



# GOING OVERBOARD

They're in  
too deep

PORTIA MACINTOSH

The Million-Copy Bestseller



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PORTIA MACINTOSH

B  
Boldwød

*For Joe*  
*Thanks for always being there*

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## About Boldwood Books

‘Cheer up, love, you might have marked the days wrong in your calendar.’

Ugh. Gross. And way to make an already misogynistic phrase just that little bit worse. You’ve got to hand it to some people, going above and beyond like that.

I suppose (some might say) it’s my own fault, for sitting on the side of the pub garden next to the pavement, like I was just asking to be talked to by one of the drunk men pub-crawling past.

I am smiling now, to be fair, but not because he told me to, because the man who said this to me was dressed like a T-Rex. Peak dinosaur behaviour, as expected.

I swirl my drink around in my glass, watching the ice melt under the afternoon sun. I’m trapped somewhere between heaven and hell. Well, you can’t beat a Saturday afternoon in a pub garden in sunny Headingley... it’s just a shame that some of the people doing the Otley Run are so worse for wear at this point that they’re in that annoying stage of drunkenness where being a bit of a dick seems like the funniest thing.

I know, I sound grumpy for a thirty-two-year-old, and I was no stranger to an Otley Run – the infamous fancy-dress pub crawl – when I was a student in Leeds. It’s just that today I’m trying to vibe in the sunshine, now that it feels like summer might finally be well and truly here after a few false starts, and that vibe is being killed by things like handing back a rogue

inflatable banana to a twenty-something Minion with a beer stain down the front of his dungarees.

Don't get me wrong, I love that Headingly is a social Petri dish, but I'm feeling kind of stressed today, and coming here was supposed to relax me and cheer me up, and yet I find myself sitting on my own watching the world go by – literally, I just saw someone dressed up as a globe.

I smile to myself as a gaggle of girlies dressed as bowling pins trot by in their heels. I have a lot of time for that – that respect for style, even when it feels impossible. I don't envy them navigating the pavement flags though, which I always seem to trip on, even when I'm in my trainers.

It's been a long time since I went on a pub crawl with Kelsey, my bestie. Isn't it weird how you sort of reach an age when you decide you're too grown-up for such things... but then one day your perspective shifts and you start feeling like you might be old? Maybe I'll ask her if she's up for it, one of these days – perhaps we'll even dress up for old times' sake.

At least it's sunny. The entire street is bathed in a warm glow – and my legs are getting their first official outing of the season. Shorts seemed like a great idea, for keeping cool, but it has to be said that my legs are looking alarmingly reflective. Maybe I should have stuck some fake tan on, just to not be such an obstacle to traffic should the light bounce off my ghostly-white legs and blind a driver, but to be honest with you I was so eager to get out of the flat and feel the sun on my skin that it's a miracle I even bothered shaving them.

I'm scrolling aimlessly through Instagram, busying myself with something, when a shadow falls across the table. It's not a cloud – it's a man.

'All right, princess,' he says, his voice a mixture of swagger and slur.

And there he is. Super Mario himself. Super-*drunk* Super Mario.

His hat is kind of flat and sad and his stick-on moustache is clinging on for dear life, but he's got the full outfit on – even the white gloves. Well, I assume they were white when he put them on.

'Erm... hi,' I say, polite but cool, already turning back to my phone, pretending like I'm doing something very serious, very urgent, very... none of

his business.

He doesn't take the hint.

Mario plonks himself onto the bench opposite me, causing it to creak under his weight – almost like it's protesting his intrusion on my behalf.

'What's a lovely lass like you doing sitting on your bill?' he asks, leaning across the table with the kind of smile that makes me think either this has worked for him before, or he has an overwhelming level of self-confidence. I'm certain it's the latter.

'I'm with someone,' I tell him. 'My b—'

'You dressed up too, yeah?' he asks, squinting at me as he talks over me. 'What are you meant to be?'

I blink at him. I'm wearing denim shorts, a white vest and a pair of sandals. My long blonde hair is in loose waves – nothing fancy. Who or what on earth could I possibly be? Other than a millennial thirty-something starter pack.

'I'm not dressed up,' I say flatly.

He grins.

'Not dressed, eh? Even better. You can be my Peach. I wouldn't mind takin' a bite out of that.'

I feel a wrinkle form on my forehead at his choice of words. Well, one word in particular – *that*. I don't know whether to cry at the sheer bleakness of it or burst into flames.

'Charming,' I say under my breath.

'Come on, princess, what do you say?'

Ugh, and then he winks. Honestly, like that was going to help.

'Don't you have a drain to jump down?' I ask, briefly confusing him with my smile.

He leans over the table, too close for comfort, the overwhelming stench of stale beer and cheap aftershave overwhelming.

'My boyfriend will be here in a minute,' I tell him, starting to feel uncomfortable.

'Oh, your *boyfriend*,' he says mockingly. 'Suddenly she's got a *boyfriend*.'

‘Yep,’ I say weakly.

I glance around, looking for a friendly face, or even the unfriendly face of a bouncer, but I’m not on anyone’s radar right now.

Mario smirks – so much so, his moustache is hanging by a thread now.

‘You don’t seem like you’ve got a boyfriend, princess.’

I furrow my brow involuntarily, because what does that mean?

He shrugs like he’s just said something deeply profound.

‘I’m just saying... if you were mine, I wouldn’t leave you sat out here alone. I’d be by your side, holding your hand, feeding you chips... maybe whispering something dirty in your ear...’

And they say romance is dead.

Mario reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. I try to snatch it away but he keeps tight hold of it.

‘Okay, seriously, I’m not interested,’ I say plainly, because politeness is getting me nowhere.

‘Come on, don’t be like that,’ he says, shaking my hand in his. ‘Just one drink, come on, say you agree – look, you’re shaking my hand, that’s binding.’

‘I’m really not, and I’m really, really not interested,’ I tell him. ‘Can you let go of my hand, please?’

The word please leaves my lips like a reflex, like muscle memory I’ve been trying to shake my entire life.

‘Why, are you worried your fake boyfriend will get jealous?’ he asks.

He clearly doesn’t believe me on that one, which is infuriating, because I do have a boyfriend, and I am waiting for him.

‘Sorry I’m late, babe.’ A voice snaps me from my thoughts as I feel someone sit down next to me.

As I turn to look instinctively I’m greeted by a peck on the cheek – well, mostly the cheek. His lips ever so slightly graze mine on one side.

I just look at him and blink at the absurdity of the situation.

Super Mario somehow stumbles to his feet – that’s the only way I can think to describe it – as panic sets in.

‘Shit, sorry, mate, sorry,’ he babbles. ‘She said she had a boyfriend. I thought she was joking. Sorry, sorry. My bad. No hard feelings, eh?’

‘We’re trying to have a nice day, if you wouldn’t mind pissing off...’

‘Yeah, of course, mate. Sorry,’ Mario replies.

Stunning, really, that Mario wouldn’t take no for an answer from a female, but when a man rocks up he gets not one, not two but – let me just count them quick – five sorrys.

‘Sorry,’ Mario says again – taking it to six.

I don’t know what to say so I just glance back and forth between the two of them.

‘Just... go, yeah? Get back to your mates. Have a good time.’

He leans over to give Mario an encouraging pat on the arm. He’s so cool, calm and collected. It’s a move that somehow seems friendly and low-key threatening. It works.

‘Yeah, okay, you too,’ Mario replies as he makes a move. ‘You’re a legend, by the way.’

Mario practically runs away, his moustache finally falling off, landing on the floor next to us.

Wow, just like that, gone as fast as he arrived, and it didn’t take magic words, as such. Just any words spoken by a man. Bro code – ugh. Still, at least he’s gone.

I turn to look at my hero. My tall, dark, handsome hero. He has messy brown hair and eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, giving nothing away. His cheeks dimple as he smiles, showing a gentler side – I suppose something has to offset those bulging muscles and tall frame. Even sitting down, it’s impossible not to notice.

‘Hi,’ he says, grinning.

‘Hi,’ I reply, unable to keep a matching smile from my own lips.

The sunglasses, the tight black t-shirt – I can’t tell if he’s giving secret agent or Balenciaga model or both.

‘He seemed nice,’ he replies.

I let out a short, breathy laugh.

‘Yeah, no, not at all,’ I say. ‘Thank you for that. He was... persistent.’

‘That’s polite,’ he replies. ‘What are boyfriends for?’

‘True,’ I say, my smile widening by the minute.

‘Anyway... I’d better get going...’

I can’t form sentences in time to stop him in his tracks. He’s gone, disappearing into the crowd, leaving me feeling like I’ve had too many cocktails (or not enough) or like a little heatstroke made me hallucinate the whole thing. I can’t help but stare into the crowd, waiting to see where he’s gone, if he’s coming back...

‘Oi, Jessa.’ A voice snaps me from my thoughts.

I turn to see Todd standing there with a beer in one hand and a piña colada in the other.

‘Wow,’ I blurt at the sight of the huge glass, overflowing – probably due to the sheer volume of garnishes and various other bits in it (two umbrellas feels like a bit much).

‘You said surprise you,’ he says, sweat dripping from his brow.

‘Consider me surprised,’ I reply. ‘You were ages – I didn’t realise it was so busy.’

‘Ah, no, I got distracted, watching the match on one of the big screens,’ he confesses. ‘Your drink might be a bit melty. I’d drink it ASAP.’

‘You’re a bit melty,’ I tease him.

‘Well, that’s no way to speak to your boyfriend,’ he jokes. ‘Anyway, who was that, sitting next to you? Someone you know?’

‘Oh, no, I don’t know him,’ I reply. ‘He was just...’

‘...Just after our table, eh? Did you tell him to piss off?’

‘I didn’t need to. He just left,’ I reply simply.

‘This is why we think you women are so mysterious, FYI,’ he tells me. ‘You never say what you really mean.’

‘I am always telling you wh—’

‘So mysterious,’ he says again, turning his phone sideways, giving away exactly what he’s doing. Putting the match on. From where I’m sitting it

looks like football – but by that I mean I can see a lot of green and a lot of men. It could be anything.

I drain the last of my sea breeze before making a start on my piña colada. Wow, even though it's melting, it still gives me the most intense brain freeze.

With Todd immersed in his sport, I feel just as alone as I did before he got back. Well, minus my brief encounter with my heroic yet mysterious stranger.

I can still feel his kiss on my face, like the ghost of it is still hanging around. It was just a peck – and only 10 per cent of it, tops, on the lips – but it really feels like it's left a mark.

I'm really grateful for him stepping in and saving the day like that. I wonder who he is, who he's here with, who he was dressed up as... I wouldn't have thought he was dressed up but Mario clearly knew who he was supposed to be because he called him a legend. Then again, Mario was incredibly drunk.

I suppose I'll never know who he was, it was just a random man right when I needed one – maybe that's why my imagination is running away with me, because life feels a little boring these days, so why not project a bunch of wild scenarios onto a blank canvas of a man?

He was something exciting... someone interesting... someone other than Todd who noticed me for a moment.

But now the moment has gone and it's back to reality.

Still, better to be sitting at a table with a boyfriend engrossed in a football game than a drunk fake plumber.

But only just.



## 2

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### ONE YEAR LATER

I never knew you could fall in love with an en suite until I met this one – and it's a love that intensifies every time I step in it.

I love feeling the heated tiles underneath my feet, even on a warm day like today. When Todd was designing this place, he put so much thought into so many things, like which rooms should face south and be bathed in sun, and which rooms would do well to be on the cooler side of the house. I love his attention to detail with things like that.

In here it's all smooth marble and soft lighting, with gold taps that gleam like they have a dedicated cleaner who shines them every day, and then there's the double sinks – a sink each, both big enough to wash a medium-sized dog in at least (but you wouldn't, because there is a dedicated sink for that in the utility room).

And then there's the bath. Oh, the big, big bath. It's free-standing and sits next to a floor-to-ceiling window – but not one with frosted glass, like you might think, nope, one that looks out over the West Yorkshire countryside, with uninterrupted views and – best of all – no one around to peep in at you while you're soaking the day away.

I walk over to it and trail my fingers across the edge of it, thinking about how I'd love nothing more than to get in it, relax, have a glass of wine, maybe light a candle and just allow my brain to empty. Bliss.

But I can't do that right now, for so many reasons.

Back in the bedroom, the cloud-like mattress calls my name in a similar way. It's a super-king, super-squishy bad boy loaded up with at least eight pillows and cushions. It's the kind of bed you could just dive right into... were it not for the perfectly laid-out tray of breakfast sitting on top of the duvet. Croissants, glasses of champagne, cute little jars of jam. Waking up to this on a morning – that's the life, right?

I carefully adjust the rolled-up napkins, angling them just right, and polish one tiny missed smudge from the silverware. Okay, now it's perfect.

'It's ready,' I call out.

James walks in, his camera hanging from his neck, ready for action.

'It looks great,' he tells me.

'Thanks,' I say with a smile. 'Oh, wait, one last thing...'

I grab the small vase with one single rose inside from the sideboard and place it on the breakfast tray.

'Okay, now it's ready.'

I watch James as he cracks on, snapping pictures of the room before zooming in on the cute little details that make all the difference.

'Love what you've done with the place,' he jokes as he photographs the breakfast.

'This old thing?' I reply, batting my hand playfully.

James and I have really got things down to a fine art. He's a photographer, for a luxury estate agents – which is a genuine art form, from the bonus lifestyle pictures to the twilight shoots. All things that make so much difference when it comes to not just selling a house but selling a home – selling a way of life.

God, imagine waking up to this every morning. Imagine owning this house. I often wish the houses I worked in were my own, but this one is really something else.

'Oh, wow, I wish it always looked like this,' Joanne, the actual owner, says as she joins us.

Joanne is in her late forties, early fifties maybe. She's wearing white – all white – the volume of white that only comes with having enough money to

not need to worry about destroying it. Her tan gives away that she's been on holiday recently – and the photos dotted around the place give away that she goes on holidays often. I can tell just by glancing at her shoes that they cost more than my weekly food shop – then again, you don't live in a house like this, custom-designed by a luxury architect, without being super rich.

'Jessa!' she says warmly, giving me the sort of smile I would usually reserve for cute dogs. 'The place looks simply divine. I'd seen your work but... wow. You've really outdone yourself.'

'Thank you,' I say, genuinely pleased with how it's turned out. Sure, it's a beautiful house (although maybe I'm biased, because I know the architect who designed it, obviously) and gorgeously decorated, but my little touches are really helping it shine. 'It's easy when the bones of the house are this good,' I reply. 'I just dress it up a bit.'

'Come,' she insists. 'Let's go downstairs, while James works his magic. I have so many questions, and I've made coffee.'

'Sounds great,' I say with a smile.

I follow Joanne downstairs, running my hand along the polished curved banister as I admire the hallway window. The front door sits below two storeys of glass, allowing light to pour into the property – and that's on the north side of the house. In here it's like an art gallery – or the set of a contemporary murder mystery – with so much to take in it's almost too much, but it just works. There's something new to notice every time I pass through.

'So, do tell,' she says as we arrive in the huge open-plan kitchen. 'How did you get into this line of work?'

'Oh, it was just sort of... a natural progression,' I explain. 'I worked in a showroom, when I was younger, then for an interior designer. I fell in love with the idea of making homes perfect, but it was dressing them, rather than decorating them, that really appealed to me. So I started doing some jobs here and there, and then I started working with your agent and here we are.'

'So is it always the same things you add, or do you tailor it to the house?' she enquires.

She seems genuinely interested, so I'm happy to talk about it.

'Everywhere I go it's slightly different. It's all about emotion,' I say, smiling to myself as I talk about my favourite subject. 'You're not selling a house, you're selling the idea of a better life. The right scent in the hallway. The exact throw on the sofa. Books on the bedside table or a coffee on the kitchen island. The details make people feel something – or fantasise about something, even. That's what gets them. They walk in and think, "This is exactly where I'm supposed to live."' "

We step through tall glass doors and into the garden.

Ugh. This garden, honestly.

There's a pool. A full-size, heated outdoor pool with mosaic tiles and submerged steps like something you would expect to see at a spa or a resort. Next to it, an almost unused-looking outdoor kitchen sits under a pergola, with a marble countertop, built-in appliances and a wine fridge – because who wants to trail inside for a glass of white? There are loungers arranged around the pool, perfectly spaced. A firepit. Fairy lights strung between the trees. Everything's so perfect it almost doesn't feel real.

Joanne gestures for me to sit on one of the linen-cushioned outdoor sofas. She cradles her mug in her hands – a mug that perfectly matches the marble countertops, it's like even the crockery knows how to coordinate effortlessly here.

'So,' she says, tucking one leg under the other, 'is it fun? Your job, I mean. Dressing up houses like this to help them sell?'

I smile.

'Oh, absolutely,' I reply. 'It can be hard work, but it's a fun challenge. My car is always packed full of things like plants, candles, fake lemons – all sorts, but I love it. It's like playing house for grown-ups.'

She laughs.

'So what exactly do you do? Like, what's the process? I'm fascinated.'

'Well, I usually walk through the property first, get a feel for the place,' I explain. 'Then I create a mood board based on the architecture, the target buyer, the light, even the postcode sometimes. There's a big difference