

'I SWAPPED MY

Julia with handy Al — not only good with his tools, but kind and supportive



According to a recent survey, the most sought-after men now are those with manual jobs, like plumbers or builders. Apparently we want men we can bank on in a crisis – not bankers who caused a crisis! Author Julia Stephenson (left), 42, explains why she turned her back on alpha males in favour of a handyman

Main photograph: Amit Lennica

Words: Laura Miller

KER FOR A BUILDER'

THE OTHER NIGHT all the lights in my flat went out at once. In the past, I'd have dealt with such a disaster by frantically flipping through the *Yellow Pages* or trying to persuade whichever hapless boyfriend I was with at the time to try to sort out the problem, despite him usually knowing less about practical matters than I did. But without a word, my builder fiancé, Al, bounded up to the attic, immediately identified the cause – a pipe was dripping on to our fuse box – and fixed it. I felt like I'd been swept off my feet.

Pre-Al, my checklist for the perfect partner included being a high achiever with a substantial income and a luxurious lifestyle. Now, knowing my partner can fix a dripping tap, hang wallpaper and unblock the sink makes me feel protected in a way that fast cars, fancy restaurants or exotic holidays just couldn't.

Right now, I'm not the only woman who feels this way. According to a recent survey by *mysinglefriend.com*, the men most searched-for work in trade, crafts or agricultural industries. Forget bankers or financiers, women want 'men who can do'. The tide is turning against City-types – the alpha males whose high-earning, fast-paced, money-obsessed ways have not only caused the biggest global financial crisis in decades, but are starting to make us all see there's more to life than material things.

Once upon a time, however, that was the lifestyle I lived – and loved. I'm a middle-class girl who spent most of her twenties dating a range of bankers, ex-public schoolboys and even the odd minor aristocrat. I sipped champagne in stylish riverside apartments and was whisked off on weekends to country houses. So how can I explain how I'm now engaged to a ▶

working-class cockney builder, who doesn't buy me jewellery, but recently converted my loft into a spare bedroom?

There is no one, single event that prompted me to turn from traders to tradesmen; it's been a gradual realisation over the past few years that certain things don't necessarily guarantee happiness: like money. Dating a man with money inevitably made me feel pressurised: to live up to his high-flying lifestyle or impossibly high standards of grooming. I'd feel like I was on parade; there to smile and look pretty and impress his friends. And part and parcel of being with a driven man is the risk of losing him, as he may well end up looking for someone younger and more attractive. Public schoolboys are also often full of neuroses about women, escaping to male-only institutions and often only able to relax with women when tanked up on booze. And while their chivalrous rituals can be charming – bobbing up and down like lifebuoys when a woman enters or leaves the room and walking on the outside of pavements – the grim reality is that, practically, they're seldom useful.

It's taken me a long time to learn any of this. After a short marriage to a finance director who loathed DIY and made me insecure, followed by years dating more City types, I count myself lucky that I'm now marrying a man with a treasure chest of vital life skills. Since I attract overflowing drains, burst pipes and crumbling ceilings, being at the mercy of random household disasters was a constant anxiety until the advent of Al.

However, I nearly let Al slip through the net. I'd met him in a bar in 2002 and he'd tried to chat me up. But I'd immediately dismissed him as not being 'my type', besides I was in the throes of a doomed romance with another banker at the time. More fool me!

Fortunately I got a second chance when, coincidentally, a couple of months later, we found ourselves on the same fitness course. During that week he pursued me. I was flattered by his constant attention and he was so different from the men I usually dated. I loved his devil-may-care attitude and unshakable confidence. And while some people may think guys like Al are all brawn and no brain, they couldn't be more wrong. Al loves going to the theatre and reading. He's also kind and helpful and displays his chivalry in a much more practical way. Recently, I snapped the heel of my Jimmy Choo shoe on the pavement. Instead of rolling his eyes at my distress, he calmly pulled out his penknife and fixed it. Al may not shower me with expensive gifts,

WHEN I SNAPPED MY JIMMY CHOO HEEL, AL JUST GOT OUT A PENKNIFE AND FIXED IT!

but when I sold my car, he bought me a second-hand bike for a fiver, and fixed it up so it's as good as new.

No wonder women are flocking to men who can make flatpack furniture rather than fortunes. We've suffered from 'affluenza' – chasing after the latest 'it' accessory, the most exotic holidays – and lost sight of what's really important. Now the nation's mood is thriftier, and we no longer need the baubles that a high-earning city slicker will provide. Men who really hold their value in these times are builders, plumbers and those with essential skills like ambulance men, doctors and teachers.

If only I'd known all this when I was younger. Often the more 'successful' men are, the more emotional problems they have. Like Robert, a good-looking internet whizz-kid, with whom I was utterly obsessed for two years. He used to whisk me around London in his top-of-the-range Porsche with reclining seats and black leather upholstery. I was wined and dined in London's swankiest restaurants. But it was clear he had serious issues when he refused to take things further than the occasional kiss. So I moved on.

Then came Peter: witty, well-read, well-bred, good fun – but totally impractical. When water began to pour through the ceiling of his dilapidated country house one day, he just stood there, transfixed – and in my eyes suddenly powerless and unsexy. Then there was Simon, a shipping magnate. During our first date he told me it was 'nice having a girlfriend because you have someone to organise dinner parties for you'. I cringed. And left things there.

That's why I appreciate my 'beta' man. Not because he can unblock the loo, but



The best old days: Julie in Cannes with some alpha males

because finally I feel like I'm in a relationship. We're a team, who do things together. I'm not his consort, and I'm not there to provide a particular lifestyle for me. While my friends and family were surprised when Al and I first got together, once they got to know him properly, they were happy that I'd found someone kind and supportive.

Well, mostly. Last year, I was contacted by a friend of a friend when he asked 'And what does your boyfriend do for a living?' 'Builder', I explained. 'Ah'. Long pause. 'Did you find him in the *Yellow Pages*?'

Of course I didn't, but if only I'd thought to do so, I could have saved myself years of romantic angst. I reckon that *Pages* should stage a comeback as a hearts directory. But I wouldn't have – most of the men advertising inside have been snapped up by now. ■
Letting Go Of The Glitz: The True Story Of One Woman's Struggle To Live The Simple Life In Chelsea by Julia Stephenson (£8.99, House Publishing) is out now

THE STARS TRADING UP

- ★ Neither Cameron Diaz nor Jennifer Aniston could resist Essex ex-builder Paul Sculfor.
- ★ Lily Allen has recently fallen for painter and decorator Sam Cooper. More useful than a man who sells paintings – like former flame, gallery owner Jay Jopling...
- ★ Sandra Bullock met motorcycle shop owner Jesse James when she took her nephew to visit his store. They're now married.
- ★ Pamela Anderson's new boyfriend Jamie Padgett is an electrician [insert your own 'sparks flying' joke here!]