



Wanted: Fabulous Female Flatmate

Should:

- 1) Be funny (as in amusing, not weird)
- 2) Lend trendy clothes (but not steal mine)
- 3) Be young-ish (but definitely not a student)
- 4) Have a decent day-time job
- 5) Never forget to buy toilet paper

Should not:

- 1) Hog the phone
- 2) Hoover the flat between midnight and 7.00 a.m.
- 3) Bring strange men home from clubs (or women if that way inclined)
- 4) Flirt with my boyfriend (if I ever get one)
- 5) Leave hair in the bath

Oh God, why is this happening to me? I can't stand the thought of sharing my lovely little flat with a

complete stranger! Suppose I end up with a raving nympho with a penchant for three-in-a-bed romps or a crazed nut that carefully writes her name on milk cartons? I wish Ellie was still here. Why can't everything be just like before? How did it go so, so wrong? But Ellie is gone now. Gone for good. She moved out this morning. It was for the best, she said. She couldn't continue sharing a place with someone who had slept with her boyfriend. She said she hoped I'd understand and was very civilised about it all. We didn't have a good-bye drink. No. In fact we didn't even say good-bye at all. I just sat in my room staring numbly at the wall as she packed her bags and when I finally heard the front door shut, I looked out the window tearfully as the taxi sped away. Then I collapsed to my knees and howled.

The pain is unbearable. I'm hungover and depressed and feel like I always do when I get dumped, only this is worse. Yes, this is definitely the pits! I've managed to get over my ex-boyfriends by remembering how badly they snored, how they piddled on the bathroom floor and always left the toilet seat up. I'd recall their unbelievable tightness or the way they ogled every passing tart in a low-cut top. But Ellie didn't have any horrible traits, nor did she ever treat me badly. So I couldn't possibly hate her. She had a heart of gold and always tried to set me up with well-meaning men and remembered my birthday and stuff. When I used to work late she'd go into my room to turn on the heating, and when I found out that my ex-boyfriend Greg was two-timing

me with his married next-door neighbour, Ellie booked a girlie weekend away to Brighton and wouldn't let me waste one minute more on him. When my budgie, Bertie, died she dug a hole in my parents' garden and we buried him and had a little ceremony. Just the two of us. And then we opened a bottle of wine and reminisced about Bertie's short life before hitting a trendy nightclub because, as Ellie, pointed out, it was exactly what Bertie would have wanted.

Nobody else would have done that for me. I have a big gang of fun but fairly fickle friends who tend to forget about you the minute a man arrives on the scene. Ellie is different though. Some girls ring you just so they'll have someone to go to a club with. But they're much more interested in meeting a potential mate than spending the evening chatting to you and will basically spend the night looking over your shoulder to check out any available talent. But Ellie genuinely cares about other people. She listens. And cares. She cared about me.

So now you know the type of girl Ellie is, you'll probably understand why I can't pin a blown-up photo of her to the door and throw darts at it like I've done with the countless boyfriends who've bit the bullet and fled. This is so, so different. Yes, there'll be other flatmates; yes there'll be other party-loving women who will drift in and out of my life at various stages. But there'll never be another Ellie. I wouldn't mind but I didn't even sleep with her damn boyfriend. I didn't even fancy Connor, although

admittedly, when I first met him I thought he was one of the best-looking guys I'd ever seen. So did Ellie. She couldn't wait to introduce us. Her two favourite people in the world. She said she was worried that we wouldn't hit it off. But we did. Oh yes we hit it off all right.

I'd made a big effort for Ellie's twenty-eighth birthday party. She said Connor had lots of hot-looking friends and joked that if I didn't fancy any of them there was no hope for me. She made me get my hair done professionally instead of just doing my usual DIY job and even let me wear her favourite dress so I could make a serious impression. I did it to please her: got my roots done in a top hairdresser and wore a short dress and knee-high boots. When Ellie saw my new look she frowned and said, 'I didn't expect you to make *that* much of an effort'. But then she laughed. She knows better than anybody that I'm an 'all or nothing' kind of girl.

The minute Connor walked through the door I felt like a trussed-up turkey. He was wearing faded blue jeans and a black T-shirt; his light-brown wavy hair had that just-got-out-of-bed look and he was sexy as hell. Desperately intimidated, I immediately rushed back upstairs and changed. When I reappeared, slightly red-faced, I mumbled something about my boots being new and hurting my feet. He nodded sympathetically but he knew. That's just the way Connor is. He knows things about women.

The flat soon filled up with friends of Ellie and Connor's. They all seemed to be media types as

Connor works in TV (although what he does there exactly I have absolutely no idea) and Ellie ‘works’ as a travel writer for a magazine called *Travelling About*. Anyway the flat was jammed with vaguely familiar people and champagne corks seemed to be popping every five minutes. At one stage I noticed Ellie and Connor snogging passionately and soon they disappeared altogether. I was genuinely happy for my flatmate though. After all, she, like the rest of us, has met with a fair amount of slime in her time, so at last things seemed to be looking up.

I mingled with the party set wondering vaguely who they all were, but avoiding anyone who might quiz me about what I did for a living. You see, I never really have a suitable answer to that question. At the moment I’m temping in a really awful stuffy insurance office so I suppose my real title would be ‘PA’ but I don’t feel like a PA. No. I’m not sure what I am but deep down I always had this feeling that I really would get somewhere someday. I just didn’t think it would take me this long. Anyway, ever the optimist, I still live in hope that God has something more exciting in mind for me than answering phones, placing files in dusty cabinets, and having to answer to a cantankerous fool and his sorry old sidekick, Cynthia.

So anyway, there I was at the party, terrified of being ‘spoken down to’, interrogated, and frozen into embarrassment by these ultra-hip creatures with spiky haircuts and funny-coloured shoes. I kept moving around the flat with plates of canapés

pretending to be the perfect ‘can’t-stop-and-talk-right-now’ hostess. I know it was fairly ridiculous, I mean I *shouldn’t* feel inferior to these people because I know from experience that those in glamorous jobs usually get paid very little but the thing is, these types always seem to know what they’re talking about and I don’t. Also, I know that people who ask ‘what do you do?’ aren’t actually remotely interested in your job; they’re just trying to place you. Trying to figure out if you’re worth spending another sixty seconds in their company. I decided not to allow myself be dismissed.

I opted to hang around the fridge (where most people seem more interested in guzzling cold beer than quizzing you about work) when I felt a pair of strong hands grab my waist. I screamed and swung around. Suddenly I found my face buried in a broad black T-shirted chest. ‘Mmm, you smell good,’ I thought hazily before looking up. My eyes locked with Connor’s and drunkenly I tried to focus on them. I remember noticing his eyes were a very dark blue. I’ve never seen anything like them before: intense, intelligent and utterly mesmerising. But, alas, they belonged to my best friend’s new boyfriend. I knew this so I did the right thing, took a step back, offered him a mini quiche and asked breezily whether he was enjoying his evening.

‘I am, but I haven’t had a chance to talk to you yet, unfortunately. You’ve been running around all night,’ he teased, revealing a set of teeth you could advertise in a dentist’s office.

‘Well, I can’t let Ellie do all the work,’ I insisted.

‘And besides, you can never totally relax at your own party, can you? I have to make sure people aren’t smashing things or having sex in my bed.’

Connor raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

‘Anyway,’ I hurried along, ‘I always find I have a better time at other people’s parties. I do like letting my hair down.’

‘I can see that,’ Connor grinned and looked down at my long blonde hair. The ends of my tresses were floating inside my wine glass. Jesus, how embarrassing! Why hadn’t anybody told me I was this drunk? I fished my dripping wet hair out of my glass with a flirtatious smile. Connor looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or not. Suddenly the awkwardness between us dissolved as Killian, a friend of Connor’s (almost as good-looking, but not quite) made a surprise appearance and introduced himself.

‘You’re taken, so get lost,’ he gave Connor the elbow. ‘Wanna dance, Gorgeous?’ He grabbed my hand. I put down my glass and let him lead the way into the living room where a couple of people were stamping on balloons and generally lowering the tone of the party. I spotted Ellie out of the corner of my eye. I smiled and she winked back. This was exactly what she’d been hoping for. She’d been convinced that Killian and I, and Connor and herself would make a great foursome. As in going out and drinking and stuff.

Then something really awful happened. Something really, really terrible. One minute I was snogging somebody (I think it was Killian but due to vast

alcohol consumption I simply can't be sure), and the next minute I was face down on Ellie's beautiful handmade rug, which she imported all the way from India, getting sick. And even though I was absolutely sloshed, I was still aware that this was the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to me. For as long as I live I'll never recover from the humiliation of it all. Yes, just imagine your worst nightmare and multiply it by a thousand. I could tell there was a crowd gathering around me and I heard someone urgently shouting 'Can someone call an ambulance?' Jesus, that was enough to sober me up immediately. I lifted my head and yelled 'No! No ambulance, I'll be fine.' Then Ellie was beside me holding back my hair and she whispered, 'Are you okay?'

'No . . . no, I'm not,' I whimpered. 'Tell all these people to go away and leave me alone.'

Thankfully she did just that, ushered all the excitable party people into the next room and then came back with some old dishcloths and helped me clean myself up. I sat up unsteadily and told her I'd ruined her night.

'Don't be silly,' she laughed good-naturedly. 'It wouldn't be a real party unless at least one person got sick.'

'But your rug . . .' I pointed out helplessly. 'I'll pay for a new one, I promise. I'll write to the people in India, I'll . . .'

'Now listen, don't be daft,' she said calmly. 'The rug will go off to the dry cleaners and come back like new. It's only material.'

‘I think I’ll go to bed now for a little snooze,’ I mumbled weakly and apparently I passed out just after that. I remember half waking up in the bathroom with Ellie holding my head under the freezing cold tap. Then I felt myself being carried to my bedroom by a big pair of strong arms. When I came around completely, Connor was in the room. He was pointing a black object in my face. Something shaped like a gun. ‘Jesus, what the f . . .?’

‘Hey, I was just going to help you dry your hair,’ he said softly. ‘If you fall asleep like that you’ll wake up with pneumonia. I’ve also got you a pint of water and I’m going to make you drink it whether you like it or not.’

‘Thanks,’ I muttered. Even though I felt completely lousy I must admit it was nice to have somebody being so attentive. Even if that somebody didn’t belong to me. I sipped the water slowly while Connor plugged the hairdryer into the socket. He started drying the top of my head and the warm blast of air made me drowsy again. I leaned my head against his chest and I’m not totally sure if this happened or not, but when Connor finally switched off the dryer I think that he might have kissed my ear.

‘You’ll have to take off that dress,’ he said. ‘You’ll ruin it by sleeping in it.’

‘S’okay,’ I muttered. ‘Don’t have the energy anyway.’

‘Well I’m taking off my T-shirt,’ Connor insisted. ‘It got soaked earlier.’ He stood up and although the room was quite dark when he peeled off his T-shirt, I

can assure you he'd give David Beckham a real run for his money.

'I don't suppose you've a big enough top you could lend me?'

I stared at his picture-perfect-tanned physique, opened my mouth to answer, but no words came out. I can't even begin to describe how sexy he looked. I began thinking how lucky Ellie was to have Connor and then it hit me that . . .

'Hey, where's Ellie?' I asked suddenly.

'She's gone to the hospital.'

'Wha . . . at?' I sat bolt upright right in the bed.

'Yeah, one of her crazy journalist friends passed out and hit her head against the glass coffee table in the sitting room. The table's okay but they reckon she'll probably need stitches.'

'Oh my God, the poor girl!'

'Yeah it's pretty bad, isn't it? Ellie drove her to the hospital. She rang my mobile there a few minutes ago and says her friend's going to be okay but they might be stuck in the hospital overnight.'

'Poor Ellie. I feel so guilty. Tonight should have been a really fun night for her. She was really looking forward to it, eh . . .'

I paused. 'She couldn't wait for us all to meet you.'

Connor looked away looking slightly uncomfortable.

'Did I just say something I shouldn't?' I asked.

'Of course you didn't,' he said quickly. 'Yeah, there were a few casualties here tonight. The punch was pretty strong; I reckon someone poured in an extra

bottle of vodka. Ellie didn't touch any of it so that's how she was sober enough to drive to the hospital.'

'God, I'm a disgrace,' I muttered. 'It was Ellie's birthday. *I* was the one who should have stayed sober and let her enjoy herself. By the way, did you not offer to go to the hospital too?'

'Yeah, 'course I did,' Connor said looking completely offended. Then he sat down on the bed beside me. 'But Ellie thought I should stay with you to make sure you were okay. She was worried about you.'

'That's just typical of Ellie. She puts everybody else first. The girl is a goddamn saint. I feel even guiltier now. I'm a dreadful person for drinking so much.'

'Don't worry, it happens to us all. Don't beat yourself up about it, do you hear?'

'I hear you. Anyway I feel much better now. Thanks for looking after me,' I managed a weak smile. 'Will you be okay now? Where are you going to sleep?'

'Um . . . I'll see if someone can lend me a sweater or something, and then hopefully I'll grab a couple of hours' kip on the sofa,' Connor yawned. 'But first of all I'm going to insist you take off that dress. Go on, I won't look, I promise.'

He turned his back and after much fumbling and grumbling, I finally yanked Ellie's dress over my head. 'You'd better not look,' I warned him. 'I'm not wearing a bra or anything so you are absolutely dead if you move.'

'I'm tempted but I won't,' he laughed.

‘Good.’

But nothing is ever simple and somehow the damn clasp of the dress suddenly got stuck in my hair. For the life of me I couldn’t untangle it. And asking Connor for help wasn’t an option as I was now half naked, as was he.

There was a light knock on the door. Oh fuck, it was probably one of Ellie’s annoying friends. Or maybe a couple trying to come in and ‘do the business’.

‘Don’t you dare come in,’ I yelled.

Another knock.

‘Hey, would you ever piss off please?’ Connor ordered and we both started giggling. But the door opened anyway and as someone turned on the light, I let out an indignant scream.

Ellie just stood there in the doorway, saying nothing.