

Kate's Escape from the Billable Hour

Petula Parker

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An Arizona lawyer trades her cutthroat office for a Barcelona "sanity break" in this charming debut.

In Petula Parker's debut novel, *Kate's Escape from the Billable Hour*, a young lawyer with a charitable bent decides she's not cut out for the dog-eat-dog corporate world and heads to Europe for a change of pace and a chance at romance. Deftly avoiding the pitfalls of stereotypical chick lit, Parker combines a winning narrator, convincing banter, and a sparkling sense of humor to make this a great escape.

Twenty-six-year-old Kate Billings realizes she is not right for the Krapp & Lipschitz law firm when the bosses tell her she is too good at her job: she writes in clear English, completes assignments quickly, and prioritizes pro bono work. The last straw: instead of a Christmas bonus, she gets concealer and a smoked ham. Kate buys a one-way ticket to Barcelona, where she is determined to find Diego Salazar, the Spanish exchange student she fell in love with during high school. Dating, modeling, and finding a new roommate all bring disastrous turns, but, as a fortune-teller predicts, Kate might find romance where she least expects it.

Parker's writing is sharp and funny, particularly her satirical commentary on the law profession and office life in general: "Petty squabbles over the corner office. A drawn-out death by post-it note." The contrast between that tense, depressing working environment and Spain's languid holiday atmosphere works especially well: "Time passes at a different pace for those who have escaped the workweek," Kate notes. She even seems to take on a new persona: instead of "LaQuisha," as she dubbed her go-getting legal alter ego, she is back to being Kate, a kindhearted romantic who still feels insecure despite losing over eighty pounds in law school. Parker succeeds at contrasting these past, present, and future Kates: "No one in Barcelona knew who I was, which gave me the exhilarating freedom to be anyone I chose."

At certain points it feels as if the novel will devolve into predictable chick lit: "Operation Make-Diego-Fall-In-Love-With-Me would need to launch immediately," Kate declares. However, for the most part, Parker avoids romantic comedy clichés in favor of more subtle charms. Nothing goes right for her heroine, not even dating Barcelona's richest celebrity and landing a modeling contract. Instead, Kate whines, "I felt bitch-slapped by the Universe." Yet, Parker lightens Kate's frequent catastrophes with madcap scenes. A few incidents defy believability but still bring belly laughs, such as Kate getting a croissant stuck in her retainer and earning universal suspicion when she appears in a commercial for foot fungal cream.

Kate is an enjoyable narrator, and snappy dialogue helps bring her cast of supporting characters to life. Comic asides maintain the light, mildly cynical tone, such as, “like Whole Foods but without the hordes of Monday-morning vegans in designer yoga gear.” A couple of supernatural interludes seem slightly out of place here, such as visiting a gypsy fortune teller and performing a love spell. All the same, Parker has crafted a sweet yet unsentimental story of one woman rediscovering her purpose. As a love interest counsels Kate, “you seem to be in some frenzy to ‘find yourself,’ when really, it may be helpful to just stay lost a while.” Fans of Elizabeth Gilbert or Nora Ephron comedies should find this novel delightful.

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