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BIG KISS.
LOTS OF LOVE.
BYE.

SWIPE RIGHT

A story about online dating, beautiful illusions, and desires unleashed

LISA LUCAS

Lisa Lucas
**Swipe Right. A story about
online dating, beautiful
illusions, and desires unleashed**

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Аннотация

The book describes the journeys of a young, successful woman in search of new impressions through dating applications. Before her opens a whole world with offers ranging from simple romantics to influential investors.

Whom to select, how to communicate, and, primarily, what to desire?

Questions, to which the heroine is assisted in answering by her friend and mentor, sharing her rich experience of relationships.

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Lisa Lucas

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This book contains explicit language and sexual content and is intended for readers aged 18 and over.

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persons, living or dead, or to actual events is either coincidental or used fictitiously.

Part I

Valeria

[WhatsApp]

#

“Hi, Lera. I wanted to ask you about Tinder. I’m thinking of signing up. I’d like to meet someone — not for sex, though. I’m looking for a relationship. Is that even possible? Anything I should or shouldn’t do?”

“You mean in Moscow?”

“Yeah. Can you filter people by location?”

“On the free version, you only see people nearby. If you pay, you can set your location anywhere in the world.

“I’ve been using Tinder for years, so I can usually tell a lot just from someone’s profile. First, I set the location, then I ask where they live and what they do for a living. I also prefer men who run their own businesses.

“And funnily enough, I always swipe right on profiles without photos — they often turn out to be the most interesting people.”

“Seriously? No one’s going to swipe right on me if I don’t have a photo. Are people using their real names?”

“Some do, some don’t. If things go well, they’ll usually tell you

their real name later.”

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“I signed up yesterday. Honestly, they’re all so unattractive.”

“Set your location to London. That’s where all the gorgeous and smart men are. In Moscow, everyone filters for women under thirty. If anyone asks why I’m looking abroad, I just say I’ve recently been there — or I’m planning a trip. That’s exactly what I did when I was matching with people in Montenegro. If looks are your priority, try Stockholm or Copenhagen instead.

“You can find absolutely anyone on Tinder — but you have to keep looking and never get emotionally attached too soon. Even if you’re already seeing someone, don’t stop browsing.

“When you’re having regular sex, you naturally become more attractive to other people. It’s instinctive. And even if you’re not in a relationship, simply being in that searching mindset gives you a certain energy. People pick up on it. The more people I meet, the more convinced I become that it’s simply a numbers game.” In everyday life our world is small. Home. Work. The gym. Weekend trips. We already know everyone around us, and it’s unlikely a colleague will suddenly reveal an entirely new side of themselves. The same goes for bumping into someone at the supermarket — those romantic movie moments rarely happen in

real life.

Travelling is one of the best ways to broaden your horizons and meet new people. But most of us can't afford to travel all the time. Once or twice a year is wonderful, but it's a bit like casually browsing job listings — you aren't actively looking, but if something interesting comes along, great.

Dating apps changed that. Now one can meet anyone at any time: a pilot, a banker, an actor, a founder, a crypto investor — whoever one's curious about. The trick is learning how to choose well. Out of fifty matches, perhaps three will genuinely catch your attention. One of those might turn into a real conversation. Anything beyond that is even less likely. But if you swipe through five hundred profiles, you'll probably end up with thirty worthwhile contacts. Among them, one person may stand out. Three thousand profiles? Your chances of finding someone truly exceptional become surprisingly real.

Whether that story turns into a great love or just a beautiful chapter isn't entirely up to us. What is up to us is creating the opportunity for it to happen.

The platform matters, too. Every dating app attracts people looking for different things — marriage, long-term relationships, casual dating or sex. Tinder has the widest audience, but it's also the noisiest. That's why it's so important to know exactly what you're looking for before you start.

As complicated as it may seem, attraction happens almost instantly. Sometimes a single photograph, a short bio or a shared

interest is enough to make you think, *yes. This person.*

The opposite is true as well. If you don't feel even a spark after your first interaction online, don't expect those feelings to magically appear later. Sometimes one tiny detail is all it takes.

Beauty, intelligence, humour and kindness mean something different to every one of us. Those differences are exactly what help us recognise our own person among thousands of strangers. The more specific your standards are, the longer the search will probably take. But when you know what you want — and why you want it — the search is worth it.

There are plenty of intelligent people. Intelligent and funny is rarer. Intelligent, funny and financially successful? Rarer still. And those who are all of that and genuinely attractive? They're unicorns. But they do exist. And they're looking for someone, too. I'm not even talking about deeper qualities yet. Those only reveal themselves with time. But intelligence, education, financial stability and physical attraction? You can usually get a pretty good sense of those within the first ten minutes of chatting. Isn't that remarkable? It saves you from dozens of awkward first dates. Unless, of course, awkward first dates are your thing. As for me, my standards are high. If it isn't leading towards marriage, then at the very least it should be a relationship that genuinely enriches my life.

I want a man to bring something into my world that I haven't been able to create on my own. That's why I'm selective. And, in my experience, it's worth it.

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“Lera, why would a great guy — a surgeon — message me and then disappear before he’d even seen my reply?”

“It happens. Don’t overthink it. Just keep looking.”

“He got back to me. Said he’d just finished surgery. But I’ve already started talking to someone else — a realtor.”

“Perfect. Keep them both. And keep looking.”

“The realtor wants my social media, but there’s nothing on there worth showing. The surgeon says he’s only interested in good sex right now. He told me to get in touch next time I’m in London.”

“Well, you want good sex too, don’t you? Ask him to move the conversation over to WhatsApp.”

“The realtor seems to be after sex as well, but I could actually imagine something more serious with the surgeon. They’re both surprised I’m in Moscow.”

“Then fly over. Or let them come to you. Surgeons are usually either alcoholics or perverts. But generous. That’s why I like them.”

“I’d happily fly over for a weekend. The realtor says he’ll spoil me.”

“Good.”

“I think I’d rather book my own hotel for the first meeting. How do I tell him that?”

“Just say you’d feel more comfortable meeting on neutral ground.”

“And what if he expects to stay in my room?”

“Then you make it clear from the start that whether he stays is entirely your decision.”

“He’s gorgeous.” I sent Lera his photo.

“Looks like you’re in for a good weekend. But don’t stop looking. That’s Tinder’s golden rule.”

“I’ve still got the surgeon quietly waiting in the background. He’s much more reserved. Still, all of this is putting me in a good mood.”

“Exactly. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along. The secret is not to expect anything. Then every date feels like a success. And remember why you’re doing this. If you stop meeting new people, life starts standing still.”

“Not expecting anything is the hardest part.”

“Relax. You’ve already realised how many men are out there. And tomorrow there’ll be even more.”

“I’ve already upgraded to Tinder Gold. And I’ve switched off the setting that shows my profile to everyone. Now only the men I like can see me.”

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Lera and I met ten years ago on an interior design course. I was twenty-six; she was thirty-three.

She'd already been married and had a son. I, meanwhile, was in the middle of a whirlwind romance with my English boyfriend — the man who would later become my husband. She caught my attention from the very first class. There was something effortlessly graceful about her. She spoke quietly and thoughtfully, never trying to dominate the room. A delicate blonde with striking features and an unmistakable sense of style, she wore the sort of clothes few people could pull off — like a bright pink fox-fur coat — and somehow made them look perfectly natural.

For the entire year we studied together, she drove from her hometown of Nizhny Novgorod to Moscow — without a driving licence. When I finally found out, I wasn't even surprised.

It seemed exactly like something Lera would do. She always kept a bottle of expensive vodka in the boot of her car. "For bribes," she'd say with a smile. She never drank a drop herself.

During the course she stayed with different classmates in their spacious Moscow flats, moving from one home to another as naturally as if she'd always belonged there. People simply enjoyed having her around.

She was one of those rare people who seemed to get along with everyone. I don't remember her arguing with anyone — not

once — even though our class had more than its fair share of drama.

She struck me as extraordinarily kind, almost as though she'd been born without the instinct to compete. She never fought for attention, approval or status. She accepted people exactly as they were. At the time we weren't especially close. To me, she seemed almost otherworldly — untouched by everyday concerns or material things.

She barely ate, surviving mainly on a single protein bar each day. Some people mistook her gentleness for naivety.

She'd occasionally arrive late because she'd been trying to figure out how to buy a tram ticket, which always made me wonder where she'd ever needed to take a tram in the first place.

Her final project suited her perfectly. She designed a villa in the Seychelles inspired by the island's iconic *coco de mer* — the enormous palm seed shaped like a woman's hips and long believed to be a powerful aphrodisiac.

When the course ended, everyone went their separate ways. Most of our classmates stayed in interior design. I didn't.

Lera continued working on projects across Russia and Europe. She was rarely in Russia, and people often wondered how someone who seemed so absent-minded managed to build such a successful life.

For years we saw each other only at the occasional reunion. Then the pandemic came. My husband died.

Lera was one of the very few people who truly knew how to

support me. Her own mother had died of cancer not long before, so she understood grief without needing it explained.

We met again in August 2020, when I visited Nizhny Novgorod with my parents. That afternoon changed the way I saw her. The gentle, dreamy woman I remembered was still there. But beneath that softness was extraordinary strength. Wisdom. A quiet resilience I'd never noticed before. Meeting her felt like finding a lifeboat after a shipwreck. Except Lera didn't just throw me a rope. She handed me the whole boat. Freely. Without hesitation. Without expecting anything in return.

These days she divides her time between the South of France, Monaco and Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. She's in her early forties now. And from where I'm standing, she's living exactly the life she wants.

#

“Lera, how are you? I've got a little fling going with the realtor from Tinder. He's already talking about meeting me anywhere in the world.”

“Then meet him as soon as you can.”

“We're thinking about Turkey. Why the rush? Does the magic wear off?”

“Yes. It's much easier to work out whether it's a yes or a no

if you meet quickly.”

“London would obviously be easier. But what about Turkey? If we meet in Istanbul, should we stay in the same hotel room or book separate ones?”

“Darling... I don’t know. If you’ve already been talking openly about sex, separate rooms seem a bit pointless.”

“What exactly am I supposed to find out? I’m almost certain the sex will be good. It’s everything after that you can’t predict.”

“Exactly. Whether anything comes of it or not, the sooner you know, the better.”

“He keeps sending me photos of himself at home — watching TV with his dog, drinking wine. Things like, ‘If only you were here with me.’ Tell me, if we stay in the same room, he’s paying, right?”

“Of course. But I always ask, ‘Are you inviting me?’ That way there are no misunderstandings.”

“God, I wouldn’t even know how to ask that.”

“Learn. It’s an essential skill. Think of him as practice.”

“When we talked about London, he said I could always stay at his place. I told him I’d rather book a hotel the first time. He said, ‘Fine, I’ll arrange one for you.’ I said I’d book it myself. Then he replied, ‘In that case, I’ll just spoil you instead.’”

“Why did you insist on booking it yourself? Now he’ll think you’re one of those fiercely independent women.”

“Because I want to stay independent.”

“You already are. If a man wants sex, he pays. That’s how it

works almost everywhere.”

“But I want sex too.”

“So? You’re still the woman. When the hotel comes up again, just tell him you’re happy to come — as long as he’s taking care of everything.”

“I’m simply more comfortable paying my own way. Probably out of habit. I can let a man look after me once we’ve built some trust. My goal is something long-term. I’ve already caught myself imagining that, if things worked out, maybe one day he’d ask me to move in with him.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself. Don’t rush. Don’t take the lead. If he offers, accept. If he doesn’t, don’t push.”

“I know. But if I didn’t genuinely like him, I wouldn’t even be thinking like this. I’ve already turned down ten men on Tinder who wanted to meet.”

“Zhenya, wanting someone sexually isn’t the same as loving them. Real attachment comes later — usually after two or three months, once you actually know the person.”

“But I wasn’t attracted to the others at all.”

“That’s your brain making the choice. Your libido picked the realtor.”

“It definitely did...”

“Good. Stay in that phase for now. Later you’ll work out what you really like — and what you don’t.”

“So, what should I do now?”

“Nothing. Watch. Learn. Test things. And keep your options

open. You get attached far too quickly. I had to train myself out of that. These days the only thing I emotionally depend on is the moment they transfer me the money. Everything else leaves me completely calm.”

She added another story.

“Not long ago I pushed an older man into a complete meltdown. Usually, I persuade them to make expensive purchases for me, but this one turned out to be unusually stingy. Afterwards I even suggested therapy. He refused. Today he wrote asking for the therapist’s phone number — just so I’d reply.”

I smiled. Lera had a talent for turning almost any situation into an anecdote.

“You’ve decided money is your goal,” I wrote.

“Mine is material too, in a way — but it’s much bigger than that. I’ve realised I don’t want to live in Russia anymore. I honestly can’t imagine building my future here. I want to move to England. One of the biggest reasons is my son. He’s half English, he has a British passport, and I believe that’s where he should grow up. So, whenever I meet a man now, I already know what my long-term goal is. If we’re building a future together, he’ll have to be willing to help us build a life there. That means helping us relocate, supporting us while we settle, and giving my son the education I want him to have. That’s what I’m looking for.”

Lera replied almost immediately.

“That’s not unrealistic at all. It’s actually a very clear plan. The important thing is making the right man fall in love with

you. Everything else follows. Every man who's ever bought me an apartment eventually asked the same question: 'What did you do to me? How did I end up doing everything you wanted?'"

"If a man wants something different from life," I wrote, "then we'll simply go our separate ways. I'm not interested in exchanging sex for money. Money disappears. The rest of life doesn't."

"Exactly, it's not that his plans are wrong. They're just different from yours. People stay together when they meet each other's needs. Sometimes I know from the very beginning that someone isn't right for me. But if he's already in love... I might still enjoy the situation."

"Right now, my biggest priority is getting my son into the best English school I can. I can manage the first couple of years on my own. After that, the fees are close to thirty thousand pounds a year. I won't be able to do it alone. I'll need help."

"You're thinking about it exactly the right way. Life gives us what we're ready to receive."

"So, here's the plan. We meet in Istanbul. He falls in love. He asks me to move to England. We build a life together. And if none of that happens... then I probably won't see him again."

"Perfect."

"And if I realise, he's not looking in that direction," I continued, "I'll lose interest — even if he looks like a Greek god."

I sent another photo. A ridiculously handsome man from Tinder.

“Not my type. Men that handsome are usually in love with themselves.”

A moment later another message appeared.

“I’ve noticed something else. European men — especially British men — seem tired of casual dating. More and more of them genuinely want relationships.”

That was reassuring.

“One thing I really liked,” I wrote, “was that Warren wasn’t bothered by my past. I told him about my husband and my son. It didn’t seem to change anything.”

“A lot of men actually prefer women with children,” Lera replied. “He has two children himself. Then remember one thing. He’s probably paying a fortune in child support.”

I smiled. “At least we both have dogs.”

“That’s a start.”

“Goodnight, darling.”

Warren was exactly my type. Imagine a cross between George Clooney and David Beckham. He was a laid-back former rocker whose greying hair only made him more attractive. Lean, toned and effortlessly masculine, he looked after himself without looking as though he spent his life in the gym.

I found him irresistible. Sometimes I’d catch myself staring at his photos for far longer than I meant to. The way he sat. The tilt of his head. The look in his eyes. Everything about him made me feel as though we were meant to find each other.

He kept sending me little glimpses of his everyday life, and

somehow, they felt like snapshots of my own future. There he was cycling past Buckingham Palace in his cycling gear. Fresh out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, his hair still damp. Having drinks with friends. Playing golf. Watching his children run through the park. Making pasta together for dinner.

I couldn't get enough of it. I wanted that life more than anything. It was exactly how I'd imagined my future in London. And Warren — everything about him — seemed to fit perfectly into that picture.

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“Hi, darling. Things with my Englishman are getting serious. He won't let me out of his sight. ‘Goodnight, darling.’ ‘Morning, beautiful.’ The connection between us feels incredible. I've already stopped talking to everyone else — they simply don't compare.

“Now he keeps asking whether I could imagine moving to London. He drops hints about wanting something serious, sends me photos of his children... everything. I'd happily fly over for a weekend, but England still has a fourteen-day quarantine, which makes it impossible. Maybe that's actually for the best. I'd rather meet somewhere neutral first and see whether he really means everything he says. Istanbul would be perfect. He suggested it

himself before.

“But just an hour ago he messaged saying he’s trying to work out who could look after his children. ‘Maybe it’s better if we wait until you come to London.’ Honestly, Lera, I’m so annoyed I feel like telling him to get lost.”

“Don’t.”

“Give him time.”

“You can always tell him off later if he turns out to be useless.”

“For now, just say: ‘No problem. Let me know when you’re ready to meet. Take care until then.’”

“You believed his words too quickly.”

“Words are an illusion.”

“Actions are reality.”

“You know, if he does agree to Istanbul, I want him to buy both tickets himself. At least then I’ll know he’s serious and won’t back out. Meanwhile he’s sending me messages about how lovely the weather is in London this weekend — twenty-eight degrees — and how wonderful it would be to walk around the city together. Honestly... what am I even supposed to say to that?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t answer.”

“Darling, there are thousands of men like him.”

“Right now, your job is simply to gain experience.”

A few days later, Warren pleasantly surprised me. He agreed to meet in Istanbul. I was over the moon.

We started comparing flights, and I suggested staying at Soho

House Istanbul — a stylish, bohemian hotel I'd always wanted to visit.

I sent him my passport details. For the first time, I felt genuinely proud of myself. I'd persuaded a man I'd never even met to fly to another country just to see me. Maybe online dating really was that powerful.

Then he sent me his flight confirmation. Just his. I asked where my ticket was.

He admitted, quite openly, that he'd assumed I'd buy my own. I felt as though someone had pulled the rug out from under me. I'd genuinely believed he would pay for everything. Apparently, he'd never imagined that. He explained that his ex-wife was Swedish, and where she came from, men and women generally split costs equally.

We ended the conversation with the polite phrase “cultural differences.” But underneath that politeness, I felt deeply disappointed.

Naturally, I immediately sent screenshots to my WhatsApp coach.

“He’s trying to explain himself,” I wrote. “Here’s what he’s saying:”

“I didn’t expect you to pay, but equally I didn’t expect to pay for everything myself. Spending a hundred or two hundred pounds on dinner and drinks for a first date feels perfectly normal to me. But paying around a thousand pounds for flights before we’ve even met is a lot — for anyone, man or woman. If we

were already together and going away as a couple, that would be different.”

Lera’s reply came almost instantly.

“He’s simply not wealthy. In Europe, an €800 restaurant bill on a first date isn’t unusual if you’re dating genuinely wealthy men. I’ve had plenty of dinners like that. At least you discovered this before ordering Dom Pérignon. “You always blame yourself. Don’t. You set a boundary. That’s exactly what you were supposed to do. Now he’s the one trying to justify himself. People are different. Think of it as passing the first test.”

“You still haven’t realised how limitless online dating really is. After the pandemic, everyone moved online. Just like in real life, you’ll meet every kind of person imaginable. I’ve dated billionaires, heirs, owners of clinics, architecture firms, famous companies — you name it. Half of them I’ve probably forgotten by now. Of course, it wasn’t all plain sailing.

“My very first online date was with a writer who also worked as a lawyer for the German government in Munich — I can’t even remember which department now. The only presents he ever bought me were perfumes. That wasn’t enough, so I sent him packing.

“Then there was the heir to a family estate outside Munich, complete with hotels and restaurants. He was a lovely, cheerful country boy, but I’d have had to wait for his entire family to die before he inherited anything. He had no cash of his own, although he was genuinely kind and hopelessly in love with me.

“After him came a millionaire — a major hotel developer in Kitzbühel and Kufstein, with properties in some of Europe’s most exclusive locations. Then there was a factory owner, whom I eventually introduced to a friend. We weren’t each other’s type, but he moved in the same circles as Trump, and his name regularly appeared in the German papers.

“And those are only the ones I still remember. There were plenty of others — rich, poor, generous, stingy, every kind imaginable. I once ended things with a man simply because I hated the hotel, he’d booked for us in Munich. Unfortunately for him, I happened to be seeing Oleg at the same time, and Oleg was putting me up in presidential suites. Compared with that, the Austrian never stood a chance.

“I still managed to get a few gifts out of him. For someone who claimed to be a millionaire, he wasn’t nearly generous enough. That’s the thing — truly generous men are much rarer than rich men. That’s why I always tell you: take what you can, then move on from the stingy ones. A generous man gives willingly. A stingy one takes work.”

She paused before adding, “Ironically, the most generous men I’ve ever met weren’t online at all. I met them in real life. It’s a pattern I’ve noticed.”

“But I wouldn’t exactly call it a free holiday,” I said. “You’re still paying with something.”

“At first I slept with them because I genuinely wanted to. I hadn’t had sex for ages. Later, I only did if there were presents

involved.

“Every single man who’s ever given me something still messages me. They invite me out. They don’t forget. That’s how men work.

“If you want a man to become attached, let him invest in you first. Only then sleep with him. Do it the other way round, and the game’s usually over.”

“He texted me today,” I said. “Here’s what he wrote: ‘This is exactly why I didn’t want a long-distance relationship. I really like you, Ginny. I want us to be together because I’m sure we’d get on brilliantly. But I can’t promise you more than I can realistically give. My children come first, and they need me here. If you already lived in the UK, we’d probably spend every day together.’”

Lera’s answer came almost immediately.

“He’s a drama king.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s creating emotional tension instead of solving the problem. He enjoys the drama. Play along if you like — but don’t believe it.” She carried on.

“In America, a man wouldn’t dream of approaching a woman with speeches like that unless he’d turned up with a Cartier box in his pocket. That’s why American men are often so generous. They’re raised to understand that courting a woman costs money.

“Sometimes I simply tell them, ‘I know what men spend on women in America.’ There’s usually nothing they can say after

that.”

“Lera, I don’t want to sound like a prostitute. I could never say something like that.”

“‘Prostitute’ is simply a profession. Everything comes down to an agreement between two adults. The only question is whether the arrangement suits you.

“But let’s be realistic. An Englishman with two children isn’t going to pay thirty thousand pounds a year for your son’s education unless he’s genuinely wealthy.”

“There’s something else, though. He keeps talking about a relationship. That’s different from just trying to hook up for the night.”

“In a real relationship, a man naturally wants to make a woman’s life better. That doesn’t mean the gifts stop.

“Once I had dinner with a Jewish man. Afterwards he assumed he’d be staying at my flat. I didn’t argue. I simply went to bed and fell asleep. The next time he came to Baden, he booked himself a hotel.”

She smiled. “Lesson learned. Now he’s trying to persuade me to go to Italy with him.”

“So, it’s all just strategy? And here I was thinking there was such a thing as romance.”

“That Jewish man thought it was romance too. It’s simply natural selection. Not every man can afford the life you want. That’s why you test them early. The sooner you understand who you’re dealing with, the less time you waste.

“By the way, there’s a much better dating app than Tinder in London. I’ll remember the name later.”

“I still hate thinking that maybe it all came down to money. Or that I scared him away by being too direct.”

“Zhenya, stop analysing him. Why waste your energy trying to understand someone you barely know? The only conclusion that matters is that he isn’t right for you. You decided much too quickly that he was.

“Men like him are everywhere. Every third man in Europe is like that. Set Tinder to Stockholm one evening — you’ll be amazed. When I was there, my biggest problem was figuring out how to squeeze five dates into one night.”

She laughed. “Stockholm left a huge impression on me. But Copenhagen... that’s my dream city. Whenever I really liked someone, I’d leave my number on a paper napkin in restaurants. Tinder in Copenhagen is incredible. Unfortunately, during Covid it was pointless. London, though...”

She paused. “...London is much easier.”

“I can’t stop thinking that maybe I ruined everything,” I admitted. “Maybe I offended him. If I’d handled it differently, perhaps it could have worked.”

Lera wasn’t convinced.

“I’ve already told you — you didn’t offend him. He enjoyed the fantasy while it lasted. Now it’s over. He’s a hero in a virtual romance, nothing more.”

She paused before adding, “And you’re making one very

common mistake. You think you've fallen in love with him. You haven't. Listen to a few good psychologists talking about relationships. Once you understand how men and women actually bond, all of this will start making sense."

"Then why did he end it?" I asked. "I could have carried on sending him photos. There are plenty of men on Tinder looking for serious relationships."

"Because he'd had enough."

She shrugged, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. "That's all."

Then she added, "Of course men are looking for relationships. But ask yourself one question. If he isn't willing to invest in you now, what exactly are you hoping will change later?"

Lera had developed her own theory about relationships.

"I've realised there's always a top position and a bottom position. If you want to feel secure with a man, you have to stay in the stronger position. That affects everything — how you behave, what you say, even how you think."

She smiled. "If I decide to sleep with a man, I never think of it as him 'getting' me. I'm choosing him. And I'm getting something valuable in return. You can only think like that once you've stopped depending on him emotionally. All your love should be directed towards yourself. Everything else is theatre."

She knew I wasn't there yet.

"It'll take time," she said more gently. "You've spent years trusting men too quickly. That habit keeps knocking you off

balance. Experience is the only thing that changes it.”

Then she became almost teacher-like.

“The biggest problem is expectation. Not just expectations of men — of anyone. Words don’t entitle us to expect anything. Only actions do. Serious people don’t make promises unless they’re prepared to keep them.”

She laughed. “Whenever someone talks too much, test them immediately. Tell them: ‘you said this would happen. I’ll give it three days. If nothing changes, I’ll know where I stand.’”

“And stop blaming yourself.” She sounded almost irritated. “Where did that habit even come from? Who convinced you that you’re always hurting people? We don’t offend anyone. People choose whether they’re offended. That’s their decision, not ours. If someone crosses your boundaries, the answer isn’t guilt. It’s stronger boundaries.”

I reminded her of something she’d once said. “You told me you have an avoidant attachment style.”

She nodded. “That’s the result of old trauma. It’s hardly a superpower. I’ve simply learned to use it. I tend to attract anxious men because they become emotionally invested very quickly. That only works during the honeymoon phase. After that, it stops. You can’t build a healthy relationship that way.”

She smiled to herself. “The funny thing is, I used to be anxiously attached too. Then I spent three months listening to the same psychologist every single day. Another three months putting it all into practice. Eventually my brain changed.”

She laughed. “Now, whenever I really like a man, my first instinct is to push him away. You need to send at least ten men packing before your brain starts building new neural pathways.”

Lera wasn't finished.

“I have rules for myself too,” she said. “I won't even consider meeting a man unless he's already done something meaningful for me. I watch what he does, not what he says. Right from the start, I make it clear that I live in a five-star hotel.”

She smiled. “That way he understands the conversation starts somewhere around Prada. If he doesn't want to buy gifts, then he'd better have something equally valuable to offer. A luxury holidays. Useful help. Access to something I couldn't easily arrange for myself. Anything that genuinely adds value to my life.”

She leaned back. “The more a man invests in a woman, the more valuable she becomes to him. That's simply how people work.”

She paused before telling me another story.

“Here's an example. About two and a half years ago I met a man on Tinder. We had lunch once. He played polo. Owned a yacht. Had a hotel. Drove a Porsche.”

She shrugged. “Upper-middle class by German standards. Nothing extraordinary. During lunch I needed to stop at a pharmacy. The bill came to about a hundred and fifty euros. He paid without hesitation.”

She nodded approvingly. “That immediately told me

something important. He was comfortable spending money on a woman.”

Her expression softened. “That same day my mother died. I flew home immediately.”

For a moment she fell silent. Then she continued.

“Afterwards we stayed in touch. One day I told him quite openly that if I came to visit him, I’d want to go shopping first. He kept sending me photos of himself enjoying life. I ignored most of them. Then lockdown happened. Everyone was bored. One day he wrote: ‘Do you still remember me?’ I waited until the next day before replying.”

She smiled. “People value attention more when they don’t receive it immediately. Not long ago I was planning a trip to Düsseldorf. I remembered he had a hotel nearby. So, I messaged him. He replied almost instantly. I asked him to send me a hotel booking confirmation because I needed it for the police during quarantine. He made the reservation straight away.”

“Then added that I was welcome to stay there if I wanted. I told him I’d think about it.”

A few days later he wrote again. “Have you decided? We need to know whether to keep the room reserved.”

She laughed. “It was obvious he wanted to see me. So, I agreed. The day we met was incredibly hot. He suggested going out on his yacht. It suited him.”

She grinned. “I needed some sunshine. And I hadn’t had sex for a while. So, I said yes. He collected me from the hotel with

my suitcase. We had oysters for lunch. Then we headed out onto the river. The yacht was beautiful. Comfortable. Immaculately maintained. That evening we stayed at a lovely restaurant with rooms overlooking the water.”

She looked at me. “And yes. We slept together. The next morning, he was a completely different man.”

“Different how?” I asked.

“He said he’d take me back to the hotel. ‘You can stay there until Sunday,’ he told me. ‘I’m busy now, but if I have time, maybe we’ll meet again on Saturday.’”

She gave a small smile. “I wasn’t surprised.”

“That’s strange,” I said. “Do you think he didn’t enjoy the sex?”

Lera laughed. “It had nothing to do with the sex. Men are remarkably predictable. They climax, and that’s it.”

She shrugged. “For them, sex itself doesn’t change much from one woman to another. That’s just how they’re wired.”

She took another sip of coffee.

“Look at the situation from his point of view. He’s single. Comfortable. Used to living exactly as he pleases. So far, he’d spent, what... about a hundred and fifty euros on me? Seeing me again would almost certainly mean spending more.”

She smiled. “Simple maths. Once you understand the calculation, you stop taking it personally. Men commit when they’re ready to invest. Financially. Emotionally. Practically. Nothing else really matters. If they’re not ready, they’ll disappear

after sex.”

She looked at me. “And that’s perfectly normal.”

“So, if a man walks away after sleeping with you, don’t make it about yourself. It doesn’t necessarily mean you did anything wrong. It simply means one of two things:”

She raised two fingers. “Either he wasn’t ready. Or you weren’t the right match.”

She paused before adding, “The real disaster isn’t when someone leaves. It’s when two people with completely different needs fall in love. That’s when the drama begins. Infatuation fades. Reality doesn’t. That’s why you’re responsible for your own emotions. No one else. If you choose to fall in love, understand what you’re risking. Every outcome is possible.”

She smiled gently. “These days a lot of psychologists describe infatuation as a kind of temporary illness. You develop powerful feelings for someone who’s essentially still a stranger. When you think about it like that... it sounds almost absurd.”

A few days later another message from Lera popped up on my phone. “I remembered the name of that British dating app.”

A second message followed immediately. “Hinge. Give it a try.”

The Introduction

September 2020

Of course, I quickly figured out how to use the new dating app, and I was amazed by the calibre of men on it.

One of Hinge's biggest advantages was its filters. Unlike Tinder, it let you narrow your search by education, religion, ethnicity and a whole range of other criteria. The moment I switched my location to London, it felt as though an entirely different world had opened up before me. Successful, intelligent, upper-middle-class British men.

Thanks to Lera, I already knew one useful trick: always like the profiles without photos. More often than not, they turned out to be the most interesting. But even among the public profiles, there was no shortage of impressive candidates.

Within a couple of weeks, I'd narrowed it down to five men. A middle-aged Danish entrepreneur with an infectious smile and a villa in Spain. An absurdly handsome young chef from London. A wealthy investor who seemed to have all the time in the world. A doctor. And a financier.

I was chatting to all of them at once, swapping photos and getting to know them.

Only one suggested a video call almost immediately. I'd never done one before. His name was Mark. Ironically, he was

probably the least attractive of the five. Yet something about him intrigued me. His photographs weren't posed. One showed him stalking deer in the Scottish Highlands. Another was taken on a golf course. There were pictures from safari trips in Africa and weekends away with friends. No luxury cars. No designer watches. No attempts to prove how wealthy he was. Which, in my experience, usually meant the opposite.

I've always believed that genuinely successful, intelligent men don't feel the need to advertise their status. People now call it quiet luxury. Those who belong to that world recognise it instantly. Those who don't usually try far too hard. And it isn't only about money.

In Europe, wealth often comes with education, manners and culture. The old class system still leaves its mark there, unlike in Russia, where the very idea of old money barely exists. But what attracted me wasn't a bank account. It was something much harder to imitate. Curiosity. Good taste. Emotional intelligence. A certain generosity of spirit.

Those qualities reveal themselves almost immediately. Money doesn't. I've always respected people who genuinely love what they do. A carpenter or a farmer can be just as fascinating as an investment banker if they have an original mind or an unusual way of seeing the world.

Whether we'd have enough in common to build a relationship is another question entirely.

The truth is, I wasn't looking for some profound emotional

connection. Not yet. I was simply trying to survive. It had only been a few months since I'd lost my husband. No words can adequately describe what grief like that feels like. There's almost no point trying. Oddly enough, from the outside I probably looked calmer and more composed than ever.

Years later I finally understood why people contemplating suicide can seem perfectly cheerful. Sometimes the mind protects itself by functioning on autopilot.

I made decisions with startling speed. Almost immediately after the funeral I returned from maternity leave. I started going to the gym again. I kept moving because stopping wasn't an option. I had a one-and-a-half-year-old son in my arms. He was my reason to keep living. At just eighteen months old, he'd already lost his father. I refused to let him grow up with a mother consumed by grief. He deserved the coolest mum in the world. The woman his father had fallen in love with. The woman I used to be.

For the time being, I was doing everything I could to fill the enormous emptiness inside me. Anything was better than falling into it. I knew it would take a long time before I could truly enjoy life again. Before happiness would feel natural. Before I'd be capable of loving someone new. That journey couldn't be rushed. Perhaps it never really ends.

Even years later, the pain doesn't disappear completely. You simply learn to carry it. I've often thought of athletes who lose a limb. Nothing can replace what they've lost. But with time they

learn to walk again. To run. To compete. To discover strengths they never knew they possessed.

Perhaps grief works the same way. You never get your old life back. But you slowly build another one.

Sometimes I wonder whether that's the purpose of suffering. Perhaps we're given these impossible experiences because they're meant to change us. To force us to become someone we could never have become otherwise. To open the door to another life while we're still living this one. That's the only explanation I've ever found that makes sense to me. And somehow... it helps.

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I agreed to a video call with Mark.

I wasn't attracted to him in the slightest, but curiosity got the better of me. I'd just come back from walking the dog and hadn't even bothered to freshen up.

To my surprise, we ended up talking for more than an hour. More importantly, it was genuinely interesting. Unlike any conversation I'd had on a dating app before.

My first impression of Mark wasn't exactly flattering. He looked like the quintessential academic — brilliant, slightly awkward, and completely unconcerned with his appearance. One newspaper had once compared him to a character from *The*

Simpsons.

The resemblance was uncanny. His hair had receded dramatically, leaving only a stubborn tuft at the front. An egg-shaped head. Prominent eyes. A long, slightly hooked nose. Thin. And, unmistakably, an English smile — with teeth that had clearly never met an orthodontist. His grin was so broad it was almost unsettling. It took a little while to realise it was actually rather charming.

He was wearing an ordinary checked shirt with the top two buttons undone. The original wired Apple EarPods dangled from his ears. Nothing about him looked polished.

Yet somehow it all worked. He was lounging in a beautiful neoclassical armchair as though he'd owned it for generations, one leg casually crossed over the other, speaking in flawless, carefully articulated English while punctuating every sentence with elegant gestures. I wasn't physically attracted to him. But I was becoming intrigued.

His education was exactly what you'd expect. Winchester College. Harvard. The University of Edinburgh. Everything about him suggested old British privilege worn lightly.

Behind him hung paintings in ornate gilt frames. During one of our first conversations, he proudly showed me his latest purchase — a nineteenth-century portrait of a young woman — and asked where I thought it should hang. It was the first time a man on a dating app had asked for my opinion on art.

Our conversations soon settled into a rhythm.

Roughly a third of them revolved around his family. There was Mark. His beloved mother. His younger brother, together with his wife and little daughter, who had inherited her mother's Asian features. And an older brother who happened to be in hospital at the time.

Their father had died almost twenty years earlier. Yet he still dominated family conversations.

He had been a distinguished barrister and remained, in Mark's eyes, the embodiment of everything admirable about England.

Much later, when I visited London, Mark took me walking through the quiet lanes of the City. He showed me where his father had lived and worked. Ancient legal chambers tucked away behind heavy gates. Victorian buildings with private entrances reserved for barristers. Stone memorials. Brass plaques. Centuries of tradition preserved in silence. It felt like stepping inside a world that few outsiders ever see.

At that stage, though, none of us had the faintest idea where any of this was heading.

During one of our calls, I mentioned — just as I had to the other four men — that I'd be flying to London the following week and staying from Friday until Monday. Every one of them immediately invited me out. Dinner. Coffee. Cocktails. Whatever I preferred.

The truth, however, was that my thoughts were still with Warren. Despite everything that had happened, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I bought my ticket anyway, navigating all the

Covid restrictions, because I still believed he might be the one.

Out of everyone I'd met online, he felt the most natural. The easiest to talk to. Our conversations flowed effortlessly. Perhaps because he was also the least wealthy. In many ways, he reflected who I was at the time — and what I genuinely needed.

Still, somewhere in the back of my mind lingered Lera's advice. Dream bigger.

So, although Warren occupied most of my thoughts, I deliberately kept him lower on my internal ranking than my emotions wanted him to be.

I organised my weekend with military precision. Maximum coverage. Maximum efficiency.

Warren claimed Friday evening — the night I arrived. I knew perfectly well there was a chance I'd end up spending the entire weekend with him and cancel everyone else. Oddly enough, that possibility didn't bother me. The remaining dates were simply insurance. A backup plan if reality failed to live up to my hopes.

Mark, meanwhile, reacted to the news of my visit with obvious enthusiasm. Before long he'd secured Saturday evening — the second most desirable slot in my carefully planned itinerary. After a Friday night with Warren, meeting Mark felt almost... practical. Not romantic. Just sensible.

I told all five men the same story. That I was coming to England anyway because I had family there. Which, strictly speaking, was true. My late husband's relatives still lived in Britain. The excuse worked perfectly. It meant I could spend a

couple of hours with each man before politely disappearing to my “family commitments.”

I also had a private itinerary of my own. Tate Modern. Borough Market. Long walks through London.

I booked a hotel within walking distance of both. For all the dates I'd arranged, I knew I'd still need time alone with the city.

First Trip to London

October 2020

I'd never felt happier during take-off than I did that morning. For the first time in months, I felt nothing but hope. No fear. No anxiety. Only the certainty that something wonderful was waiting for me. That this trip would change my life.

Even the endless queue at Heathrow passport control couldn't spoil my excitement. England had always been a happy place for me. As a schoolgirl at summer language camp. On business trips. Later, travelling with my husband. Every chapter of my life somehow seemed to lead back here.

When I finally stepped outside the terminal, I paused for a moment. A different light. A different smell. Even London's faintly polluted air felt strangely comforting. I smiled to myself before heading for the Underground. It took about an hour to reach the City, where I'd booked a hotel for the next four nights.

The journey wasn't at all what I'd imagined. Once I'd settled into my seat, I finally messaged Warren. I've arrived. Looking forward to seeing you tonight. His reply came almost immediately. He was spending Friday with his children. Perhaps we could meet on Saturday instead. Saturday. The one day I no longer had available. Mark had already claimed the morning. The Danish entrepreneur had dinner. Sunday and Monday were

completely booked as well. Technically, I could have cancelled everyone. A week earlier I probably would have. Now I simply replied. No problem. Maybe next time.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. For a few minutes it genuinely felt as though the ground had disappeared beneath my feet. To Warren, I was simply another woman from Tinder. One more conversation. One more possibility. Being Russian. Being from Moscow. None of it made me particularly memorable. His priorities were simple. Mine were not. I'd crossed borders during a pandemic because I wanted to meet him. He hadn't crossed an evening.

So, there I was. Alone in London. The person I'd come to see wasn't coming. For weeks I'd imagined our first meeting. Replayed conversations. Invented scenes. Now they dissolved into nothing. Dragging my suitcase towards the hotel, I felt strangely empty. Halfway up the Underground stairs a man stopped and carried my suitcase without me even asking. It was such a small gesture. Yet somehow it made me smile. Maybe everything would be fine after all. Good people exist everywhere. And if all else failed... I'd simply enjoy London on my own.

My room was tiny but beautifully designed. Compact. Comfortable. Everything had its place. There was even a yoga mat tucked neatly into the wardrobe.

Downstairs I bought a salad with nuts and sprouts, carried it upstairs, ate it in silence, took a shower and climbed into bed.

Someone from Hinge offered to meet me for a drink in the

hotel bar. I declined. I was exhausted. Emotionally drained. Besides, I had breakfast with Mark the following morning. Looking back, saying no that evening turned out to be one of the best decisions I made.

Only a couple of hours earlier I'd imagined waking up beside Warren on Saturday morning and texting Mark to cancel. Life had other plans.

Mark suggested meeting at the Grosvenor House Hotel. Elegant. Traditional. Unmistakably five-star. The sort of place that makes you instinctively straighten your back before walking through the door. It was only twenty minutes from my hotel. I could easily have walked. But arriving slightly out of breath in high heels with windswept hair somehow felt wrong. Places like that deserve an entrance. If not in a limousine... then at least in a black cab. I hailed one of London's iconic taxis. The ride lasted barely seven minutes. Just long enough for my confidence to evaporate. Oddly enough, it wasn't my outfit I doubted. That part was perfect. A Burberry trench. A fine black cashmere turtleneck. High-waisted flared jeans. Tod's heeled ankle boots. An Hermès silk scarf. The clothes weren't the problem. It was the disappointment from the night before. Part of me had stopped caring. Perhaps that showed. Perhaps it even suited me. As we approached the hotel, the driver caught my eye in the mirror.

"So..." he said with a grin.

"Off on a Tinder date?"

I almost choked.

Trying to sound completely professional, I answered far too quickly.

“No. It’s a work meeting.”

On a Saturday morning. Even to my own ears it sounded ridiculous. Fortunately, he let it go. The cab rolled through magnificent wrought-iron gates into the hotel’s courtyard. The driver stopped.

“There are several restaurants.” he said.

“Which one are you after?”

“I... honestly don’t know.”

I decided the safest option was to ask at reception where breakfast was being served.

He stepped out, opened the door for me, and I climbed out as gracefully as I could. Then he smiled.

“Good luck, miss.”

I felt my face instantly turn crimson.

“Thank you.”

As I crossed the courtyard, I couldn’t help imagining Mark watching from one of the restaurant windows. Perhaps he’d seen me arrive. The black cab. The hesitant search for the entrance. Oddly enough... I liked the picture it created.

The Meeting

At reception, I explained that I was meeting someone for breakfast. The receptionist pointed me towards one of the restaurants, and I tried to walk in as though I belonged there. Scanning the immaculate white tablecloths, I spotted Mark immediately. He was reading the morning paper. As soon as he saw me, he folded it, stood up and came over with an easy smile. We hugged like old friends.

“Have you eaten?” I asked.

“I have.”

“I’ve only managed one miserable teabag so far this morning.”

“Then you absolutely must order breakfast.”

I didn’t need persuading.

A waiter handed me the menu, and without thinking twice I ordered a cappuccino and a croissant.

I’ve never understood women who pretend not to eat on first dates. If I’m hungry, I’m hungry. A warm croissant always wins.

A few minutes later an enormous basket of pastries arrived with butter and several homemade jams. Perfect.

“Right,” I said, breaking off the first flaky piece.

“You talk while I eat.”

Mark laughed. He clearly regarded that as an invitation.

Fortunately, he was fascinating company. Once breakfast was over, he outlined his carefully planned itinerary. A walk through

the City. Lunch at Borough Market. Then Tate Modern. We had three, perhaps four hours before I had to leave for dinner with the Danish entrepreneur. Mark looked exactly as he had on our video calls. Checked shirt. Jeans. A dark cashmere zip-up jumper. His trainers looked decidedly well worn. That detail bothered me more than it probably should have.

Outside, he pulled on a lightweight jacket and added a baseball cap. "*In case it rains.*" I hadn't planned for rain. My trench coat could cope. My blow-dry couldn't. His walking pace proved another challenge. He strode confidently over centuries-old cobblestones while I tried not to twist an ankle in heeled boots. Within minutes we'd disappeared into the narrow streets of the City. Listening to Mark was like walking through London with a living history book. Every alley. Every church. Every hidden courtyard. Every statue. He knew the story behind all of them. I'd visited London many times before. Yet somehow this felt like seeing the city for the first time. Every so often he glanced at his battered old iPhone. The screen was cracked. He was checking the time, recalculating the route, making sure we'd fit everything in. In little over an hour, I learned more about London's history than I had throughout school and university combined. And hearing it from someone whose family had lived here for generations made all the difference. I couldn't imagine the day getting any better. I was wrong. Eventually Mark realised we'd wandered much farther than he'd intended.

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