

SOPHIE COUSENS

New York Times Bestselling Author of
THIS TIME NEXT YEAR

IS SHE

REALLY

GOING

OUT WITH

HIM?



A NOVEL

PRAISE FOR *IS SHE REALLY GOING OUT WITH HIM?*

One of *The Nerd Daily's* Most Anticipated Books of 2024

“Cousens has a well-earned reputation for writing delightful love stories, and this one more than delivers. The enemies-to-lovers chemistry between Anna and Will is both believable and steamy, and Cousens deftly plays with rom-com tropes while crafting a journey of self-discovery in the wake of divorce. A supremely satisfying love story with all the charm readers have come to expect from Cousens.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Original and witty, this novel is a true delight, one that had me reading nonstop to find out what happened and making me miss the characters once it ended. Who says parents can’t have fun?!”

—**Zibby Owens, bestselling author of *Blank* and host of *Moms Don’t Have Time to Read Books***

“Cousens is a master at writing enchanting, laugh-out-loud stories that tug at your heartstrings. You will be charmed!”

—**Mia Sosa, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Worst Best Man***

“Zippy dialogue, a great cast, and a delicious enemies-to-lovers plot made me want to turn my phone off and read it in one sitting.... Charming, with so much heart and Cousens’s trademark wit—a fab read.”

—**Cesca Major, author of *Maybe Next Time***

“Sophie Cousens has been one of my favorite writers for years now, and *Is She Really Going Out with Him?* proves that she is only getting better and better with each book. This book has it all: heart, humor, and buckets of charm. Cousens has done it again!”

—**Falon Ballard, author of *Right on Cue***

“Brimming with Cousens’s trademark wit, charm, and richly drawn characters, *Is She Really Going Out with Him?* is a page-turning romance that spotlights parenthood, community, and knowing your worth.”

—**Ellie Palmer, author of *Four Weekends and a Funeral***

“Sophie Cousens masterfully slips another gorgeous life lesson between page after page of pitch-perfect jokes and a romance that builds just right. This one might be her most touching yet—that the path back to ourselves is always through the eyes of the people that love us most.”

—**Jessie Rosen, author of *The Heirloom***

PRAISE FOR *THE GOOD PART*

“Bestselling Cousens...knocks it out of the park with this whimsical story that is reminiscent of the movie *13 Going on 30*.... This heartfelt and unique rom-com will have readers on the edges of their seats up to the emotional conclusion.”

—**Booklist (starred review)**

“A moving and funny reminder that life is meant to be lived one day at a time.”

—**Kirkus Reviews (starred review)**

“*The Good Part* left me buried under an avalanche of emotions and with a new appreciation for life’s small, beautiful moments. This is a book to read twice—once to feverishly tear through the pages and a second time to savor.”

—**Annabel Monaghan, author of *Nora Goes Off Script* and *Same Time Next Summer***

“Warm, funny, joyful, and wise...If you want to giggle and feel *all* the swoony feels do pick up a copy of Cousens’s latest.”

—**Cesca Major, author of *Maybe Next Time***

“A tender and delightful exploration of that age-old question: *What if?*”

—**Allison Winn Scotch, bestselling author of *The Rewind***

“Delightfully zany and full of heart, the perfect read for anyone who has ever felt a little lost in their own life (and who among us hasn’t?)...New favorite Sophie Cousens book.”

—**Becca Freeman, author of *The Christmas Orphans Club***

“Sophie Cousens is one of a select few authors I will happily allow to break my heart again and again, because it’s just such a pleasure to find out how she’ll mend it.”

—**Sarah Adler, author of *Mrs. Nash’s Ashes***

“A delightful and thought-provoking new novel...[Cousens] sprinkles some magic throughout the pages.”

—**Country Living**

“Funny and heartfelt...Perfect for fans of romantic comedies with a touch of whimsy, like *13 Going on 30* and *Freaky Friday*, and authors like Josie Silver and Rebecca Serle.”

—**The Nerd Daily**

“Relatable...[and] also a good reminder to be present and appreciate life as it is in the moment.”

—**The Michigan Daily**

“Sophie Cousens’s most hilarious, entertaining, and heartwarming work yet. It will remind you of Sophie Kinsella’s *Remember Me?*”

—**Woman’s World**

“Cousens is a master at building emotional impact without becoming maudlin or sentimental.... Fresh and relevant.”

—**Bookreporter.com**

“A modern day *13 Going on 30*, Sophie Cousens’s latest will make you laugh, it will make you cry, and most of all, it will make you want to live.”

—**The Everygirl**

PRAISE FOR *BEFORE I DO*

“A thoughtful and romantic story about the moments and choices that change our lives in unexpected ways...Cousens has created something special with this lovely tale.”

—**Washington Independent Review of Books**

“Witty and heartfelt, *Before I Do* takes a familiar trope and turns it on its head, and readers will find themselves tearing through this book to find out how it ends.”

—**Booklist**

“A charming and surprising take on a classic love-triangle formula.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“Witty and emotionally rich...Readers will be especially drawn to Audrey, a woman unafraid to chase her own happiness and face challenges head-on. This is sure to charm.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“The perfect feel-good book.”

—**Reader’s Digest**

“I am the biggest fan of Sophie Cousens! She always delivers a true, laugh-out-loud rom-com with a ton of depth.”

—**Lizzy Dent, author of *The Setup***

“I adored this novel! Funny, clever, poignant, with characters that just leap off the page... Thoroughly recommend!”

—**Emily Stone, author of *Always, in December***

PRAISE FOR *JUST HAVEN'T MET YOU YET*

“A perfectly charming escape. I laughed, I teared up, and I smiled my way through.”

—**Helen Hoang, author of *The Kiss Quotient***

“A delightfully romantic tale of one woman’s search for her happily ever after in the form of the owner of a swapped suitcase.”

—**PopSugar**

“Fiction slowly becomes truth in this highly enjoyable, delectable tale.”

—**GoodMorningAmerica.com**

“Sweet [and] funny...It’s just the story to offer a little romantic escapism during the holiday season.”

—**CNN**

“Cousens imbues the entire story with an uplifting sense of hope.... The Jersey setting creates a cozy, windswept background to the deliciously slow-burn romance. A warm, witty, and absolutely charming seaside holiday that’s perfect for fans of Sophie Kinsella.”

—***Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)**

“Humor and poignancy keep the pages turning. Fans of Sophie Kinsella and Josie Silver will find plenty to enjoy.”

—***Publishers Weekly***

“At times heartbreaking and incredibly hopeful...Readers of Jill Mansell or Mhairi McFarlane will definitely enjoy.”

—***Library Journal***

“For the friend who loves curling up at home, pick up *Just Haven’t Met You Yet*, a fun meld of drama and romance.”

—***Parents***

“Reading Sophie Cousens is like meeting a new best friend. She makes you laugh, she makes you cry, you feel like you’ve loved her forever, and you don’t want to let her go.”

—**Clare Pooley, author of *The Authenticity Project***

“This book is pure, unbridled joy.”

—**Rachel Lynn Solomon, author of *The Ex Talk***

PRAISE FOR *THIS TIME NEXT YEAR*

“A funny, pull-at-your-heartstrings read...it’s a hug in book form.”

—**Josie Silver, author of *One Day in December***

“[A] second-chance romance that makes you feel unabashedly hopeful.”

—**Refinery29**

“The characters in this page-turning novel are richly drawn and transform substantially, especially Minnie, and all suggest that maybe happy ever after is up to us.”

—**NPR Books**

“If you make time for just one holiday read this year, make it Sophie Cousens’s *This Time Next Year*.”

—**PopSugar**

“With its distinctive British charm and New Year’s Eve midnight magic, this swoony debut holiday love story is about two people whose paths have crossed numerous times.”

—**Parade**

“Cousens’s debut is ripe with both emotional vulnerability and zaniness.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“A brilliantly written story about love, redemption, friendship, and self-empowerment... This book is an absolute delight.... A feel-good tale to cozy up with.”

—***San Francisco Book Review***

“Rom-com readers will revel in Cousens’s wry, lively story, which probes themes of self-discovery, acceptance, and forgiveness, and the abiding nature of friendship.”

—**Shelf Awareness**

“Sparkling and uplifting.”

—**Mhairi McFarlane, author of *If I Never Met You***

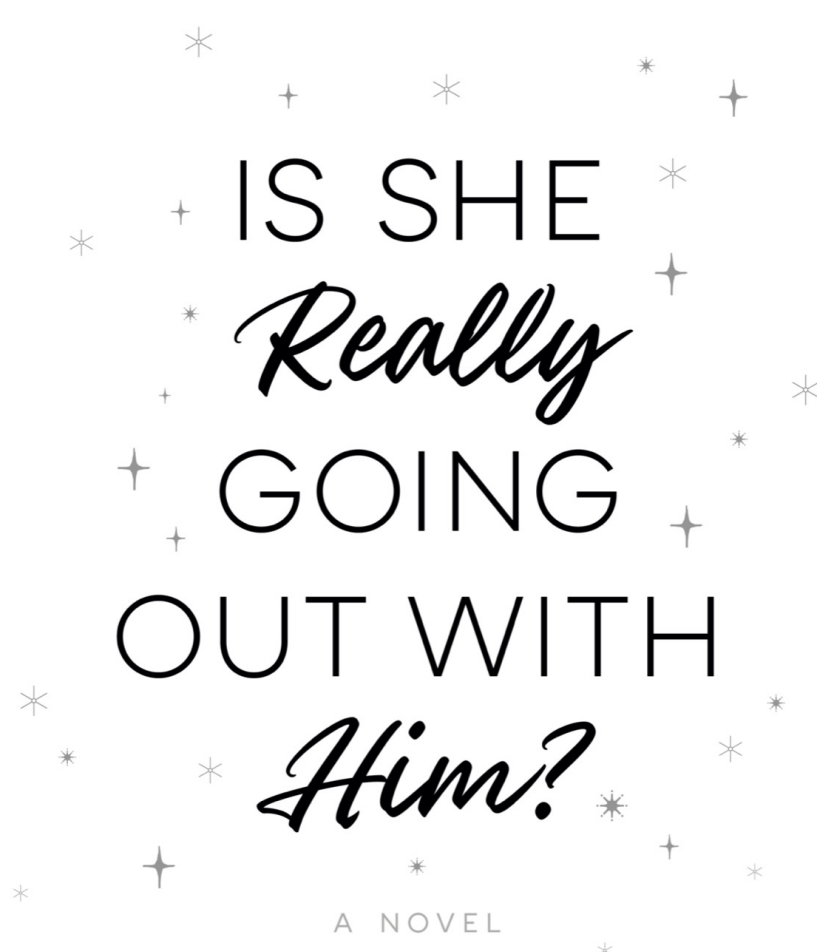
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*For Ridhima. There aren't many greater joys than a long lunch with you.
One day I will write sci-fi for you.*

—

“The more I know of the world, the more I am convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!”

—Marianne Dashwood, in Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

“Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim.”

—Nora Ephron

PROLOGUE

“ ‘ONCE UPON A TIME THERE was a beautiful maiden who was trapped in an enchanted castle. The castle was surrounded by a forest of thorns and guarded by a fearsome dragon—’ ”

A girl with long brown pigtails starts frantically waving both arms in the air, so I pause from my reading.

“Yes, Isla? Do you need the toilet?” the teacher, Mrs. Hollybush, asks the girl.

“What’s the dragon’s name?” Isla asks. More small hands shoot up.

“Are dragons nocturnal?” asks a boy wearing purple glasses.

“Is it home time?” comes the muffled cry of a girl who’s pulled her school jumper up over her face.

Mrs. Hollybush sighs. “We’ve talked about this, 1H, please just let Ethan’s mummy read the story. There’ll be time for questions at the end, okay?” She gives me an encouraging smile, then nods for me to continue.

Every Friday afternoon my son Ethan’s primary school invites a parent to come and read a book to their child’s class. Ethan has been asking me to sign up for months. It’s been a disruptive year, with Dan and I separating, so I’ve been trying to assuage my mum guilt in other small ways: pretending I enjoy board games, cooking waffles at weekends, and now ducking out of work early to read a fairy tale to thirty noisy six-year-olds. As I sit perched on a tiny chair, looking out at the children sitting cross-legged on the carpet in front of me, my gaze falls on Ethan. He beams, thrilled to have me here. I return his smile, then turn back to the book.

“The dragon scared everyone away, but a few brave princes tried to rescue the fair maiden. They would need to fight their way through the thorns and defeat the beast to win her hand in marriage.’”

“Does she have Lego?” shouts out a little boy with wild blond curls.

“No, Kenny, she doesn’t have Lego. That’s not part of the story,” Mrs. Hollybush interjects with a tight smile. I notice she has a slight eye twitch.

“What does she play with?” Kenny asks. “Does she have a brother?”

“Does she have Pokémon cards?” asks a girl with a distractingly runny nose.

“Does she have *really* long hair?” asks a boy lying on the floor with his eyes closed.

Mrs. Hollybush claps her hands three times, which prompts the children to sit up straight, then zip their mouths closed. I pause for a moment, but they are quiet, so I continue.

“‘One day a handsome prince was riding by. He spied the fair maiden at the window of the tallest turret and immediately fell in love with her.’” I clear my throat. I did not choose this book, and I’m not sure I approve of the messaging. How could the prince possibly fall in love with her from that far away? Even if you believe in love at first sight, which I don’t, from the ground, with a giant, fire-breathing dragon in the way, how much of this maiden could this man possibly see? “The prince managed to fight his way through the thorns, reach the castle gates, defeat the dragon, leap the drawbridge, and—’”

“Did the dragon die?” cries a little girl with red felt-tip pen around her mouth, her eyes wide with concern.

“I don’t think so. It probably just got tired and ran out of fire,” I say, hiding the graphic illustration of the prince stabbing the dragon in the heart.

“Dragons don’t run out of fire,” Kenny scoffs. Then there’s a hurling sound as a child sitting right by my feet throws up all over the carpet, spattering my black suede boots.

“Oh, Jason, oh no, not again,” Mrs. Hollybush says with a groan. She jumps up to deal with the situation, grabbing a pale Jason by the elbow, then

pointing me in the direction of the hallway. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Humphries, the guest toilet is along the corridor.”

In the bathroom, I use a green paper towel to wipe off my shoes, feeling grateful that I chose a career in journalism rather than teaching. After washing my hands, I pull out my phone and take a moment to check my e-mail. At the top of my inbox, there is something from the government. Why is the government e-mailing me?

From: HMCTS Divorce Services

Subject: Your divorce is now complete

Dear Ms. Anna Humphries,

Your decree absolute has been granted and you are now divorced. You can find your certificate of decree absolute attached. This is the final document proving you are now divorced. You will need to show this certificate if you get married again, or should you wish to change your name.

Divorce Services, UK Government

A sudden wave of nausea hits me, and I hold on to the washbasin to steady myself. My legs feel as though they might buckle. Twelve years of marriage dissolved in an e-mail. *An e-mail?* What did I expect, a scroll delivered on horseback, a town crier? A reverse wedding ceremony where we solemnly retract our vows? I know we live in a digital age, but an e-mail just feels so callous, so cold, so...so woefully inadequate. Did Dan get this e-mail too? How did he feel when he opened it? Relieved? Upset? A confusing combination of the two?

My chin begins to tremble and my eyes start to water. *Oh no, please, not now.* I’ve held it together this far, I can’t fall apart now, at my son’s school. I knew this was coming, of course I did, but I didn’t expect it to happen like this. *I’ll need to change my name, apply for a new passport, I’ll have to tick*

a different box on forms now...No, no, don't let your mind spiral, Anna. Just go back to the classroom, finish reading the stupid book, then you can go home and digest this in private.

Below the e-mail from the government is a new message from Dan. Maybe he got the same communication and feels strange about it too. Clicking it open, I see it's just one line: Can you show these to the kids so they can see what I'm up to? D. He's currently on holiday in South America, climbing Machu Picchu, the "trip of a lifetime." He's attached photos of himself looking tanned and happy, standing beneath bright blue skies with the Incan citadel in the background. So no, he's not feeling sick about the divorce e-mail, he's having a lovely time enjoying his newfound freedom. *I always wanted to see Machu Picchu. It's number three on my bucket list, it wasn't even in Dan's top ten.*

Looking at the photo of my ex, I am hit with a sudden pang of nostalgia for the Dan I used to know. The Dan I fell in love with at university, who held my hand beneath the table at a pub quiz, who liked me wearing his rugby shirts so they'd smell of me, who first kissed me in the rain outside a lecture theater at nine in the morning, then as I walked away up the steps called after me, "Anna Appleby, I'm going to marry you one day." Pushing my phone to the bottom of my bag, I splash my face with cold water and head back to the clamor of the classroom.

The vomit has been cleaned up, Jason sent to the school nurse, and Mrs. Hollybush is full of apologies. But I can't hear what she's saying, because a ringing has started in my ears. My head is pounding, my skin feels clammy and hot. A child thrusts the storybook back into my hands, the teacher claps the children into zipped-up silence, I let out a long, slow exhale through pursed lips. But as I look down, the words swim in front of my eyes. "The prince carried the fair maiden out of the enchanted castle, and they rode off into the sunset. They were married in a beautiful wedding and lived happily'...happily..." I pause; my throat feels parched. I can't finish the sentence.

“Happily ever after?” little Isla suggests as the room begins to sway.

“Maybe,” I mutter beneath my breath. Looking down at the illustration of the fairy-tale wedding, a mental corset pings open. “Or maybe there’s no such thing as happily ever after. Maybe they had a good few years of being happy, then they slowly drifted apart, argued about who left crisp packets in the carriage and dirty washing all over the turret floor. Maybe the prince got really into triathlon training and left the princess at home with the kids every weekend. Then one day they realized they were lonely in each other’s company and that they didn’t love each other anymore.” The children look up at me in confusion, and Mrs. Hollybush—eye twitching faster—lets out a burst of nervous laughter. I stand up from my tiny chair and hold the book aloft. “Maybe these kinds of stories are perpetuating a damaging narrative of a woman needing to be rescued by a man, telling little girls that getting married is the goal, that life will make sense once they’re in love. But it’s a lie, because everything ends, even the greatest love stories.” Then I start ripping the pages out of the book, throwing them like confetti around the classroom. “Maybe the maiden was happy with her dragon, maybe she didn’t want to leave her nice, safe turret. Maybe the prince was a jerk!” The children squeal with delight and shock, and Mrs. Hollybush claps her hands, attempting to restore order, but this time it doesn’t work. They leap around the room trying to catch the torn pages.

“Smash the patriarchy!” I cry.

“Smash the patriarchy!” the children repeat, wild with glee.



MY SISTER, LOTTIE, picks me up from the headmaster’s office. The school was understanding when I feigned not feeling well. Mrs. Hollybush kindly suggested that “maybe something is going around,” but she also said she would have to remove me from the “reading parents” list, and that I would need to pay for a replacement book.

“What happened?” Lottie asks me as we sit in her car, waiting for Ethan to be let out of school. “The headmaster said you’d had ‘an episode’? What

kind of episode?”

I silently pass her my phone, with the e-mail open, and watch her as she reads it. To look at us, you wouldn't think Lottie and I were sisters. I have long, dark hair and skin that tans easily, while she is a pale English rose, with blond, wavy hair curling into a halo around her face. If this were a fairy tale, she would be the good witch, and I would be the bad. “I didn't expect to get an e-mail,” I tell her. “I don't know what happened. I lost it reading a fairy tale about happily ever afters.”

“Oh, Anna,” Lottie says, reaching across the car to tuck a strand of hair back behind my ear. The gesture unsettles me. For as long as I can remember, it's my little sister who has been the emotional one. At thirty-three, she's four years younger than me. I've had two decades of her crying to me about boyfriends and breakups, swearing she could never love anyone as much as *insert name here.* I was always the stable, sensible one, ready with a box of tissues and an appropriately uplifting movie. Now she's happily married, and I'm ripping up schoolbooks. She pats my hand, and I close my eyes to try to stop myself from bursting into tears. “I think the problem is, you bottle everything up and then occasionally it all bursts out,” Lottie says.

“I don't know why, but seeing it written down, it all seems so final. I feel like such a failure,” I tell her, letting my shoulders slump as I hear how pathetic that sounds. “Dan's in South America living his best life, and I'm here, getting divorced in a primary school toilet. The wording of the e-mail too—‘if you get married again’—I genuinely can't imagine ever wanting to meet someone else.”

“I know it feels awful right now, it's too soon to think about anything like that. But it will get easier, I promise you.” Lottie strokes my hair, circling her fingers around my crown just like our mother used to do when we were children.

“I'm thirty-seven and I'm done with love,” I tell her.

“No, you're not, but you're still grieving. Trust me, this time next year, or maybe eighteen months from now, everything is going to look so different. You'll have moved on. I know you can't imagine it now, but you'll be dating;