

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Gift of Girls

Chloë Thurlow

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About the Book

Magdalena Wallace scores a great summer job as an intern at City accountants Roche-Marshall. But she omits to tell her boss, the mysterious Simon Roche, that she works nights as a waitress at Rebels Casino.

When Magdalena learns a 'secret' system from a high-roller, she plays the tables only to lose all her university savings. Soon she is dipping into clients' money and it is not long before Simon Roche catches her in the act. As an alternative to notifying the police, he suggests she become his slave until the debt is paid. She agrees but never envisages just how far she will have to go to break even.

About the Author

Chloë Thurlow is a London-based author. She is the author of *Being a Girl*.

Also by Chloë Thurlow

BEING A GIRL

THE GIFT OF GIRLS

Chloë Thurlow



For Jim Arnold

The Interview

SITTING ACROSS THE desk from Simon Roche in his office was worse than sitting A level French; worse than being sent to Sister Benedict to be reprimanded. My armpits were dripping and my knickers were so damp they had ridden up into the crack of my bottom. I was wearing a lacy blouse that revealed rather more bare flesh than was probably appropriate and my cheeks turned pink with embarrassment as I followed Mr Roche's eyes down to my throbbing breasts.

My flatmate Melissa had said, if you've got it, flaunt it, and the thing with clichés is, while they are usually true, they don't always apply.

With the push-up bra shamefully tipping my breasts out of my top, I had chosen a pink suit and cherry-red heels high enough to give a girl a sense of presence. That was the plan. My clothes were neat, pretty, feminine and tight enough to ensure that my bones could be seen to be exactly where they should be, pressing through my lightly tanned skin and brushing the inside of the pink fabric.

I was wearing the uniform of a girl with confidence, although I couldn't help wondering as I gazed back mesmerised into Simon Roche's deep-set eyes if I had got it all terribly wrong. He looked like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* with wavy black hair and those probing dark eyes that had remained for an age on my breasts before panning

slowly upwards over my chin and my nose. As our gaze met once more, I got the impression that he was looking into my soul, into my hidden desires and secrets. Desires and secrets I didn't even know I had.

The office was cool and dark with pale wooden planks underfoot and floor-to-ceiling windows cloaked by vertical blinds. The blinds were partially drawn and bars of light patterned the room in such a way that for a moment I felt as if I were a bird in a gilded cage, there of my own free will to have my wings clipped. Roche-Marshall was one of the top accountancy firms in the country and a month's work experience at their London office would give me a feeling for the profession before I started my degree at the London School of Economics.

'Aren't you going to find accountancy a little dull, Miss Wallace?' Mr Roche began.

'Not at all, I adore figures.'

He cast his eyes over my neck and shoulders, over that reckless display of cleavage.

'As do I,' he finally said, and I felt the flush on my cheeks burn more brightly. 'How old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'So, no gap year?'

'No,' I said and paused. 'I want to get ahead. I like to succeed in what I set out to do and taking a year off now would slow me down.'

'You seem very ... disciplined.'

'Yes, I am.'

'That is something I like in a girl.' His eyes in the refracted light seemed to sparkle like black stars. 'Unlike art or literature, that can be bent to the shape that pleases the practitioner, the purity of numbers demands our subjugation to discipline.'

He clearly expected a reply and I wasn't sure what to say. 'Yes,' I said. 'I think that's probably right, Mr Roche.'

'You can call me Simon, and I shall call you -' he paused before saying my name '- Magdalena.'

My name sounded oddly sensual in his deep voice. 'OK,' I said with a little shrug.

'We are a very old firm. Some of our clients have been with us for a hundred years. Dealing with other people's money requires complete trust. I like to reward those who respect that trust. Those who betray it I punish. I punish with extreme severity.'

As he spoke, he lowered his voice and I felt a shiver run up my spine. 'Of course,' I said, filling the moment's silence.

He looked down at my application and continued. 'I see you received the maths prize at school.'

I nodded.

'And your hobby is gymnastics?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sure you look very fetching in a leotard?'

Was this a question? Was this the sort of thing employers asked? I wasn't sure what to say. 'Well ...' The flush on my cheeks must have been turning from pink to crimson. My throat was dry. I tried to swallow.

'Magdalena, you're not embarrassed, are you?' he asked.

'No, not at all.'

'And?'

Now what did he mean?

'I said, I imagine you look very fetching in a leotard?'

'Well, yes, I suppose.'

'Good. We try not to be too dull, even if we are accountants.' He pushed the papers into a folder and smiled. 'I'm sure you're going to fit in at Roche-Marshall very well, very well indeed. I shall look forward to seeing you on Monday.'

That was it. I was in. I was so thrilled my knees felt wobbly as I got to my feet. Simon Roche pushed back his

chair and stood, tall in his charcoal suit, a few curls of dark hair climbing over the top of his blue-and-white-striped shirt. He wasn't wearing a tie.

He walked with me out to the lifts and stood there studying me in my pink suit, my slender waist and prominent hipbones, my full breasts of which I was secretly rather proud, the neat cut of my dark hair which Sister Bianca had once described as the colour of temptation. I had never been sure if the little nun from Napoli had been flirting with me.

The lift bell rang and Simon Roche touched my arm as if to guide me between the silver doors as they whispered open.

'Until Monday,' he said.

'Thank you, thank you so much,' I replied.

The doors closed and the lift whisked me down seven floors to the glass entrance of Roche-Marshall, a temple to the divinity of numbers, the altar for the sacrificial lamb.

Learning the System

I ARRIVED SPARKY bright in a yellow suit Monday morning and was astonished to be given the job checking the accounts for various large corporations. I imagined this was a test, that the accounts had already been signed off, but there was probably going to be some small error in each one and, if that were the case, I was determined to find them.

It may seem weird that a girl like me, a gymnast, should enjoy the cold inflexible world of numbers, but I really do.

Life when you leave the safety of school is bewildering. We have all this education and ambition and temptation, and, while you are navigating a path through the grown-up maze, numbers have a purity, an honesty. Except in quantum physics or spacetime, two plus two always equals four, and there is comfort in knowing that, even if deep down the mathematician knows it isn't strictly true.

I had been placed on my own in a small office with a view over the church spires and old slate roofs of East London. I was just along the corridor from Simon Roche and mid-morning he popped his head round the door to ask how I was getting on.

'Fine, fine.'

'Have you found any inconsistencies?'

I couldn't resist a small smile. 'Yes, a few,' I replied.

'No problems with the software?'

'No, I did IT at school.'

'Good for you.'

He seemed to be studying my feet under the desk. He glanced up, gave me one of his penetrating looks and left me with a vague sense of unease as he closed the door behind him.

Simon Roche gave me the feeling that he knew something I didn't know, that he was aware that, while I was gilding my CV working as an intern at Roche-Marshall by day, from eight at night until two in the morning I was serving complimentary drinks at Rebels Casino in Piccadilly.

The truth is, I wasn't taking a gap year and I was doing a waitressing job that wasn't entirely suitable because I didn't have any money. Well, yes, I had about £1,000 in savings, but I was sharing a flat in Camberwell with Sarah and Melissa, and £1,000 added to my meagre £3,000 student loan wasn't going to last through my first term at the LSE. Not if I wanted to eat. Actually, not eating wasn't a problem, it was not buying the clothes and creams and underwear that make a girl after seven years at boarding school feel that life's worth living.

How I had managed to get into this sorry state wasn't exactly my fault. Father made and lost fortunes with his harebrained schemes and had just lost the most recent fortune publishing English textbooks for the Chinese; only 50p a copy to print in Singapore, but, with ten million copies rolling off the press, the Chinese man who had ordered the books vanished. Poor Daddy got stuck with the bill and went bankrupt. He was now in the Middle East trying to set up a business selling second-hand aeroplanes, my Spanish mother was acting suicidal, and I was on my own.

I had taken the job at Rebels at Melissa's urging because I had once played Sally Bowles in the school production of *Cabaret* and my role at the casino required a similar costume: a bowler hat and bow tie, a sleeveless

girdle that nipped in the waist and, correspondingly, pumped up my breasts, black fishnets hooked to a garter belt and shiny black knickers, which alluring prospect invited punters to smack my bottom, an occupational hazard rewarded with small gratuities and, as I'm sure it says in the Bible, who among us can resist temptation?

The job allowed me to get a glimpse of the real world, or at least the real world of gamblers, who, as often as not, seemed to toss their chips across the green baize of the gaming tables so that it resembled debris vanishing on the outgoing tide. The majority of the players lost their money, and most did so with the equanimity of poor people standing in the rain at bus stops.

There were exceptions, and I often lingered over the blackjack table to watch an Australian man who wore the same creased linen suit every night and always appeared to cash up more chips than he had purchased at the beginning of the evening. He didn't drink cocktails, but took a bottle of Coke every time I passed with the tray.

On Saturday, at the end of my first week at Roche-Marshall, I plucked up the courage to ask him how come he always seemed to win.

'I have a system,' he said and he placed four £50 chips on the three of diamonds.

My tray was empty and I had to dash off to refill it. I swept back around the room. An actor named Jay Leonard, whom everyone knew from the TV soaps, shoved £5 down my knickers and smacked me so hard I nearly dropped the tray.

'Ouch,' I cried.

'She loves it,' he called.

I stumbled on, bottom burning, determined to get a first in economics from the LSE.

Men, I had discovered, were obsessed with bottoms. They want to spank them, pinch them, squeeze them like ripe peaches in the greengrocer's. Men see bottoms and

can't keep their hands to themselves. Even some women are lured by the same strange temptation - the nuns at my school, certainly, who dearly loved to see girls breaking the rules so they could instil a bit of old-fashioned obedience in them. Spanking may have been banned in most schools, but not in mine.

I hurried in a circle giving out drinks, wiggling without even meaning to, and, when I reached the Australian, I watched him scoop in another pile of chips.

'That's amazing,' I said.

'It's easy when you know how,' he replied.

I watched him refill his glass with Coke. As he looked up, our eyes met.

'Will you teach me?' I asked breathlessly.

He laughed. 'Listen, babe, no one gives away their system, not for anything,' he said.

'Please, I'm desperate.'

He pushed back his shaggy mop of dirty-blond hair and his blue eyes ran over my features. 'Why are you so desperate?' he asked.

I told him that I had to support myself through university, that I was working unpaid in an accountant's office, that if he told me I'd never breathe a word to anyone. 'Please,' I said. 'I'll do anything.'

He looked at my breasts, my trembling inflamed lips, and he looked long and hard into my nervous eyes. 'Anything?' he asked.

The noise in the casino seemed to fade to silence. The lights had dimmed. There was only the Australian looking at me with sea-blue eyes in a nest of wrinkles, a smile on his leathery face. When you say to a girl at school you'll do *anything* if she'll let you read her essay, or let you borrow her new ra-ra skirt, it doesn't mean the same as when you say you'll do anything for a man in a creased linen suit in a casino at 1.30 in the morning.

'Anything?' he said again.

I bit my lip and nodded my head.

I was conscious of what I was doing but in a subconscious sort of way, if that makes sense. What I mean is, I hadn't thought it through. It just seemed as if there was something inevitable about it, there was no alternative, it was the right thing to do at that moment.

'What time do you finish?' he asked.

'Another half an hour.'

'I'll play on till then and then we'll get a taxi back to my hotel. All right?'

I nodded again.

My heart was thumping like a drum as I raced off with the empty tray. I couldn't believe what I had done, that I'd bitten my lip and nodded my head, that I'd agreed. It was absurd. It was outrageous. It was shameful. Girls like me don't do that sort of thing. They don't even think about such things. But I had been given an impossible choice: condemn myself to poverty or take a chance, nod my head, and agree to do *anything*.

I trotted back to the bar and refilled the tray. As I moved through the casino the enormity of what I was contemplating didn't seem real. It was like being back on stage in *Cabaret*. I was parading about in a corset and black stockings, my legs tapered in stilettos, my breasts pumped up like an ad for Wonderbra. I was in costume and a costume makes you feel safe, hidden. It makes you feel that you are playing a role. It wasn't me but the actress in me that had looked back into the Australian's eyes and silently agreed to his proposal.

In my head there were two voices. One was saying: I can't do this, I'll never do this. The other was saying: You must do this. You must do this. You nodded your head. You must do this.

The flush on my neck burned like a brand, my blood like fire in my veins. If anyone ever found out I'd feel mortified. And yet, and yet, I could see all the advantages, and the

disadvantages reminded me for some reason of Sister Benedict in chapel quoting the parable of the ten talents: the good servants who had taken the cash gift from their master and doubled their money had *done the right thing*, while the servant who had ignored the opportunity and hidden his solitary talent in the desert had the coin taken from him when the master returned.

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

It was chilling. When opportunity comes knocking you have to be dressed and ready for it. Surely that's what Matthew in verse 25 was trying to tell me.

My armpits were tingling and damp. I felt breathless in the tight corset. I couldn't focus on anyone or see anything except the picture in my mind of a girl in a bizarre black costume in a small bare room listening to the sound of an iron knocker rapping on a bolted door. Opportunity's here. Are you going to let me in?

The last thirty minutes at work always dragged but time that night was racing, the minutes ticking me closer to the moment when I threw back the door, the sound of knocking an echo coming closer and closer.

You must do this. You must do this. You nodded your head. You must do this.

There were a few more slaps on my bottom, a few more creased bank notes shoved down my pants, and suddenly, instead of changing out of my casino clothes, I was pushing my arms into a floor-length raincoat that I buttoned up to my throat.

I can't do this, I'll never do this.

The colour drained from my face as I moved like a shadow through the casino to the main doors. The Australian was waiting outside. He didn't speak and neither did I. He stopped a cruising cab. He opened the door and

stood back, gazing at me like the master judging the servant with the solitary unused talent.

I hesitated. I was on the banks of the Rubicon. Once I crossed the raging river there was no way back. This was my last chance to say no, to apologise, to rush off and find another taxi to take me home.

Kate, another girl who finished at two, ran down the casino steps to where her boyfriend was waiting in his car. She gave me a wave as if in encouragement and, as I waved back, I stepped into the taxi's dark interior. I was on autopilot. I wasn't making my own decisions. They were being made by some power outside myself. I sat in the corner of the seat trembling and silent, my fingers laced together in my lap, like a prisoner in the dock.

My companion introduced himself. His name was Sandy Cunningham. It was all very formal. Magdalena Wallace, I said. He patted my knee as you would pat a restless pony. It was all so weird and all so easy.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing wrong with making it with a sixth-former from the local grammar school on the bottom field; heavens, the third-year girls were at it like rabbits. But Sandy was a man, an adult, and I really had no idea how I had come to be sitting there in a taxi with him and how I should behave now I was there.

'You're not nervous, are you?' he asked me.

I blushed. 'No ...' I paused. 'Yes, I am a bit.'

He patted my knee again. 'I can have the taxi drop me, then you can go home,' he suggested. He looked into my eyes. My pulse was racing. There was a throbbing in my temples. A tightness across my chest. I felt like a reprieved prisoner and, now I was free, I wasn't sure what to do with my freedom. I watched the shop lights race by, a few late-night couples wandering home, a drunk sitting in the gutter drinking from a bottle wrapped in a bag.

There are in life few moments that are of the essence, direction-making or changing, few decisions that determine

who we are and what we might become. This was one of those moments, one of those decisions. It was as if sitting in that taxi in high heels and fishnets there were two girls, the me I thought I was and the me I really am. Freud says we are all someone else underneath, and the real person underneath has different feelings. The feeling I had as the black cab slowed outside a hotel in Kensington was that if I didn't take this opportunity to learn the system I would have an entire lifetime to look back and regret it.

The taxi stopped.

'We're here,' I said.

'Remember, anything,' he said.

I nodded and bit my inflamed lip.

The uniformed desk clerk gave Sandy that man-of-the-world sort of grin as we entered the soft light of the foyer. I felt like shouting, 'I've never done this before,' but that would have been childish and, anyway, the moment had passed. I was standing facing the row of three lifts watching the numbers rise and fall and trying to work out square roots as they shifted and changed.

The silver doors in the middle lift pinged and, as they whispered open, it felt as if a rock were being rolled away from the mouth of a cave. It was like the beginning of an adventure. Once I entered the cave I would be setting out on a journey.

I paused. Like the two girls I had imagined in the taxi, I was one person outside the lift. I would be another if I entered.

'Shall we?' he said.

As the lift was about to close, Sandy put his arm in the space. The doors shuddered impatiently, then opened again. There was still time to make an excuse and leave, but dire straits call for desperate measures. Sandy Cunningham knew how to beat the system and I entered the mirrored cubicle thirsting for knowledge. He pressed 7: the fourth prime number; VII in Roman numerals; the

Hindus invented it and the Arabs shaped it. There was a girl at school who had the number tattooed on her bottom after sleeping with seven boys in three days at Glastonbury during the rock festival. Seven is said to be a lucky number and my stomach lurched as we glided through the void, our reflections captured in the glass, a girl with pink cheeks and a floor-length raincoat, a man in a creased linen suit, a puzzled look on his sunny features.

Up through the numbers, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. The doors opened and I followed him along the corridor with its dimly lit floor lights and trays of half-eaten snacks from room service abandoned outside locked rooms. The hour was late. Insomniacs listened to the soft hum of televisions; you could see a flicker of blue light below some of the doors. We turned a corner and, as we reached room 713, I felt a pang of regret that it was this room and not one of the others, although that was silly. In theory I believed in lucky numbers, but unlucky numbers are an invention of the devil.

He shoved a key card into the lock and a green light indicated when the mechanism was ready. He turned the handle and I entered a vast luxurious suite which surprised me: he clearly made a fortune playing the system, I thought. We made our way through the living room with its sofas and baskets of fruit into the bedroom with its enormous bed, leather armchairs, a television and pink lampshades that gave the room a pastel glow.

He closed and locked the door.

'I've never done anything like this before,' I said, the words escaping from me in a terrible rush.

'Neither have I,' he replied and he knew I didn't know what he meant. He smiled. 'I've never told anyone the system, not anyone, not ever.'

That made me feel better. It made me feel that what I was going to get was worth what I was going to give, although what exactly I'd be expected to give I wasn't sure.

It seemed as if I was being inducted into some wonderful secret, something esoteric and divine, and it didn't seem quite so disgraceful as he peeled off my long raincoat, put his arms around me and kissed me on the lips.

I was quite shocked by this, although I'm not sure why. I had pictured myself lying back on a bed, eyes pressed tightly shut, Sandy Cunningham bouncing away on top of me. I was going to give my best, I always do, but kissing just felt weird and I pressed back half-heartedly at first and with somewhat more enthusiasm when I realised it really wasn't so bad.

His fingers began the long task of unlacing the corset. It came away in his hands and I sighed with a sense of release as he placed it over the arm of the leather armchair. He kissed my neck and shoulders, my collarbones, then bent to unclasp my stockings. He rolled them down my legs and I slipped out of my shoes. He unsnapped the garter belt and studied this strange harness before placing it with the corset. He did everything slowly, undressing me as you would open a surprise parcel, and it occurred to me that this was the difference between a man and a boy. Boys want to do everything so quickly they leave a girl feeling that it's all a bit of a waste of time.

Sandy was like a scientist doing research on my lips, my chin, my neck. My breasts were throbbing painfully, my nipples prickling with pins and needles. I had the odd feeling that I wanted him to bite me, bite me hard, but he didn't: he took my nipples in his mouth, one at a time, and suckled on them like an infant. They popped out and became hard and the pins and needles went away. Slowly, slowly, he kissed my rib cage and the hollow of my stomach. He went down on his knees and, as he carefully lowered my knickers, a shower of £5 and £10 notes scattered like leaves around our feet.

'Blimey, must be fifty quid here,' he said.

‘That’s because it’s Saturday.’ My voice was a whisper. I was naked, stark naked with a strange man just about old enough to be my father. He was on his knees sniffing and licking at my pussy and I couldn’t understand why I was so aroused, why I was so wet. What I was doing was out of character, so unacceptable, so absurd and outrageous, it was shamefully, lusciously exciting. My body was sheathed in perspiration. After six long hours trudging around the casino having my bum spanked I felt totally and wantonly alive.

I arched my back and pushed out my breasts. I cupped the back of Sandy’s head and pushed his face into the wet gash of my open pussy. I sighed as the lips of my labia parted and his tongue wormed its way between my legs.

Sister Benedict had always implied that I had the potential to be wicked, and being wicked, I realised, was liberating. All through my life I had been imprisoned by views and opinions that didn’t belong to me. I was a gymnast. I was a bird. I wanted to be free. I wanted to fly. I had sat through a million exams and now I was in a strange room with a strange man holding the cheeks of my bottom and lapping at my pussy.

It was so unlike me, so depraved and intimate I would never be able to tell anyone, not even Melissa, who claimed to have done it all by the time she was fourteen. But I was sure she had never done this, never stood boldly naked with a man’s long tongue like a key opening the secrets between her legs, her breasts on fire, her reflection captured in the dark face of the television screen. I was an intern at Roche-Marshall in the City of London and soon I would know *the system*.

A moment of doubt pricked my mind: I remembered reading in a book by Jean Rhys or Anaïs Nin that a girl should always make sure she is paid before the act, not after. But Sandy Cunningham seemed an honourable type and I was too absorbed to do anything but enjoy the feeling

of my own warm juices turning sticky on my thighs, the sharp jolts of pleasure as contractions zipped like electricity through my tummy. I was remotely aware that my sense of shame and embarrassment made the sensation more intense, more thrilling. I was a bad girl, and being bad after always trying to be good was liberating.

I had an inkling that every woman fantasises about having sex with a stranger, about being taken by accident, by chance, as a prostitute, and then taking the money to perform the service. There is something logical in it all. Why else would prostitution be the oldest profession? Was it really so terrible, so shameful? What is our role, after all, I wondered? What are we supposed to do with this life? I was born with certain assets: I was good at figures and, ironically, I had become a figure, a long slender figure 8, the sign of infinity.

I took a firmer grip on Sandy's head and he pumped his tongue like a piston in and out, in and out. I could feel something fiery and mysterious moving through me, something the girls at school talked about like they talked about ghosts when the lights in the dorm were turned off, though, like ghosts, few girls had actually ever seen one, felt its touch. My ghost was coming now and, at that moment, the worst possible moment, he let go of my bottom and just stopped. He stood up. I sighed and, like a deflated balloon, all the air went out of me as he scooped me into his arms and tossed me quite roughly on the bed.

'Was that all right?' he said, and shamefully I nodded.

He removed his crumpled suit, his blue polo shirt and his boxer shorts. Only as I gazed at his cock did I realise that I had never actually studied a man's penis before. Boys always act as if they are late for a train. They whip your knickers down, push up inside you, and just as it's beginning to feel nice, that's it, they shoot their milky sperm inside you, or over your stomach, and then go all soft and silly.