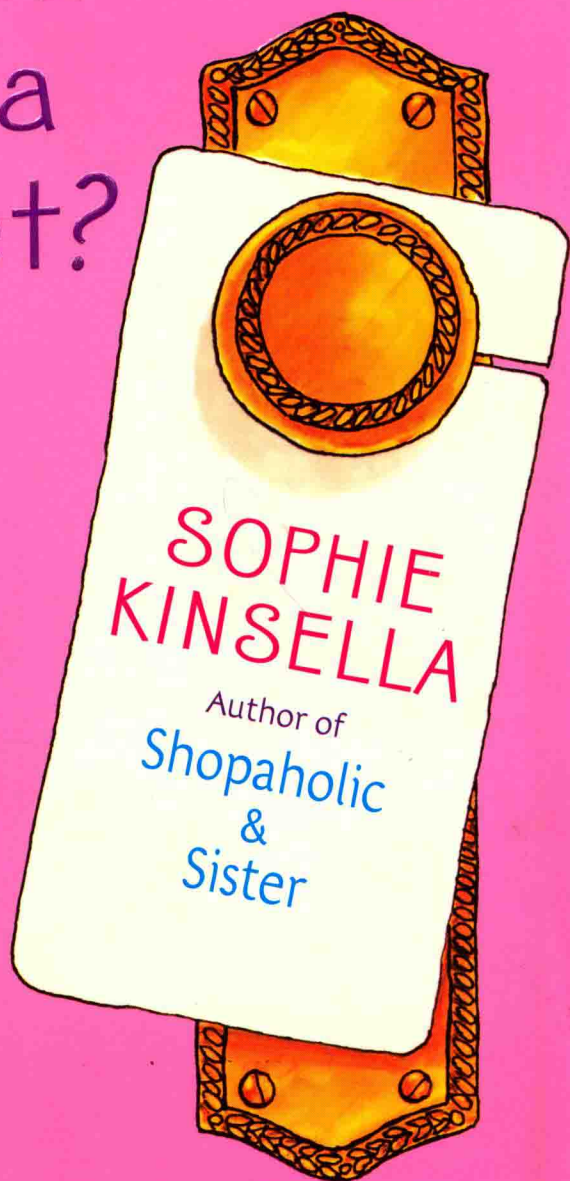


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# Can You Keep a Secret?

*a novel*



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S O P H I E   K I N S E L L A

# Can You Keep a Secret?



DELTA TRADE PAPERBACKS

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CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET?

A Delta Book

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# One

OF COURSE I have secrets.

Of course I do. Everyone has a few secrets. It's completely normal.

I'm not talking about big, earth-shattering secrets. Not the-president-is-planning-to-bomb-Japan-and-only-Will-Smith-can-save-the-world type secrets. Just normal, everyday little secrets.

Like, for example, here are a few random secrets of mine, off the top of my head:

1. My Kate Spade bag is a fake.
2. I love sweet sherry, the least cool drink in the universe.
3. I have no idea what NATO stands for. Or even exactly what it is.
4. I weigh 128 pounds. Not 118, like my boyfriend, Connor, thinks. (Although, in my defense, I was

- planning to go on a diet when I told him that. And, to be fair, it is only one number different.)
5. I've always thought Connor looks a bit like Ken. As in Barbie and Ken.
  6. Sometimes, when we're right in the middle of passionate sex, I suddenly want to laugh.
  7. I lost my virginity in the spare bedroom with Danny Nussbaum while Mum and Dad were downstairs watching *Ben-Hur*.
  8. I've already drunk the wine that Dad told me to save for twenty years.
  9. Sammy the goldfish at home isn't the same goldfish that Mum and Dad gave me to look after when they went to Egypt.
  10. When my colleague Artemis really annoys me, I feed her plant orange juice. (Which is pretty much every day.)
  11. I once had this weird lesbian dream about my flat-mate Lissy.
  12. My G-string is hurting me.
  13. I've always had this deep-down conviction that I'm not like everybody else, and there's an amazingly exciting new life waiting for me just around the corner.
  14. I have no idea what this guy in the gray suit is going on about.
  15. Plus, I've already forgotten his name.

And I only met him ten minutes ago.

"We believe in multi-logistical formative alliances," he's saying in a nasal, droning voice, "both above and below the line."

"Absolutely!" I reply brightly, as though to say "Doesn't everybody?"

Multi-logistical. What does that mean, again?

Oh, God. What if they ask me?

Don't be stupid, Emma. They won't suddenly demand, What does "multi-logistical" mean? I'm a fellow marketing professional, aren't I? Obviously I know these things.

And anyway, if they mention it again, I'll change the subject. Or I'll say I'm post-logistical or something.

The important thing is to keep confident and businesslike. I can do this. This is my big chance, and I'm not going to screw it up.

I'm sitting in the offices of Glen Oil's headquarters in Glasgow, and as I glance at my reflection in the window, I look just like a top businesswoman. My shoulder-length hair is straightened, after half an hour with the hair dryer and a bottle of serum this morning. I'm wearing discreet gold swirl earrings like they tell you to in how-to-win-that-job articles. And I've got on my smart new Jigsaw suit. (At least, it's practically new. I got it from the Cancer Research shop and sewed on a button to replace the missing one, and you can hardly tell.)

I'm here representing the Panther Corporation, which is where I work. The meeting is to finalize a promotional arrangement between the new cranberry-flavored Panther Prime sports drink and Glen Oil, and I flew up this morning from London, especially.

When I arrived, the two Glen Oil marketing guys started on this long, show-offy "who's traveled the most?" conversation about air miles and the red-eye to Washington—and I think I bluffed pretty convincingly. But the truth is, this is the first time I've ever had to travel for work.

OK. The *real* truth is, this is the first business meeting I've attended on my own. I've been at the Panther Corporation for eleven months as a marketing assistant, which is the bottom level in our department. I started off just doing menial tasks like typing letters, getting the sandwiches, and collecting my boss Paul's dry cleaning. But after a couple of

months, I was allowed to start checking copy. Then a few months ago, I got to write my very own promotional leaflet, for a tie-in with washing powder! God, I was excited. I bought a creative-writing book especially to help me, and I spent all weekend working on it. And I was really pleased with the result, even if it didn't have a misunderstood villain like the book suggested. And even if Paul did just glance at the copy and say "Fine" and kind of forget to tell anyone that I wrote it.

Since then I've done a fair bit of writing promotional literature, and I've even sat in on a few meetings with Paul. So I really think I'm moving up the ladder. In lots of ways I'm practically a marketing executive already!

Except for the tiny point that I still seem to do just as much typing as before. And getting sandwiches and collecting dry cleaning. I just do it *as well as* the other jobs. Especially so since our departmental secretary, Gloria, left a few weeks ago and still hasn't been replaced.

But it's all going to change; I know it is. This meeting is my big break. It's my first chance to show Paul what I'm really capable of. I had to beg him to let me go—after all, Glen Oil and Panther have done loads of deals together in the past; it's not like there'll be any surprises. But deep down I know I'm here only because I was in his office when he realized he'd double-booked with an awards lunch that most of the department were attending. So here I am, representing the company.

And my secret hope is that if I do well today, I'll get promoted. The job ad said "possibility of promotion after a year"—and it's nearly been a year. And on Monday I'm having my appraisal meeting. I looked up "Appraisals" in the staff induction book, and it said they are "an ideal opportunity to discuss possibilities for career advancement."

Career advancement! At the thought, I feel a familiar stab of longing. It would just show Dad I'm not a complete loser.

And Mum. And Kerry. If I could just go home and say, "By the way, I've been promoted to marketing executive."

Emma Corrigan, marketing executive.

Emma Corrigan, senior vice-president (marketing).

As long as everything goes well today. Paul said the deal was pretty much done and dusted, and all I had to do was raise one point about timing, and even I should be able to manage that. And so far, I reckon it's going really well!

OK, so I don't understand some of the terms they're using. But then I didn't understand most of my GCSE French Oral either, and I still got a B.

"Rebranding . . . analysis . . . cost-effective . . ."

The man in the gray suit is still droning on. As casually as possible, I extend my hand and inch his business card toward me so I can read it.

Doug Hamilton. That's right. I can remember this. Doug. Dug. Easy—I'll picture a shovel. Together with a *ham*. Which . . . which looks *ill* . . . and . . .

OK, forget this. I'll just write it down.

I write down "rebranding" and "Doug Hamilton" on my notepad and give an uncomfortable little wriggle. God, my knickers really are uncomfortable. I mean, G-strings are never that comfortable at the best of times, but these are particularly bad. Which could be because they're two sizes too small.

Which could possibly be because when Connor bought them for me, he told the lingerie assistant I weighed 118 pounds. Whereupon she told him I must be size 4. Size 4!

So it got to Christmas Eve, and we were exchanging presents, and I unwrapped this pair of gorgeous pale pink silk knickers. Size 4. And I basically had two options.

A: Confess the truth: "Actually, these are too small. I'm more of an eight, and by the way, I don't really weigh one hundred eighteen pounds."

B: Shoehorn myself into them.



Actually, it was fine. You could hardly see the red lines on my skin afterward. And all it meant was that I had to quickly cut the labels out of my clothes so Connor would never realize.

Since then, I've hardly ever worn this particular set of underwear, needless to say. But every so often I see them, looking all nice and expensive in the drawer, and think, Oh, come on, they can't be *that* tight, and somehow squeeze into them. Which is what I did this morning. I even decided I must have lost weight, because they didn't feel too bad.

I am such a deluded moron.

"... unfortunately, since rebranding ... major rethink ... feel we need to be considering alternative synergies ..."

Up to now I've just been sitting and nodding, thinking this business meeting is really easy. But now Doug Hamilton's voice starts to impinge on my consciousness. What's he saying?

"... two products diverging ... becoming incompatible ..."

What was that about incompatible? What was that about a major rethink? I feel a jolt of alarm.

"We appreciate the functional and synergetic partnership that Panther and Glen Oil have enjoyed in the past," Doug Hamilton is saying, "but you'll agree that clearly we're going in different directions."

Different directions?

My stomach gives an anxious lurch.

He can't be—

Is he trying to pull out of the deal?

"Excuse me, Doug," I say in my most relaxed voice. "Obviously I was closely following what you were saying earlier." I give a friendly, we're-all-professionals-together smile. "But if you could just ... um, recap the situation for all our benefits ..."

In plain English, I beg silently.

Doug Hamilton and the other guy exchange glances.

"We're a little unhappy about your brand values," says Doug Hamilton.

"My brand values?" I echo in panic.

"The brand values of the *product*," he says, giving me an odd look. "As I've been explaining, we here at Glen Oil are going through a rebranding process at the moment, and we see our new image very much as a *caring* petrol, as our new daffodil logo demonstrates. And we feel Panther Prime, with its emphasis on sport and competition, is simply too aggressive."

"Aggressive?" I stare at him in bewilderment. "But . . . it's a fruit drink."

This makes no sense. Glen Oil is fume-making, world-ruining petrol. Panther Prime is an innocent cranberry-flavored drink. How can it be too aggressive?

"The values it espouses." He gestures to the marketing brochures on the table. "Drive. Elitism. Masculinity. The very slogan 'Don't Pause.' Frankly, it seems a little dated." He shrugs. "We just don't think a joint initiative will be possible."

No. No. This can't be happening. He can't be pulling out.

Everyone at the office will think it was my fault. They'll think I cocked it up and I'm completely crap.

My heart is thumping. My face is hot. I can't let this happen. But what do I say? I haven't prepared anything. Paul said the promotion was all set up, and all I had to do was tell them we wanted to bring it forward to June.

"We'll certainly discuss it again before we make a decision," Doug's saying. He gives me a brief smile. "And as I say, we would like to continue links with the Panther Corporation, so this has been a useful meeting, in any case. . . ."

He's pushing back his chair.

I can't let this slip away! I have to try to win them around.

"Wait!" I hear myself say. "Just . . . wait a moment! I have a few points to make."

There's a can of Panther Prime sitting on the desk, and I grab it for inspiration. Playing for time, I stand up, walk to the center of the room, and raise the can high into the air where we can all see it. "Panther Prime is . . . a sports drink."

I stop, and there's a polite silence. My face is prickling. "It, um, it is very . . ."

Oh, God. What am I doing?

Come *on*, Emma. *Think*. Think Panther Prime. . . . Think Panther Cola. . . . Think. . . . Think. . . .

Yes! Of course!

"Since the launch of Panther Cola in the late 1980s, Panther drinks have been a byword for energy, excitement, and excellence," I say fluently.

Thank God. This is the standard marketing blurb for Panther Cola. I've typed it out so many times, I could recite it in my sleep.

"Panther drinks are a marketing phenomenon," I continue. "The Panther character is one of the most widely recognized in the world, while the classic slogan 'Don't Pause' has made it into dictionaries. We are offering Glen Oil an exclusive opportunity to strengthen its association with this premium, world-famous brand."

My confidence growing, I start to stride around the room, gesturing with the can. "By buying a Panther health drink, the consumer is signaling that he will settle for nothing but the best." I hit the can sharply with my other hand. "He expects the best from his energy drink, he expects the best from his petrol, he expects the best from himself."

I'm flying! I'm fantastic! If Paul could see me now, he'd give me a promotion on the spot!

I come over to the desk and look Doug Hamilton right in the eye. "When the Panther consumer opens that can, he is making a choice that tells the world who he is. I'm asking Glen Oil to make the same choice."

As I finish speaking, I plant the can firmly in the middle of the desk, reach for the ring pull, and, with a cool smile, snap it back.

And a volcano erupts.

Fizzy cranberry-flavored drink explodes in a whoosh out

of the can, drenching the papers and blotters in lurid red liquid . . . and—oh, no, please no—spattering all over Doug Hamilton's shirt.

"Fuck!" I gasp. "I mean, I'm really sorry—"

"Jesus Christ," says Doug Hamilton irritably, standing up and getting a handkerchief out of his pocket. "Does this stuff stain?"

"Er . . ." I grab the can helplessly. "I don't know."

"I'll get a cloth," says the other guy, and leaps to his feet.

The door closes behind him and there's silence, apart from the sound of cranberry drink dripping slowly onto the floor.

I stare at Doug Hamilton, my face hot and blood throbbing through my ears.

"Please . . ." My voice is husky. "Don't tell my boss."

After all that, I screwed it up.

As I drag my heels across the concourse at Glasgow Airport, I feel completely dejected. Doug Hamilton was quite sweet in the end. He said he was sure the stain would come out, and promised he wouldn't tell Paul what happened. But he didn't change his mind about the deal.

My first big chance—and this is what happens. I feel like phoning the office and saying, "That's it. I'm never coming back again, and by the way, it was me who jammed the photocopier that time."

But I can't. This is my third career in four years. It *has* to work. For my own self-worth. For my own self-esteem. And also because I owe my dad four thousand quid.

I've arrived at the airport with an hour to go, and have headed straight for the bar. "So what can I get you?" says the Australian bartender, and I look up at him in a daze.

"Erm . . ." My mind is blank. "Er, white wine. No, actually, a vodka and tonic. Thanks."

As he moves away, I slump down again in my stool. An air

hostess with fair hair in a French plait comes and sits down two bar stools away. She smiles at me, and I smile weakly in return.

I don't know how other people manage their careers, I really don't. Like my oldest friend, Lissy. She's always known she wanted to be a lawyer—and now, ta-daah! She's a fraud barrister. But I left college with absolutely no clue. My first job was in an estate agency, and I only went into it because I've always quite liked looking around houses, plus I met this woman with amazing red lacquered nails at a career fair who told me she made so much money, she'd be able to retire when she was forty.

But the minute I started, I hated it. I hated all the other trainee estate agents. I hated saying things like “a lovely aspect.” And I hated the way if someone said they could afford three hundred thousand we were supposed to give them details of houses costing at least four hundred thousand, and then kind of look down our noses, like, “You only have three hundred thousand pounds? God, you complete loser.”

So after six months I announced I was changing careers and was going to be a photographer instead. It was *such* a fantastic moment, like in a film or something. My dad lent me the money for a photography course and camera, and I was going to launch this amazing new creative career, and it was going to be the start of my new life. . . .

Except it didn't quite happen like that.

For a start, do you have any idea how much a photographer's assistant gets paid?

Nothing. It's nothing.

Which, you know, I wouldn't have minded if anyone had actually *offered* me a photographer's assistant's job.

I heave a sigh and gaze at my doleful expression in the mirror behind the bar. As well as everything else, my hair's gone all frizzy. So much for “Salon Serum—For That 24-Hour Professional Salon Look.”

At least I wasn't the only one who didn't get anywhere.

Out of the eight people in my course, one became instantly successful and now takes photos for *Vogue*, one became a wedding photographer, one had an affair with the tutor, one went traveling, one had a baby, one works at Snappy Snaps, and one is now at Morgan Stanley.

Meanwhile, I got more and more into debt, so I started temping and applying for jobs that actually paid money. And eventually, eleven months ago, I started as a marketing assistant at the Panther Corporation.

The barman places a vodka and tonic in front of me and gives me a quizzical look. "Cheer up!" he says. "It can't be that bad!"

"Thanks," I say gratefully, and take a sip. That feels a bit better.

I ought to call Paul and give him a report. But I just can't face it. Anyway, he's probably still out at his awards lunch. He won't want me disturbing him on his mobile. It can wait until Monday.

I'm just taking a second sip of vodka when my mobile starts to ring. I feel a beat of nerves. If it's the office, I'll just pretend I didn't hear.

— But it's not; it's our home number flashing on the little screen.

I press "answer." "Hi," I say.

"Hiya!" comes Lissy's voice. "Only me! So how did it go?"

Lissy is not only my oldest friend but my flatmate, too. She has tufty dark hair and an IQ of about 600 and is the sweetest person I know.

"It was a disaster," I say miserably.

"It can't have been that bad!"

"Lissy, I drenched the marketing director of Glen Oil in cranberry drink!"

Along the bar, I can see the air hostess hiding a smile, and I feel myself flush. Great. Now the whole world knows.

“Oh, dear.” I can almost *feel* Lissy trying to think of something positive to say. “Well, at least you got their attention!” she says at last. “At least they won’t forget you in a hurry.”

“I suppose,” I say morosely. “So, did I have any messages?”

“Oh! Erm, no. I mean, your dad did phone, but, um, you know, it wasn’t . . .” She trails off evasively.

“Lissy. What did he want?”

There’s a pause.

“Apparently your cousin’s won some industry award,” she says apologetically. “They’re going to be celebrating it on Saturday, as well as your mum’s birthday.”

“Oh. Great.”

I slump deeper in my chair. That’s all I need. My cousin Kerry triumphantly clutching some silver best-office-furniture-salesperson-in-the-whole-world-no-make-that-universe trophy.

“And Connor rang, too, to see how you got on,” adds Lissy quickly. “He was really sweet. He said he didn’t want to ring your mobile during your meeting, in case it disturbed you.”

“Really?”

For the first time today, I feel a lift in spirits.

Connor. My boyfriend. My lovely, thoughtful boyfriend.

“He’s such a sweetheart!” Lissy is saying. “He said he’s tied up in a big meeting all afternoon, but he’s canceled his squash game especially, so do you want to go out to supper tonight?”

“Oh,” I say, pleased. “Oh, well, that’ll be nice. Thanks, Lissy.”

I click off and take another sip of vodka, feeling much more cheerful.

My boyfriend.

It’s just like Julie Andrews said. When the dog bites, when the bee stings . . . I simply remember I have a boyfriend—and suddenly things don’t seem quite so completely shit.

Or however she put it.

And not just any boyfriend. A tall, handsome, clever boyfriend whom *Marketing Week* called “one of the brightest sparks in marketing research today.”

I sit nursing my vodka, allowing thoughts of Connor to comfort me. The way his blond hair shines in the sunshine, and the way he’s always smiling. And the way he upgraded all the software on my computer the other day without my even asking, and the way he . . . he . . .

My mind’s gone blank. This is ridiculous. I mean, there’s so much that is wonderful about Connor. From his . . . his long legs. Yes. And his broad shoulders. To the time he looked after me when I had the flu. I mean, how many boyfriends do that? Exactly.

I’m so lucky. I really am.

I put my phone away, run my fingers through my hair, and glance at the clock behind the bar. Forty minutes before the flight. Not long to go now. Nerves are starting to creep over me like little insects, and I take a deep gulp of vodka, draining my glass.

It’ll be fine, I tell myself for the zillionth time. It’ll be absolutely fine.

I’m not frightened. I’m just . . . I’m just . . .

OK. I’m frightened.

## 16. I’m scared of flying.

I’ve never told anyone I’m scared of flying. It just sounds so lame. And I mean, it’s not like I’m phobic or anything. It’s not like I can’t *get on* a plane. It’s just . . . all things being equal, I would prefer to be on the ground.

On the way up here this morning, I was so excited about the meeting, it was almost a distraction from my fear. But even so, I kept feeling bursts of panic. I kept having to close my eyes and take deep breaths. And ever since I landed, it’s



been ticking away at the back of my mind: I have to fly back again. I have to get on a plane again.

I never used to be scared. But over the last few years, I've gradually got more and more nervous. I know it's completely irrational. I know thousands of people fly every day and it's practically safer than lying in bed. You have less chance of being in a plane crash than . . . than finding a man in London, or something.

But still. I just don't like it.

Maybe I'll have another quick vodka.

By the time my flight is called, I've drunk two more vodkas and am feeling a lot more positive. I mean, Lissy's right. At least I made an impression, didn't I? At least they'll remember who I am.

As I stride toward the gate, clutching my briefcase, I almost start to feel like a confident businesswoman again. A couple of people smile at me as they pass, and I smile broadly back, feeling a warm glow of friendliness. You see. The world's not so bad after all. It's all just a question of being positive. Anything can happen in life, can't it? You never know what's around the next corner.

I reach the entrance to the plane, and there at the door, taking boarding passes, is the air hostess with the French plait who was sitting at the bar earlier.

"Hi again!" I say, smiling. "This is a coincidence!"

The air hostess stares at me. "Hi. Erm . . ."

"What?" Why does she look embarrassed?

"Sorry. It's just . . . Did you know that . . ." She gestures awkwardly to my front.

"What is it?" I say pleasantly. I look down, and freeze, aghast.

Somehow my silky shirt has been unbuttoning itself while I've been walking along. Three buttons have come undone and it's gaping at the front.