picked up two more calls, 'Hello, On Fire, can you hawld?' she sang, fiddling with her big hoop earrings before asking, 'Izz, is there somefing big happening this morning that

I dunno about?’ My reputation obviously preceded me.

The upstairs office was completely silent. I turned on my computer, thinking I might read Popbitch and check out the vintage Biba I was watching on eBay before starting some work, when my thoughts of a leisurely start were interrupted by a loud rummaging noise from Maddy’s office. I peered through the gap in the door to see who was in there.

A minuscule female frame was changing out of sweatpants. Her pin-thin legs were spray-tan brown and topped with cellulite. It was only from the hair that I realised that the figure was Maddy. In just a sports bra and pants she actually looked her age. She must have come in straight from her Pilates class, a daily seven-thirty rendezvous with Eric. I scurried back to my desk before she could see me, trying to shake off the image of my semi-naked boss. Just moments later I heard her make a call.

‘It was soooo wonderful last night, darling. Divine. I had a fabulous time and I just couldn’t wait to tell you,’ she purred. Even when she was trying her hardest to be nice, she sounded fake. ‘No, of course not. I snuck in and Rupert was fast asleep,’ she added, lowering her voice instinctively. I paused, the paper coffee cup at my lips poised as I heard her continue. ‘Of course he doesn’t . . . you know the sense of being caught just turns me on.’

My skin started to crawl. I couldn’t believe my ears. I was overcome with a desperate urge to escape before ‘Dirty D-P’ spotted me. Careful not to ruffle the papers on my desk as I stood up, I slipped off my shoes and headed for the door. Out in the corridor I ran barefoot to the ladies, shut myself tightly in a cubicle and took it all in. Christ! Maddy was married to Rupert Davenport-Parker, Conservative MP. If she cheated on him and news got out, it would be HUGE. Her cosy Islington

home life and his career would be wrecked. I took in some deep breaths. From beneath the cubicle door my eyes followed a pair of heels walk in. Black, patent Prada with heavy wooden stacks. I'd only seen her wear them once before, but I knew they were Maddy's. I waited. I'd been in this situation many times. If I happened to be in the ladies at the same time as Maddy I'd stay perfectly still in a cowardly attempt to avoid making polite conversation with the most awkward and anti-social woman in the building, who also happened to be my boss. The routine was always the same. I'd hear the cubicle door close and the lock turn, and, often, the sound of her taking a call (talk about time is money!). I'd then wait to hear the tap run, the sound of her make-up bag unzip and a lipstick case click open, then the heels would totter off and I was free to follow. But today, the dreaded heels headed straight for my cubicle and Maddy banged frantically on the door. Even though I'd seen the shoes come my way first, I almost jumped out of my skin.

'Isabelle, I know you're in there, I need you NOW.' I flushed the chain, opened up the door and nervously beamed my best 'good morning', all smiles.

'Good morning?!' Maddy shrieked back at me. 'Good morning?' Her cheeks were mottled crimson, her hair wild, her nostrils flared; really not a good look. Her voice raised an octave and boomed.

'Don't you know what you've done, you idiot?'

Maddy's voice echoed in the confined space. Her expression was bizarre and contorted; she looked as if she might burst out of her Botoxed face.

'Err, not exactly, no. I don't know what you're talking about,' I tried to offer quietly.

'The email, Isabelle. The EMAIL. What were you thinking? Don't you understand how this will ruin me? Or maybe that's what you want. Maybe you've got fed

up of your sad little role and want to see the tables turned. DO YOU, ISABELLE, DO YOU?’

She was screaming now, her eyes bulging like a bullfrog’s. A single contact lens shot across the room as a result, but she just ignored it, her witchy, skinny finger pointing at me – the accused. I froze.

‘DO YOU WANT TO SEE EVERYTHING I HAVE GOT GO DOWN THE PAN? DO YOU, DO YOU, DO YOU, DO YOU, DO YOU, DO YOU?’

This was the last intelligible line of our one-way conversation, because at this point Maddy Davenport-Parker, quite literally, went mad. She turned into a ranting ball of hyperbole, her arms flailing in vague time with her screaming accusations, till, just minutes later, she fell to the cold tiled floor, her legs lifeless and askew, her face wet with tears as she sobbed uncontrollably.

I could imagine all those who were already at their desks listening. My brain whirred. What was I supposed to do? I didn’t know whether to pass her a tissue, help her up or run for my life. I was completely and utterly petrified. But before I could think of an answer, Maddy got herself together enough to deliver it for me.

‘YOU’RE FIRED!’ she shrieked, her voice gritty from her now hoarse throat. ‘FIRED, YOU HEAR ME? GET OUT!!!’

I squeezed out of the ladies, stunned. Red-faced, I passed my colleagues for the last time. Most pretended they were working, picking up the phone to dial no one, sending ‘Are you hearing what I’m hearing?’ emails, or making embarrassed conversations about pending shoots with any person next to them. Others openly stared at me, some shooting me an ‘Are you OK?’ expression, a few looking smug, as I took a long, slow-motion walk of shame, which seemed to last a lifetime, out of the building.

I didn't go to my desk. I didn't even remember to collect my shoes or my handbag. I just kept on walking, fighting back the tears, head held as high as I could manage, my mind whirring as I walked, through those doors etched with flames for the last time.

Outside I took a big gulp of crisp winter air and walked. Halfway down the Portobello Road, however, I suddenly realised that I had to turn back. I was at risk of contracting some weird medieval foot disease walking without shoes on the grubby streets lined with litter and debris from the market. I didn't have a key to get into my own flat, or my wallet to get a stiff drink. But still, I couldn't face a u-turn. I blagged a pound from my regular flower stall, ran to the nearest phone box, and made a desperate, shaky call to On Fire.

'On Fire, can you hawld?' Nikki the receptionist twanged.

'Nikki, it's Izz, don't put me on—' Great, my money was bound to run out. But she soon came back to me, excitedly.

'Izzy, EVERYONE is talkin', babe.'

'Yes, well, it's one for the pub another time. Look, I need you to get my stuff down to me, the phone box on Portobello—' The pips went. 'Road, near Elgin Crescent,' I squeezed in before the phone line buzzed its dead-line tone. I didn't know whether she'd heard me, or whether she would do anything, but I waited.

Outside the box, I hunched my shoulders and raised my eyebrows in an 'I'm crazy me' expression as the immaculately groomed yummy mummies and trendy media types of Notting Hill peered quizzically at my grubby, bare feet. Finally, after an old lady had literally thrown some coppers at me, a young sweaty On Fire runner arrived, fumbling with my belongings, unable to meet my gaze.

‘Great, you’re a life-saver, thank you soooo much,’ I managed to say, my eyes filling with tears, before he could ask questions. He stood awkward and dumbstruck in his baggy jeans before turning without a word, presumably to run back to the gossiping lair of the office.

Suddenly, I felt very alone. Squeezing my mucky toes and still sore, blistered feet into the heels I was beginning to hate, I literally wobbled. The bustling market had become a blur behind my tear-filled eyes and fuzzy head as I tried to navigate which way was home on shaky legs. I ran the scene with Maddy through my mind as I pushed through the busy market crowds with my head down, oblivious to the calls of the traders.

‘This is bad, Izzy, really bad,’ I kept telling myself as I carried on walking, the cold winter air stinging my eyes and my now wet cheeks. I pulled up the collar on my jacket and huddled into it for comfort. I didn’t know where I was going, what I was going to do, or how long I’d been walking, but several hours later my stomach growled, telling me it must be lunchtime. I headed into the nearest newsagents for an emergency chocolate bar and some tissues. It was then that I saw it. The *Evening Standard* seller’s board, the early edition in big, bold, black capitals: MEDIA BOSS THROWS HERSELF INTO FIRE. What on earth? I grabbed a copy and rushed back to my flat to read it. I needed space to clear my head. It must be Maddy, I thought, it must be the affair.

Back home I flopped into a heap on the sofa, leaning back on a pile of cushions to read the front-page article. After everything that had happened, I was quite looking forward to learning the details of Maddy’s juicy affair,

but I was in for a shock. I scanned the page, racing through the lines at double speed as my stomach turned to water. I felt a trickle of sweat on my brow. My mobile phone buzzed with missed calls and started to ring again. I switched it off.

Renowned television producer Maddy Davenport-Parker took on the BBC this morning, having sent a highly defamatory email to Commissioning Editor Ian Leighton. The contents of the email are said to be highly insulting to both Mr Leighton and the channel. Our source said that the comments may have been fuelled by an earlier viewing at independent television production company On Fire where Leighton demanded a new series to be reworked for transmission at the very last minute. The source also speculated as to whether Managing Director Davenport-Parker intended to send the email, as it appeared to be unfinished, unsigned and containing many litigious statements which we can only describe as outrageous, personal slants in the worst possible taste. We wait to see if Mr Leighton or the BBC will take action. Mrs Davenport-Parker is currently unavailable for comment.

I ran to the toilet feeling nauseous and was instantly sick, swiftly pulling my hair out of the way of the torrent. On wobbly legs I made it to bed, and collapsed into a deep, deep sleep, fully clothed, till the early hours of the next morning, when I awoke with a start, remembering that I'd agreed to meet Remi to go shopping, after an early morning yoga class and brunch. It was just what I needed!