



Mr. Maybe: A Novel

by Jane Green

Excerpt

Chapter 1

Nick was never supposed to be The One, for God's sake. Even I knew that. And yes, I know those that are happily married often say you can't know, not immediately, but of course I knew. Not that he sounded wrong -- Nick spoke the Queen's English slightly better than myself, but nothing else was right, nothing else fitted.

There was the money thing, for a start. My job as a PR might not be the highest-paying job in the universe, but it pays the bills, pays the mortgage, and leaves me just enough for the odd bit of retail therapy. Nick, on the other hand, didn't earn a penny. Well, perhaps that's a bit of an exaggeration, but he wasn't like all the other boyfriends I'd had, wasn't rolling in it, and, although that's not my main motivation, what I always say is I don't mind if he can't pay for me, but I do bloody well mind if he can't pay for himself.

And though Nick occasionally offered to go dutch, it was with such bad grace and I used to feel so guilty, I'd just push his hand away, tell him not to be so silly and drag out my credit card.

And then there was politics. Or lack thereof, in my case, might be more appropriate. Nick was never happier than when he was with his left-wing cronies, arguing the toss about the pros and cons of New Labour, while I sat there bored out of my mind, not contributing just in case anyone asked me what I voted and I had to grudgingly admit I voted Conservative because, well, because my parents had.

Speaking of pros and cons, it might be easier if I showed you the list I drew up soon after I met Nick. I mean, if I sit here telling you about all the reasons why he wasn't right for me, it would take all day, and I've still got the list, so you may as well read it. It might help you to see why I was so adamant that he was just a fling.

Pros

I fancy the pants off him.

He's got the biggest, softest, bluest eyes I've ever seen.

He's very affectionate.

He's fantastically selfless in bed. (Make that just fantastic.)

He makes me laugh.

Cons

He's got no money.

He lives in a grotty bedsit in Highgate.

He's left-wing/political.

He likes pubs and pints of beer.

I hate his friends.

He's a complete womanizer.

He's allergic to commitment.

He says he's not ready for a relationship. (Although neither am I.)

So there you have it -- far more cons than pros, and, if I'm completely honest, the cons are much more important, I mean, how could I have even thought of getting involved with someone whose friends I hated? I have always, always thought you could judge a person by their friends, and I really should have known better.

But then again, I suppose you can't help who you fancy, can you? And that was the bottom line. I fancied Nick. Fancied him more than I'd fancied anyone in years, and somehow, when someone gives you that tingly feeling in the pit of your stomach, you stop thinking about the rights and wrongs, the shoulds and should nots, and you just go with it.

You're probably wondering how I met Nick, because, let's face it, our paths were hardly destined to cross. I'd known him for a while, actually. He was one of those people I used to see at the odd party when I went out with my friend Sally, Sal, and I never took much notice of him, I didn't see him enough to take much notice of him because I didn't see Sal all that much.

I used to work with Sal, indirectly. Years ago, when I first started as a lowly PR assistant, Sal was a journalist on one of the magazines, and she was about the only person who didn't treat me like shit, so we formed a friendship on the basis of that.

Not that I dislike her. She's a great girl. She's just different. To me, that is. She's more like Nick, and I vaguely remember her having a crush on him. That's probably the only reason I did remember him, she'd ask me to watch him to see if he stared at her, all that sort of stuff, and I did, because she was my friend and it gave me something to do, which was better than standing around bored, wishing I were somewhere else.

She used to drag me along to these parties, student parties I'd think snootily, except no one had been a student for years, but they were always in dilapidated houses, held by the four, or six, people who lived there, and they were never my scene.

Not that I could have afforded the lifestyle I wanted. Not then. Champagne tastes and beer pockets, my mother always used to sniff, if I made the fatal mistake of wearing a new outfit when I went round to see my parents.

"What's that?" she'd say, in a disapproving tone of voice.

"What? This old thing?" I'd learn to say, dismissing my fabulous designer outfit that I loved so much I was wearing it for about the sixth day on the trot. "I've had this for ages." Or, "It was lying around the fashion cupboard at work, so they gave it to me. Do you like it?" It took me a while, but eventually I learned that, as long as I didn't admit to it being new, my mother would like it. If I ever told her I had actually bought something, she'd raise her eyebrows and say, "How much was that?" And I'd mumble a price, usually knocking off around a hundred pounds, and she'd roll her eyes again and shake her head, making me feel like an errant child.

I used to have these dreams about being a career woman. I wanted shoulder pads, briefcases and mobile phones. I wanted designer clothes and a fuck-off flat which had wooden floors and white sofas and enormous bowls of lilies on every polished fruitwood table. I wanted a Mercedes sports car and chunky gold jewelry.

Unfortunately, life in PR is probably not the best way of going about it, because PR seems to be one of the worst-paid professions in the world. I know what I should have done, I should have gone into the City, because I graduated at the tail end of the eighties boom, and I could have made a mint, but I never had a very good brain for money, or numbers, and I would have been hopeless. And PR seemed like the easiest option. It sounded glamorous, exciting, and I wouldn't have to start as a secretary, which I was loath to do, because I would have hated people asking me what I did for a living. In PR I was able to start as a Public Relations Assistant, which, at the ripe old age of twenty-one, made me feel like I'd won the lottery.

I answered an ad in the Guardian, and when I went along for the interview I decided that if I didn't get this job I would die. The offices of Joe Cooper PR were in a backstreet in Kilburn, not the most salubrious of areas, I know, and from the outside it looked just like a big warehouse, but inside it was magnificent. A huge loft, wooden floors, brightly colored chairs and velvet cushions, and a constant buzz of phone conversations from some of the most beautiful people I'd ever seen in my life.

And I looked completely wrong. There they were, everyone in jeans, super-trendy T-shirts and big motorbike boots (which was the look at the time), and there I was in my little Jigsaw two-piece cream suit, with matching high heels and a briefcase clutched in my hand to look more professional.

Shit, I remember thinking when I walked in. Why oh why didn't I research this before I came, but then Joe Cooper came to shake my hand. "You must be Libby," he said, and as soon as I met him I knew I'd like him, and, more important, I knew he'd like me. And he did. And I started the following week on a pittance, but I loved it. God, how I loved it.

Within a month all my friends were green with envy, because I was already on first-name terms with some of the hottest celebrities on TV, and I spent my days helping the actual executives, typing press releases, occasionally baby-sitting those celebrities on their excursions to radio and television shows where they plugged their latest book, or program, or film. And it was so exciting, and I met so many people, and my Jigsaw suit was placed firmly at the back of my wardrobe as I dressed like all the others and I fitted in.

My budding champagne tastes were brought to full fruition at Joe Cooper PR. Admittedly, not in quite the way I'd planned. Instead of Yves Saint Laurent I wanted Rifat Ozbek. Instead of Annabel's I wanted Quiet Storm. Instead of Mortons I wanted the Atlantic Bar, or whatever the hell was in at the time, I can't actually remember. A lot of the time I was "entertaining" clients, so it was on expenses, but when you throw a girl into that sort of lifestyle at work, you can't expect her to be happy with takeaways in the evenings, can you?

And now, finally, I can just about afford to fund my lifestyle, with the help of a very understanding bank manager who agreed to give me an overdraft facility "just in case." Just in case of what? Just in case I should ever not need it? Because I fill my overdraft facility pretty much all the time, but hell, it's only money, and as far as I'm concerned we're only here for about eighty years if we're lucky, so in the grand scheme of things nothing really matters very much, and certainly not money. Or even men, when it comes to it.

Friends are what matter, that's what I've decided. My social life is swings and roundabouts. Sometimes I'm on a social whirl, out every night, grateful for the odd night in watching television and catching up on my sleep. But then everything will slow down for a while, and I'll be in every night, flicking through my address book, wondering why I can't really be bothered to talk to anyone.

Well, not quite anyone. I talk to Jules every day, about five times, even if we don't really have anything to say to each other, which we don't usually, because what news can you possibly tell someone you last spoke

to an hour ago? We usually end up talking shit. She'll phone me up and say, "I've just eaten half a packet of biscuits and a cheese and pickle sandwich. I feel sick."

And I'll say, "I had a toasted bagel with smoked salmon, no butter, and one stick of Twix," and that will be it.

Or I'll phone her and say, "I'm just calling to say hi."

And she'll sigh and say, "Hi. Any news?"

"No. You?"

"No."

"Okay, talk to you later."

"Okay."

We never, ever, say goodbye, or talk to you at the weekend, or even tomorrow, because, unless we're speaking to each other late at night when we're in bed (which we do practically every night), we know we are going to talk to each other later, even when we've got nothing to say.

What's really surprising about this is not how close we are, but the fact that Jules is married. She married James, or Jamie as he's more commonly known (good isn't it, Jules et Jim), last year, and I was terrified I'd never see her anymore, but if anything the reverse has happened. It's almost as if she isn't married, because we hardly ever talk about Jamie. He never seems to be there, or if he is he's shut away in his study, working, and for a while I was worried, concerned that perhaps she'd made a mistake, perhaps their marriage wasn't all it should be, but, on the rare occasions I see the two of them together, I can see that it works, that she's happy, that marriage has given her the security she never had, the security I long for.

And meanwhile, I've still got my friend, my touchstone, my sister. Not that she is, of course, she just feels like it, and Jules is the wisest woman I know. I'll sit and bore her with my latest adventure and she'll listen very quietly, wait for a few seconds when I've finished before speaking, which really used to bother me because I thought she was bored, but actually what she's doing is thinking about what I've said, formulating an opinion, and when she does give me advice it's always spot-on, even if it might not be exactly what I want to hear.

She's what my mother would call a true friend, and I know that no matter what happens we'll always be there for each other, so even on those nights when I'm cocooning, when I decide that I'm not quite ready to face the world, Jules is the one person I always phone. Always.

And at least my flat's comfortable for those solitary periods of takeouts and videos. Not quite the flat I've always dreamed of, but I've made it pretty damn nice considering most of my furniture has either been inherited from my parents or bought secondhand from junk shops.

But if it hadn't been for my parents, bless them, I'd never have been able to afford to buy somewhere. I'd probably be sharing some dilapidated house with four, or six, other girls and spending every evening arguing about the washing-up or just resenting them even breathing. I may not have ever had to do it, but I've got enough friends who have, and quite frankly I got sick of them ringing me to ask if they could crash on my sofa because they needed some space.

My flat is tiny. Tiny. The tiniest flat you could ever imagine that's actually a flat and not a studio. It's in a basement in Ladbroke Grove, and you walk in the front door and straight into the living room. But,

surprisingly, for a basement it's quite bright, and I've tried to emphasize this by keeping it as neutral as possible. Except I can't help the clutter, the shelves of books, and photographs, and cards, because I never throw anything away, you never know when you might need something.

There's an L-shaped kitchen off the living room, a galley kitchen, open plan, and opposite the large window there are french doors leading into a bedroom. It's so small there's a bed that folds up into the wall, except I never bother putting it up unless I have a party, and then off the bedroom is a minute bathroom, and that's it. Perfect for me, although I haven't lost sight of my dream of huge spaces and high ceilings--I've just about accepted that working in PR is most unlikely to buy me what I want, and I'll just have to marry a rich man for the lifestyle to which I want to become accustomed.

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