

THE LIFE EXPERIMENT

JESS KITCHING



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For James Knox and Ross Elliott.
Every day, I'm grateful to have known you.
Every day, I wish you were still here.
Miss you, always.

And for Lily Raiti, who lit up every room she entered.

Do you ever wonder where your life is heading?

Does it feel like everyone around you knows
what they're doing but you don't?

Do you ever question if you're on the right path?

We could help!

OPM Discoveries is searching for participants for an exciting research opportunity. Preliminarily named 'The Life Experiment', this scientific study aims to answer all of life's big questions.

Applicants will be required to complete a series of assessments and medical checks to confirm their eligibility. The trial itself will involve a range of tasks over a ten-week period, including submitting diary entries, wearing a monitoring device and 1:1 counselling sessions.

Combining groundbreaking technology with tried and tested research methods, this study aims to revolutionise the way we understand and interpret life, death and everything in between.

To register your interest, click [here](#).

T&Cs: Applicants must be UK residents aged 18 or older. We encourage people from all backgrounds to apply. Participants will receive £3000 compensation for their time once experiment obligations are complete. NOTE: discretion is vital to the success of The Life Experiment. All candidates will be required to follow strict security protocols, including signing an NDA that covers screening and the duration of the experiment.

1

Layla

Legal jargon swam around the stark white background of Layla's laptop screen. She blinked, heavy-lidded, but the words refused to come into focus.

From the desk opposite, Rashida glanced up. 'Go home if you're tired.'

'I could say the same to you,' Layla replied.

Rashida grinned. *Touché.*

Beside her, Sinead laughed, but none of the women moved. As the only people left in the darkened office, an unspoken competition had begun. Who would be the last to leave? There could only be one winner and, as usual, Layla was determined it would be her.

It was a friendly competition, mind you. Layla, Rashida and Sinead were allies, working together to shatter Mayweather & Halliwell's glass ceilings one meeting at a time. It had been that way since Rashida and Layla were allocated desks near each other two years ago, with Sinead joining their cluster earlier in the year. Calling out each other's achievements and being on hand for any workload meltdowns, Rashida and Sinead were the closest thing Layla had to friends in London.

Located in one of the capital's finest heritage buildings, Mayweather & Halliwell was the kind of prestigious boutique law firm where staff generally knew each other through family connections or private education establishments. Layla, Rashida and Sinead were the odd ones out,

each from decidedly working-class backgrounds and hustling ten times harder to make it to Senior Partner one day.

And Layla was determined to make it, all right. That very morning her new manager, Michelle Beckett, had taken her aside. ‘Nice work on the presentation to Fieldhouse Mews,’ she said. ‘Keep it up and I can see you making real waves here.’

Layla accepted the compliment, although making waves wasn’t usually her style. She much preferred the head down, hard work route. It was difficult for others to belittle her achievements when the results spoke for themselves.

Still, William Addington tried his best to take the shine off the moment. ‘It’s a good management ploy to side with the weak ones,’ he drawled as Layla headed back to her desk.

It was always the same with William. He had a talent for brushing off Layla’s success as a fluke or hinting that concessions were made because of her background. Ironic, given that William was only at the firm because his granddad was a Founding Partner. Not that Layla would dare say that out loud. There was almost an unwritten rule in the office – don’t acknowledge the fact that Mayweather & Halliwell never was and never would be an equal workplace.

It tried to be, of course. At least performatively. Pink cakes handed out on International Women’s Day, posters for mental health help-lines in the bathrooms. Name the PR opportunity and Mayweather & Halliwell were on the bandwagon for it.

While the office cynics would do their best not to roll their eyes, others would say that hiring Michelle was an example of genuine progression. As the company’s first female Senior Partner, she was a symbol of the future. She had been at the front of every recent promotional photograph as proof of that.

But from what Layla could see, the only thing Michelle had done was stick to the Mayweather & Halliwell status quo. Career progression slowed for women who recently married (God forbid they might have

a *baby* soon), late nights were not only encouraged but expected, and relatives of existing employees were inevitably fast-tracked for promotions.

As Layla's jaw clenched, the sensible part of her brain kicked into life. *Office politics don't matter*, it said. *Focus on your career. You know the truth about your place here.*

Sitting taller, Layla straightened her shoulders. The truth was her success was hers, fought for and well deserved. There had been no Daddy to gift it to her, no family connection, no shortcut. Hard work and talent got her to where she was, and she was damned proud of that.

Layla just hoped the early mornings and late nights would pay off soon. Jokes about sacrificing her youth for her career might have made Layla laugh once upon a time, but setting her alarm for 5 am every morning didn't feel funny anymore. Especially when living in London meant using most of her salary on renting a room in an apartment the size of a shoebox.

With Layla momentarily distracted from her screen, her stomach took its chance to grab her attention. Cupping her hand to her rumbling abdomen, Layla fought to suppress the sounds within. Things had been so hectic earlier that she hadn't had time for lunch. Now it was what, six-thirty?

Layla glanced at the corner of her screen.

7:53 pm.

Shit.

Whenever Layla's mum saw her, an admittedly rare occasion – Layla's brain made a note to guilt her about *that* when she was trying to sleep later – she always commented that Layla needed to take better care of herself. Assessing her daughter, Joanna would grimace and say, 'If you don't start putting yourself first, you're going to get sick.'

'Mum's right. I reckon we'll start seeing a few stress-related grey hairs soon,' Layla's sister, Maya, would add. 'Just as well I'm a bloody good hairdresser and can fix them for you.'

Layla knew they had a point. Long days at a desk made her sluggish and bloated. Her skin was dull and prone to breakouts. Even her dark hair seemed tired of being attached to her head. The strands were so lacklustre that no amount of serum or mousse gave them any semblance of vitality.

Another hunger pang tore through Layla, this one too intense to ignore. 'I'm going to the vending machine. Anyone want anything?'

Sinead and Rashida shook their heads, not looking up from their laptops.

Layla stood, wincing as her knees groaned like rusty hinges. What did she expect? She'd barely left her desk all day, despite the wellness prompts HR sent around sporadically. Layla might only be twenty-nine, but some days her body creaked like she was eighty-nine.

Limping to the vending machine in the break room, Layla eyed the artificially lit, sugar-filled contents.

Skimming the names of brands she had come to know better than the names of her school friends' children, Layla selected a can of Coke and a packet of crisps. The dinner of champions. The dinner of success. At least, that's what she told herself as the nutrient-free meal landed with a thud.

Clutching her goodies, Layla headed back to her desk, returning to find Sinead with her head in her hands. 'You okay?' Layla asked as she slid onto her chair.

'Are any of us, when we're still here at this time?' Sinead sighed, the gust of breath so strong it ruffled her strawberry-blonde fringe.

Leaning back in her seat, Rashida linked her fingers behind her hijab to stretch. 'I'm not. I've missed story time again. Aaron sent a photo. I'm not sure he meant it as a guilt trip, but it's working.'

'Show me,' Layla said.

Rashida reached for her phone and turned it to her friends. A photo of her two-year-old son, Syed, wearing adorable aeroplane pyjamas and holding a picture book filled the screen.

'He's so cute!' Sinead cooed.

‘He is. It’s a shame I’m not around to see his cuteness for myself.’

Layla opened her drink, a satisfying fizz ringing out into the office. ‘Go home then. It’s almost eight.’

‘I can’t leave yet. Richard’s been at me all week about my billables,’ Rashida replied, locking her phone as if the now-black screen could silence her maternal guilt.

‘They can’t fire you for going home to see your son.’

‘No, but they can make my life difficult. You know as well as I do that companies like this look for any excuse to push working mothers out of the office and back into their homes.’

Layla’s features twisted, but she didn’t argue. Rashida was right. Time and time again, Layla had seen it happen.

Sure, working here is hard, Layla thought, *but what isn’t?*

Growing up on an estate in Hull, all Layla ever saw was hard living. The single mother battling to find a job that fit around her childcare needs. The bored teenager who joined a gang because there was nothing else to do. The migrant told their qualifications didn’t translate, so all they were offered was a minimum-wage role.

Even in her own family, things had been tough. When Layla was seven, her dad had a near-fatal fall while helping a friend install guttering on his house. The damage to David’s body was catastrophic. It took him months and multiple surgeries to recover, not that he ever fully did. Even now, David’s movements were creaky and tinged with pain.

The accident put David out of work for years, and government support couldn’t make up for the loss of his income. Joanna’s part-time supermarket salary just wasn’t enough. Money was tight. Grocery shopping was a competition to find the cheapest products. Clothes were bought second-hand and shared between Layla and Maya. Haircuts were done in the kitchen with a pair of blunt scissors and Joanna’s best efforts.

Life in the Cannon family might have been filled with love and laughter, but for Layla it was also filled with worry for her stressed

parents. David and Joanna were still struggling to pay off the debts they'd amassed during that time. Layla helped where she could, though after rent and living expenses, she never had much money to spare.

But so what if London was a financial drain and her career was an energy vacuum? This was Layla's dream. It always had been.

Ever since Layla could remember, rules, logic and consequences had called to her. Life didn't have to be chaotic, she'd realised. There could, and should, be order in the world.

So, Layla became a lawyer. And not just any lawyer, but a corporate lawyer living in the capital. Sure, Layla once pictured herself defending the rights of refugees or victims of crime, not helping millionaires hoard their wealth, but still, she had made her childhood dream come true.

Layla had been taught from an early age that if you worked hard, you succeeded. If you worked hard, then the place you were born, the school you attended, and the rank of your social class meant nothing.

But if hard work is the answer, why am I getting nowhere? Layla wondered. It was a thought so toxic she wanted to shake her head to dislodge it.

As she popped a salt and vinegar crisp in her mouth, Layla studied Sinead. Dark circles shadowed her colleague's eyes, the bags so embedded that even her expensive concealer struggled to hide them. Layla knew for a fact Sinead hadn't eaten lunch either. It was sad, really. When Sinead joined the firm eight months ago, bright-eyed and fresh from Dublin, she had been the life and soul of the party. 'Always up for the craic,' as she used to put it. Looking at her now, the only thing Sinead looked up for was an early night.

'Wasn't it your anniversary yesterday?' Layla asked, crunching on another crisp.

Sinead groaned. 'Don't remind me.'

'What happened?'

'What always happens – we had plans, but I didn't leave here until after nine.'

‘I take it Kirstie wasn’t impressed?’

‘Would you be if you had to cancel a reservation at La Rosa at the last minute?’

‘Ouch,’ Rashida winced, but Layla said nothing. For her, romantic dinners were a distant memory.

‘If you go now, you could still make a night of it,’ Layla suggested. ‘Grab some wine and surprise Kirstie. You too, Rashida. Syed might be asleep, but Aaron won’t be. When did you two last have a date night?’

‘A date night? What’s that?’ Rashida joked.

‘Point proven, so go!’

Temptation danced in Rashida’s eyes, but her shoulders slumped. ‘I can’t. The deadline is Friday and—’

‘I’ll do it,’ Layla interjected. ‘I’m staying late anyway, what difference does it make? Seriously, go. We don’t all have to be miserable.’

Sinead glanced at the time. ‘There is that bottle of wine in the fridge . . .’

‘Perfect! Share it with Kirstie. Rashida, go watch a film with Aaron. Enjoy yourselves.’

Sinead wavered. ‘Are you sure?’

As Layla nodded, Rashida’s left hand hovered above the camel-coloured coat hung on the back of her chair. ‘You really don’t need any help? Because I can take my laptop and—’

‘Don’t even think about it. Go, both of you, before I get angry at you for dithering.’

Sinead and Rashida didn’t need telling again. Coats and handbags grabbed, they headed for the exit in a flurry of thank yous and promises to repay the favour.

When they were gone, a lonely silence echoed through the wood-panelled office.

Pulling her attention back to her laptop, Layla tried to focus, but the words danced around the screen. Even when she rubbed her bleary

eyes, they wouldn't comply. Sighing, she slipped her phone from her pocket and headed to social media for a moment of respite.

As soon as she opened Instagram, Layla wished she hadn't. The first picture on her feed was of Taylina Dare wearing an impossibly small bikini while lounging beside a glorious ocean.

Envy bit Layla's throat. Taylina had been in her year at school. A toxic mix of airhead and bully, Taylina had discovered that when you're beautiful, you can be both and still be adored. Her career since her school days was testimony to that. After amassing a large online following and marrying the footballer she met on series three of *Love Shack*, Taylina was sickeningly rich, even though she'd never known a late night stuck behind a desk

Frustrated, Layla went to close the app, but something caught her eye before she could . . . An advert asking Layla the question she often asked herself.

Do you ever wonder where your life is heading?

'Only all day, every day,' Layla muttered.

Curiosity piqued, Layla read on. Her skin prickled. The advert felt like it was written for her. Like it somehow knew exactly what thoughts she was avoiding.

Was she on the right path or was she as lost as she felt?

Would all this be worth it one day, or was she wasting her time on something that would never provide the happiness and security she was searching for?

Layla sat with her misery for a moment before shaking her head. 'This is ridiculous,' she muttered. So what if the questions felt like they had been plucked from her mind? The pull she felt wasn't fate or divine intervention – it was a skilled copywriter's script.

And an experiment, really? Layla was so busy with work she couldn't find time to cook dinner, never mind commit to a ten-week experiment. Besides, someone else would benefit from the opportunity more. A £3,000 boost to her non-existent savings would be nice, as would

using the money to pay off some of her parents' debt, but it wasn't enough to make the commitment worthwhile.

Decision made, Layla went to lock her phone, but at that moment an email pinged into her inbox. The subject line read: *Looks like it will be another late one.*

Layla's heart dropped like a stone down a well. She didn't have to read the email to know what it said. Another insane deadline. Another night of overtime she wasn't paid for.

Another night of asking what the hell she was doing with her life.

Biting back a sigh, Layla skimmed the ad once more. 'Fuck it,' she said, before clicking the link to apply.

2

Angus

The sound of someone using his shower startled Angus awake. He jerked upright, exposing his naked torso from beneath the duvet. A slice of autumnal sunlight peeked through a gap in the curtains, making him wince. Angus had closed them hastily last night, too caught up in passionate activity to care about the morning.

Stifling a yawn, Angus glanced at the time on his phone. 7:47 am.

A groan escaped him. Laying back on his pillow, Angus threw an arm over his eyes to shut out the world, but the woman in the shower chose that moment to start singing. Beyoncé, she was not.

With no chance of sleep now, Angus tossed the duvet aside and found his underwear on the floor. Sidestepping the woman's possessions – Louboutin shoes, Chanel bag – he entered his ensuite.

A miracle of expensive taste and fine craftsmanship, with a large jacuzzi bath that looked out over London, the slick bathroom impressed everyone Angus brought home. So did the rest of his penthouse.

But was living there Angus's dream? Someone once asked him that. The question had stuck with Angus ever since. At the time, he hadn't been able to answer it. Truthfully, he still couldn't.

The woman in the shower smiled when Angus entered the room. Even with traces of mascara darkening the skin under her eyes, she was undeniably beautiful.

The previous night, Jasper had pointed her out as she danced amidst

a cluster of similarly long-limbed, bronzed friends. 'I want to marry her,' he swooned, eying the woman up and down.

'I thought you didn't believe in marriage?' Angus replied.

'For her, I'd change my mind.'

But it was Angus who had taken the woman home. It hadn't been his intention, but that tended to be the way things went. People quickly tired of Jasper bragging about his car collection or listing the drugs he could get. Wearied, their eyes wandered until they landed on Angus.

While Angus might present as a humbler alternative to Jasper, his surname told a different story, at least for those in the know.

Despite their gargantuan wealth, a Google search of the Fairview-Whitleys would not bring up a boastful list of business acquisitions and society-page features. In fact, it didn't bring up much at all. The family were not gossip-column fodder. They possessed a level of wealth that rose above all that.

'Did I wake you?' the woman asked, her voice carrying the distinctive croak of a big night.

'Yes,' Angus replied. His body came alive at the thought of joining her, but as he reached for the glass door, the woman turned the shower off.

'I can't stay. I've got to go to work.'

Angus blinked. *Work. Of course.* Not everyone was like him, a 34-year-old with more money than he knew what to do with and no career in sight. Angus knew that statement made him sound like a dick, and at times he *was* a dick, but he wasn't exactly proud of his employment status.

'You're rich. You don't need to work,' Jasper dismissed whenever Angus confessed his insecurities. 'Being loaded is your full-time job. Trust me, you do it well.'

But the truth was that Angus was ashamed. The one time he had gone all-in on a career, Angus lost over two million pounds of his family's money. But back then, when he was twenty-seven and so

cocky that ‘arrogant’ was the first word people used to describe him, it had been fun to wave a cheque in the air and fund the startup of a friend of a friend. Something in tech. Something he didn’t understand that sounded cool. Swooping in like a hero made Angus feel powerful, until he realised he hadn’t asked the right questions – or any questions at all.

Before Angus could spiral further, the woman spoke once more. ‘Can you get me a towel?’

Nodding, Angus grabbed a fresh towel from a concealed cupboard and handed it over.

‘Thanks,’ she said, wrapping it around herself. Shuffling out of the shower, the woman caught sight of her reflection in the semi-steamed mirror and laughed. ‘Good job I saw this. I can’t go to work looking like a panda, can I?’

As she wiped the smudged makeup from her eyes, Angus realised he had no idea what work she was referencing. ‘What is it you do again?’

The woman stopped. ‘I told you last night. I plan bespoke, high-end birthday parties for dogs.’

Yes, that was it – a career so ridiculous Angus had laughed into his drink when the woman said it. She went on to explain how her father had given her a small loan to start the business. *Only eighty-thousand pounds*, she had said, as if it was spare change.

The woman then described the services her company provided: catering from London’s finest restaurants, entertainment from award-winning dog trainers and handcrafted puppy-party costumes, to name a few. She informed Angus that she’d arranged six parties so far, each for pets belonging to her mother’s friends. No cats – she didn’t do cats, or any other animals for that matter. When she had finished her monologue, the woman took a smug sip of vodka soda.

Angus remembered sitting in the club, wide-eyed. The absurdity of the conversation seemed to be lost on everyone but him. Not for the

first time, Angus wondered what he was doing, existing in a world that made no sense to him.

What was he *doing*?

Focusing on the woman once more, Angus studied her sharp shoulder blades as they jutted from the top of her towel. Shame twinged his stomach. He shouldn't judge her. At least she'd done something with her life.

'So, what's on the agenda for you today?' the woman asked him.

Angus smiled, painfully aware that he couldn't answer the question. The day stretched ahead of him like a blank canvas. The problem was, he had no paint to fill it with.

Ever since the startup debacle, Angus had lost all trust in himself. Bad habits crept in. Within months, Angus was living a life no different to the one he had at eighteen.

'A cowardly way to live,' he once heard his mother mutter, but Angus didn't care if doing nothing made him a coward. Cowardice was better than failure. Sure, the empty days drove Angus insane, but what could he do? Figuring out what to do with your life at the age of thirty-four was embarrassing.

'Your day?' the woman prodded, when no answer was provided.

'Oh, you know, this and that,' Angus replied. 'Head to the gym, catch up with friends. Chill.'

'But it's Wednesday,' the woman pushed. 'Don't you have a job to go to?'

'Not exactly. I mean, not in the traditional sense.'

The woman cocked her head. 'What does that mean?'

Heat singed Angus's cheeks. What was he supposed to say – *It means fucking around aimlessly every day, killing time until I can fall asleep?*

When the silence dragged on, the woman raised her eyebrows. Angus found himself wishing he had done more with his life. Anything. Even starting a business planning birthday parties for dogs.

Bored, the woman walked through to the bedroom. Angus followed. He found her scooping her belongings from the floor. Plucking her skimpy dress from the pile, she shimmied it over her head. Without the club atmosphere and alcohol, the dress looked more tacky than enticing.

Suddenly, the woman met Angus's gaze. 'A few friends are heading to the Cotswolds this weekend, if you fancy it,' she said. Even if Angus's lack of drive was unattractive, he was still rich. 'Think skinny dipping in an indoor pool, cocktails by a fire, that kind of thing.'

'Sounds good, but I can't this weekend,' Angus replied.

'Oh?' The woman looked at Angus expectantly, waiting for a reason, but he said no more. He'd never been one to come up with excuses or spare people's feelings. He simply said yes, or he said no. Either way, people listened.

When the silence verged on awkward, the woman hooked the straps of her high heels through her fingers. Approaching Angus, she angled her face towards him. 'This was fun. We should do it again sometime.'

'Sure,' Angus replied. As the woman's face erupted into a smile, he panicked. He meant another casual hook-up. She knew that, right?

Angus didn't have long to worry about that, though, because the woman grabbed the back of his head and pulled him in for a kiss. The pressure was wrong, more desperate than passionate, and both could have used a toothbrush. Still, Angus reciprocated the gesture.

Eventually, the woman pulled away, breathless and grinning. Angus took it as his cue to walk her to the door. 'See you soon, Angus Fairview-Whitley,' she chimed.

Realising he couldn't remember her name, Angus waved goodbye and watched the woman slink into the lift. She blew him a kiss, the doors closed, then she was gone.

Briskly, he shut the door of his twenty-seventh-floor haven, trying not to think about how little connection he had to the outside world.

For a moment, he debated making a coffee, but caffeine meant waking up properly, and that would mean more of the day to fill.

Sloping back to his bedroom, Angus flopped onto the unmade super king. The faint odours of sex and perfume lingered on the sheets, but Jinny would be here at twelve to clean it away. By tonight, Angus would slip into bed and find no trace of the woman he had spent the night with. He would fall asleep how he spent his days – alone.

When a yawn bubbled up Angus's throat, he glanced at the time. It was barely 8 am. What to do?

What to *do*?

He could go to the gym early, he supposed, but at this time it would be busy. What if he couldn't use the machines he liked?

He could cook. Sort dinners for the week or try out recipes he'd learned when he last visited Japan. Cooking was Angus's favourite way to de-stress, something he craved now the startup failure was on his mind again. But cooking in the morning meant he would have nothing to do in the evening. It only delayed his boredom.

Maybe he could go out for breakfast instead, but who with? Angus's closest friends were probably still asleep, and he couldn't go *alone*. Imagine if someone saw him.

Angus sighed. Once, living like this had been fun. Growing up in a house with no rules or limits was freeing. Impromptu shopping trip? Take Father's card. A last-minute holiday? Where to, and how long for? Studying was for those who needed a job. Consequences were for those who didn't have connections in high places to smooth things over. Angus knew his privilege, and he enjoyed the fruits of it – until he realised how hollow the fruits were.

Memories of parties and puppy love swept through Angus. The stately homes with endless bedrooms. The taste of fruit-scented lip gloss mingled with spirits stolen from parents' alcohol collections. The names and faces seemed so transient now. Drunken moments that had promised happiness but delivered none.

Angus knew this wasn't something he could ever say out loud. After all, how could anyone feel sorry for him? But Angus didn't want pity. He wanted . . . What *did* he want?

Anything. Anything but this.

Propping himself up on a pillow, Angus grabbed his phone. Plenty of notifications were waiting. Money might not buy happiness but it certainly bought friends, although Angus suspected his definition of 'friend' was more transactional than most.

Hitting Instagram, he learned he had gained a new follower request. Strange, given that his account was private. Someone clearly wanted to find him.

Opening the notification, Angus saw it was the woman from last night.

Her bio informed him that her name was Fiona 'Fifi' Fortston. His finger hovered over the 'follow back' button, but he didn't commit to the gesture. Instead, he went back to his homepage. There, something caught his eye.

Do you ever wonder where your life is heading? an advert asked.

Swallowing hard, Angus read on. The more he read, the more the blank stretch of days ahead filled with colour. This experiment would last ten weeks, and that wasn't including the application process. That meant that for at least ten weeks, he would be busy. He would wake up with a purpose.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Angus clicked the link and submitted his details. *There*, he thought, settling into his pillow. *You've done something with your day, after all.*