

The Girl Can't Help It

by Francesca Ryan

"There's a psychologist in Nevada called Russell T. Hurlburt. He's interested in the different ways people think. That's what I'm researching—his theories."

Peter looked solemnly at Nancy. It was hard to tell whether she found this impressive, though at least she was sitting next to him. Her knee touched his thigh as she crossed her legs. She'd agreed to "go for a drink with you guys." He'd felt on safe ground inviting her down to the Cross Keys. It wasn't exactly a date, as an American girl might put it. But dinner at De Luca Cucina was expensive on a postgraduate budget.

"Did you say Hurlburt?" Nancy had a loud voice: friendly but interrogative. Her directness was one of the things he found attractive about her. No trace of Home Counties uptightness about this one.

"Why would you be interested in him? Mind control!"

"Not exactly." Peter shook his head. "It's to do with how people think."

She snorted loudly at this reply.

The whole table paused their conversation to look at her. She was a petite, pretty woman, dressed in the best American fashion: roll-neck, smart skirt, and a neat pair of pumps. Justin laughed.

"What's so funny? Nobody here is a gambler, I guess. Anyone actually been to Nevada?"

Her challenge went unanswered. Peter looked at his shoes. He caught Justin's eye, then quickly looked away. Perhaps she was altogether out of his league. Brains, beauty, and confidence. She was here at Cambridge on a Marshall Scholarship. Cambridge didn't quite know what to make of her.

"Money, folks. That's why his research is useful. Why do you think they fund it?"

The elder of the two Flint brothers raised his eyebrows but wouldn't be drawn on this vulgar question.

"Las Vegas moguls." She grinned at Justin. "Shake that moneymaker, baby. Hurlburt wanted to find out what makes people tick, and they want to find out what makes them spend more."

Nancy flashed her immaculately toothed grin at the younger Flint. She would have him sometime. Oh boy, would she ever. She'd crack his egg right open. Peter watched her expression and shifted uncomfortably.

"Another drink, anyone?" He rose to his feet.

Nancy giggled. She'd already had way more than she was used to. This prissy, stuck-up set of snobs. She'd show them. Raise a little hell.

Susie, the maths girl, patted Nancy's hand.

"It's not always about money, Nancy. Hurlburt's a psychologist, not a salesman." She loved listening to Peter talk.

"It's always about money, doll. And you Brits know it; you just pretend you don't. Money's so dirty. Isn't it, Peter?"

He flushed and rose from his seat.

"Come on, Nancy. Help me get the round in."

"Isn't it her turn?" Nancy pointed at Susie. "I thought you people were into equality, but little Miss Mouse here gets to sit on her fanny while all you guys run around after her."

"Enough." Peter grabbed Nancy's arm and pulled her towards the bar. "You're drunk, and you're embarrassing everyone."

"Well, excuse me! You want to see embarrassing? I haven't started!" She grinned at the younger Flint. "I bet you'd like to see a girl lose control, wouldn't you? Or do you prefer to be the one to let it all hang out?"

She cackled at his discomfort. Flint looked down at the crisp packet he was folding into an elaborate, tidy square. He placed it next to the one he'd done earlier. The back of his neck prickled with heat.

Later, after she'd been sick in the gardens on the way home, Nancy leant against Peter at the college doors.

"Fancy a fuck?"

Peter stared at her.

"What are you on, Nancy?"

She sat on the wall. "I don't know."

Peter sighed. It was going to be a long night, and he still had revision to do for tomorrow. Someone had to control themselves; evidently, it wasn't going to be Nancy. He watched as she was sick in the doorway.

"Come on, Miss Congeniality. Let's get you upstairs before anyone sees you."

She giggled as he wiped the hair from her sticky cheek.

“Now you’re talking!”

The light went on in the porter’s lodge.

It was all going to be more difficult than he’d bargained for.