

The
Bride-to-Be's

To-Do
List



Lindsey
Kelk

SUNDAY TIMES TOP TEN BESTSELLER

THE BRIDE-TO-BE'S TO- DO LIST

Lindsey Kelk



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lindsey Kelk](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Introduction

When I wrote *The Single Girl's To-Do List*, I was so happy with Rachel's ending, mostly because it didn't feel like an ending but a beginning. Rachel, our pathological people pleaser, had taken stock of her life and was ready to start living on her terms, and Dan, that sexy secret romantic, gave her the space she needed to do just that. As I'm sure a lot of us know, rushing from a failed long-term relationship into a brand new one doesn't always go that well ... But they never quite left my mind. What was Rachel up to now? Did Emelie make a go of it with Paul? What about Matthew and his not-quite-so-ex-ex? And of course, Dan. Hot, photographer who just randomly takes his shirt off, Dan. Could he and Rachel make it work?

Well, curiosity got the better of me and here we are. I don't think I've ever had quite so many messages from people demanding a sequel than I did for *The Single Girl's To-Do List* and honestly, I'm very sorry it took this long but may I present to you, *The Bride-To-Be's To-Do List*! A short (but not that short) story that checks in on all our friends and hopefully answers a few questions. Fingers crossed you love catching up with the gang as much as I did and who knows? Maybe we'll see Rachel again one day ...

CHAPTER ONE

SUMMER 2015

‘I can’t believe this is it,’ I said, standing in the doorway of my Amwell Street flat. ‘I can’t believe I’m really leaving.’

‘I can’t believe how many coats of paint it took to cover up that bloody pink wall,’ Emelie muttered. ‘Nothing but neutrals from here on out, no matter how good an idea it seems at the time.’

Matthew slung his arm around my shoulders and smiled down at me. ‘Truly the end of an era. How does it feel?’

With the keys in my hand, I looked down the empty hallway, the ghosts of old photos haunting the wall, and shook my head. So much had happened here but, one horrible break-up aside, almost all my memories of this flat were good. The parties, the late-night conversations, the sheer volume of food I’d consumed from the Indian restaurant around the corner.

‘Extremely weird,’ I said, wiping away a tear that took me by surprise as I closed the door, locking it behind me and dropping the keys through the letterbox. ‘But it’s definitely time. Come on, Dan’s expecting us at the new place.’

‘He could have come to help,’ Em said, slipping her own spare key through the door. ‘What is the point in having a boyfriend if he doesn’t do manual labour?’

‘Emotional support? Shared hopes and dreams? A good hard shag on your birthday?’ Matthew unwound the last key from his keyring and posted it. My heart lurched as I heard it land on the doormat with a muffled clunk.

That was that.

‘He had to be home to let the internet people in,’ I explained. ‘I can’t be expected to live in a house without Netflix, can I?’

Secretly, I was more than a little bit annoyed that Dan hadn’t come with us. It was a big deal for me to sell the flat and he knew it. We’d been going back and forth on who should move in where for two of the four years we’d been together, shuttling back and forth between my place and his until the day we forgot where we were supposed to be and I went to his, he went to mine and we both sat on our own in each other’s flats bristling at the other, until he realized he’d cocked up and came home. Then, a month ago, a friend of a friend posted on Facebook that he was selling up and the moment I saw the house, I knew it was perfect for us. A tiny Victorian terrace not far from me, and if Dan sold his flat and I sold mine, we would just be able to scrape together a deposit in time to take advantage of Dan’s friend’s friend’s extremely acrimonious divorce. Naturally, my mum was very worried about the ‘bad vibes’ of buying a divorce house, but there was no room for superstition when it came to snapping up an end of terrace house in London with its own back garden and no upward chain. Plus, I told her she could sage the place before we moved in, which she did, and unfortunately it didn’t smell quite as much like a Diptyque Baies candle as I’d hoped.

And now it was moving day. The whole deal had all happened so quickly, there really hadn’t been time to process little things like feelings, not when I was too busy on the phone to mortgage brokers and estate agents and surveyors morning, noon and night, all while trying to do my job. You can’t really ask an entire set to hold on for ten minutes for you to take a call when you’re a make-up artist. Models don’t want to hold your handset for you to argue the toss over whether or not you’re prepared to paint your entire flat an impossibly dull shade of beige for a cash buyer while you’re doing their eyeliner. I knew this because I had done exactly that and saw the model whining about it on Instagram later that evening.

‘He better have dinner waiting,’ Emelie warned as she skipped down the steps towards Matthew’s car carrying one small box. ‘I’m starving.’

‘How could you not be when you’ve worked so hard all day long?’ Matthew asked, one eyebrow raised as he staggered under the weight of a box filled with everything we’d found during our last sweep of the house. It always took twice as long as you thought it would and you always found twice as much as you expected to, they were the unwritten rules of moving house. Actually, they were probably written down somewhere, I just hadn’t had a lot of time to do my usual research.

‘If he hasn’t, I’ll murder him,’ I told her. ‘Which would trigger his life insurance policy on the mortgage, so that would work quite nicely.’

‘I’m always here to help,’ Emelie replied, smiling serenely. ‘Dan?’ I called as I opened the door to our new house.

‘Excuse me,’ Matthew grunted, pushing me out of the way as he barrelled upstairs to the bathroom. That man had never been able to hold it.

‘I don’t smell food.’ Emelie gave me a judgmental look as she ran a clean fingertip along a dusty shelf and raised an eyebrow.

‘We literally moved in this morning,’ I said with narrowed eyes as I moved through the house, looking for signs of life. ‘Dan? Where are you?’

He wasn’t in the living room, the kitchen or the downstairs study but thanks to the big French doors in the kitchen, I finally found him. Out of earshot and fiddling with a huge wooden box at the bottom of the garden.

‘What has he been buying now?’ I muttered, dreading the thought. Moving had not brought out the more frugal side of Daniel Fraser. Night after night, I had fallen asleep while he trawled the internet for the best bargains, because of course we needed an outdoor grill *and* a multi-camera outdoor security system *and* an inflatable hot tub, and these purchases simply could not wait. Admittedly, I wasn’t that upset about the hot tub, but he didn’t need to know that.

‘Hey,’ I called as I opened the French doors and stepped out into the garden. Our garden. ‘We’re back.’

‘Oh. Hello. I thought you’d be gone longer.’ Dan looked up quickly, dark curls all mussed up and his cheeks flushed red. He pressed his back against the crate and it didn’t take a genius to know he didn’t want me to see what was inside.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked, hands on hips.

‘Close your eyes, count to ten and I’ll tell you.’

‘Matthew and Emelie are inside,’ I said, not quite convinced. ‘Matthew’s having a wee.’

‘Then count to five and I’ll make it quick. But you have to close your eyes!’

Shaking my head, I closed my eyes and folded my arms over my chest as I counted, goosebumps prickling my skin underneath my coat. It was cold for July but cooler temperatures made for better moving weather, so I tried not to be too mad about it. As long as it was warm enough to leg it down the garden to the hot tub when it arrived, I would accept a midsummer cold spell.

‘Are you counting?’ Dan shouted over the sound of some shuffling, swearing and slightly concerning hissing. ‘Ah, fuck off, go on, piss right off.’

‘Sorry?’ I peeked out of one eye to see him shooing away a little grey tabby cat.

‘Not you,’ he replied as the cat rubbed itself against his legs. ‘Start from the beginning!’

I closed my eyes again and counted loudly. ‘Five, four, three, two—’

‘Two and a half.’

‘Two and a half,’ I corrected myself with an irrepressible smile. ‘And one.’

I opened my eyes as the music started, one of my favourite songs spilling out of the practically invisible outdoor speakers he’d fixed all around the garden (hours of research assured

excellent sound quality) and there, in the middle of a lawn was Dan, down on one knee with a ring in his hand and a little grey cat sniffing his arse.

‘Dan.’

I covered my mouth with my hands, completely taken by surprise.

‘I love you, Rachel Summers,’ he said, his grin so wide I thought the top of his head might pop off. ‘I think you already know I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but I would like the rest of the world to know it too. How about we make this official?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, trying not to laugh or cry or fall over. ‘Yes, please.’

‘What are you waiting for?’ he asked, pushing the cat away as it began humping his leg. ‘Come and get the bloody ring then.’

My shaky legs managed to cross the garden towards him before I crumpled to my knees, pulling him down with me and pressing my lips against his, the cat bouncing up onto the wooden crate. I felt him place the ring on my finger before I even thought to look at it. It didn’t matter, I knew it would be beautiful, what mattered was the moment, and the fact he had somehow managed to organize a surprise proposal without me having the faintest idea and—

‘Shit! Dan! Watch out!’

Suddenly, the lid of the huge wooden crate was on the floor and dozens and dozens of birds burst out, shooting up into the sky. I threw myself at the ground, covering my head with my hands, waiting for the sound of beating wings to dissipate before I opened my eyes to see my new fiancé laid beside me, laughing hysterically.

‘They’re doves.’ Dan clutched at his chest and gasped for breath as the neighbour’s cat jumped and twisted in mid-air, desperately trying to catch itself a snack.

Thankfully, it failed miserably. ‘They’re meant to be romantic.’

‘I think I just had a heart attack,’ I whispered, my heart pounding. Still lying on the lawn, I brought my left hand up to my face, looking at the ring for the first time. It was gorgeous. A single oval diamond set in what looked like an antique gold band, surrounded by three smaller diamonds, clustered on each side. He knew me so well, it was one hundred per cent what I would have chosen for myself and I loved it.

‘What is going on out here?’ Matthew yelled from the kitchen door. ‘It’s like the fucking *Birds* in the bathroom.’

‘Rachel, there’s no food,’ Emelie whined. ‘Can we order pizza? And yes, I do mean, can *you* order pizza?’

The two of them froze by the French doors, taking in the scene in front of them, me still huddled in a ball on the grass, Dan still doubled up with laughter and the last remaining doves fluttering just out of reach of the world’s most frustrated cat.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Dan asked me to marry him,’ I explained, holding my hand up in the air.

They were across the grass and piled on top of us before I could even finish my sentence.

‘About bloody time,’ Matthew commented, grabbing my wrist to check out the ring.

‘I’m just so ‘appy!’ Emelie bleated, her latent French-Canadian accent coming out as she began to sob. She’d been in the UK since uni but it still appeared when she got overemotional. Or when she thought it might come in handy. ‘Although there is bird shit all over your coat, Rach. You should get that cleaned right away.’

‘Maybe, when we tell people about the proposal, we leave that part out?’ Dan suggested as she pawed at my back with a tissue.

‘Happy to,’ I confirmed, leaning over to give my fiancé a kiss. ‘Extremely happy to do that.’

CHAPTER TWO

‘If I’m being brutally honest,’ Dan said as he turned out the bedside lamp. ‘This isn’t how I imagined celebrating our engagement.’

I peered down the bed to see Matthew and Emelie snuggled up together on our blow-up mattress, completely unconscious.

‘Next you’ll be telling me you don’t want them spending the wedding night with us,’ I replied as Em started to snore. ‘And you’re the one who didn’t want to move any boxes to make space for them in the other rooms. It was either sleep in here or kip in the bath.’

‘It’s not raining,’ he muttered. ‘I would have found the energy to throw up a tent.’

My eyes closed and I smiled as I ran my thumb over the band of my engagement ring, just to check it was still there.

‘We don’t own a tent.’

‘Well, there’s a perfectly good crate out there.’

Much to Emelie’s delight, we had indeed ordered pizza, then proceeded to put away two bottles of champagne, a bottle of rosé and two thirds of the bottle of vodka Dan found in one of the kitchen boxes when he went searching for post-pizza snacks. Matthew managed to send a semi-intelligible text to his husband to let him know he wouldn’t be driving home, and I couldn’t find it in me to put Emelie in an Uber on her own after she fell asleep on the lawn, curled up around next door’s cat. Instead, I fired off a brief text to Paul, my little brother and her boyfriend, to say she was safe and staying with us but so far, I’d had no response. There was trouble at the mill, I could feel it in my waters, but this wasn’t the time to dig. She was

my friend, he was my brother, but their relationship was their business. I could stay out of it. For now.

‘We could still celebrate,’ Dan suggested, sliding his hand down the length of my body and resting it right above my arse. ‘If we were very quiet.’

‘We’re not shagging with my friends at the bottom of the bed,’ I replied, head blissfully fuzzy as I worked my way into the nook under Dan’s right arm. ‘I’m thirty-two, not seventeen.’

‘Not even a blowie?’

I slapped his hand away before moving it up to the relative safety of my shoulder.

‘Maybe we should stay celibate until the wedding,’ I suggested lightly. ‘That might be nice.’

‘Point taken.’

‘Come here,’ I ordered.

I raised my face to give him the kind of kiss I hoped would let him know celibacy was the last thing on my mind. Just because I didn’t want to stealth bone with my best friends in my bedroom didn’t mean I didn’t want him so badly it hurt.

‘Do you have any idea how hard it is to sleep with a hard on?’ he asked in a strangled voice. ‘That’s just cruel.’

‘They’ll be gone tomorrow,’ I whispered. ‘We’ll celebrate properly then.’

Dan ran his thumb along my lower lip. ‘I’m going to hold you to that.’

Even though we’d been together for years now, even though I’d known him for so much longer, the ring on my finger made everything feel new again and for just a second, I considered waking my friends and calling two taxis to take them literally anywhere.

‘I love you,’ I whispered, nuzzling into his chest as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. ‘And I’m going to marry you.’

‘A fine threat,’ Dan said through a yawn. ‘See that you do.’

And with a smile on my face and my best friends on the floor, I drifted off into a deep and happy sleep beside my fiancé.

The next morning was brutal. It was a long time since I’d had anything like a proper hangover and living in a storage unit masquerading as a house did not make it any easier. Dan was up and out before I’d even pried myself out of bed, having cunningly booked himself on a shoot that meant he couldn’t help me with the unpacking ‘as much as he really wanted to’.

I was willingly entering into a marriage with a liar.

Thankfully, Matthew was much better at dealing with the morning after than I was and had already made himself useful by popping out to the closest Tesco Metro. Thanks to his fast metabolism and the fact he was a clear foot taller than me, he’d been able to power through the worst situations, ever since the three of us were chugging Aftershock and Bacardi Breezers at university together. Emelie and I could be face down in the communal bathroom, cursing the inventor of Jägermeister, and Matthew would still be snout deep in a fry up in the student union, no matter what he’d put away the night before.

‘Good morning,’ I said as Emelie rolled into the kitchen, clutching her head. I was rooting through a box marked ‘kitchen stuff’ looking for the kettle but so far, all I’d found was an old hairdryer, a toy WWE championship belt and three completely different Apple TV remotes. It went without saying that Dan had labelled this box.

‘That’s it,’ Emelie declared, catching her auburn curls in her hand and tipping her head to drink directly from the tap. ‘I’m officially quitting alcohol.’

‘Dry July?’

‘Dry year,’ she replied. ‘Dry rest of my life. I cannot wake up feeling like this ever again.’

I turned something that looked like a small cheese grater over in my hands, puzzled, until I realized it was the thing Dan

used to scrape dry skin off his feet, and hurled it across the room. And they said the romance would suffer when we moved in together.

‘I’m sure you’ll have a lovely time at my mum’s wedding next month, completely sober,’ I said as the front door opened and then slammed shut, splitting my head in two.

‘Maybe I have one more hangover in me.’ She pressed her fingertips into her temples as Matthew bounded into the room carrying four plastic bags. I bowed my head at the shame of not being able to find my reusable totes and hoped the planet would forgive me just this once.

‘There she is, the future ball and chain,’ he bellowed, dropping the bags on the draining board (the only available kitchen surface) and giving Emelie a double take. ‘And I see you’ve been visited by the girl from *The Ring*.’

‘*Tête de noeud*,’ she whispered darkly before seizing a bag full of chocolate chip cookies and propping herself up against the fridge.

‘At the risk of making myself unpopular,’ Matthew said as he unpacked his shopping bags: tea, milk, instant coffee, cans of Coke, bacon, bread, red *and* brown sauce. Sod Dan, truly this was soulmate material. ‘Is it too early to ask wedding questions?’

Emelie groaned through her mouthful of cookie and rolled her eyes. ‘Matthew, they got engaged twelve hours ago.’

‘What she said,’ I replied. I was thrilled to be engaged but the thought of having an actual wedding brought me out in a rash. ‘But we have talked about it before, and I would think we’ll do it sooner rather than later. Neither of us are really interested in a big wedding and I don’t want to wait around two years for some ridiculous venue to become available.’

‘No need to make this a personal attack,’ he said, miraculously reaching into the nearest cardboard box and producing a frying pan. Em covered her mouth to hide a smile, flickering her eyes up to meet mine.

‘Your wedding was perfect,’ I told him. ‘But ours will likely be a bit more ... low key.’

In that it seemed unlikely Dan and I would arrive at our ceremony by helicopter and jump out in matching brocade Gucci suits only to be met by our officiant, the second runner-up of season five of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

‘Any idea *when* it will be?’ Emelie asked.

I nodded. ‘Actually, yes. I’ve always loved the idea of a New Year’s Eve wedding.’

‘Marvellous plan.’ Matthew smiled. The bacon began to sizzle in the pan and my hangover miraculously disappeared. ‘New Year’s is nothing but a ball ache. Let’s make it your ball ache. Plus it’ll make it that much more difficult for Dan to forget your anniversary.’

‘But it’s already July,’ Emelie said. ‘How are you going to plan a wedding inside six months?’

Reaching into my ancient blue leather handbag, I pulled out a considerably newer black leather notebook and a blue pen. I might not be able to find toilet paper in my beautiful box-filled hovel of a house, but I was never more than three feet from list-making materials.

‘Well,’ I said, turning over a new page, uncapping my pen with my teeth and writing “Wedding Planning” at the top, a shiver running all the way down my spine. ‘What are the most important things? Date, venue, guest list, flowers, catering—’

‘God help us, she’s already making the list,’ Em groaned, turning to Matthew. ‘Did you pick up any cyanide pills while you were out?’

‘Someone’s going the right way to talking herself out of a bridesmaid job,’ I replied, adding “bridesmaids” to the list as I spoke.

‘Good,’ she grumbled.

‘Make her wear something rancid,’ Matthew suggested. ‘I’ll be choosing my own suit.’

The two of them continued to bicker while I lost myself in the thick creamy lined paper of my notebook. This was an important list, not like the shopping list, the Christmas card list or my everyday to-do's. This was a list that would turn into a wedding which would turn into a marriage which would hopefully turn into the rest of my life. Dan's parents had been together for roughly a thousand years (give or take) but my parents had been married six times between them and my mum was about to make it seven. My dad was only six months into his fifth union, but it felt safe to say that wasn't going brilliantly, after his latest wife spent his recent birthday party upstairs with 'a bit of a head'. I hadn't seen either of them since but his Facebook was suspiciously quiet. Even though my life was not overrun with positive examples of marital bliss, I loved Dan and I did want to marry him. More than anything, I wanted the wedding to be fun. I didn't want to be stuck taking photos for hours and talking to relatives I barely knew. I wanted it to be fun and I wanted it to be ours.

'Surely Dan will be able to find a venue?' Matthew suggested as he picked a rasher of bacon out of the pan with a plastic spork and laid it on a slice of Warburtons.

'And he can probably be trusted to find a photographer too,' I agreed, adding the pertinent points to the list.

Emelie fought with the seal on the side of the tomato sauce bottle, picking at the tiny tab on the side until a torrent of filth spewed out of her beautiful mouth and she jabbed straight through it with her keys. 'You're skipping the most important thing,' she said, squirting an obscene amount of ketchup all over her breakfast. 'We need to plan the bachelorette.'

'How long have you lived in England?' Matthew asked, one perfect blond eyebrow raised. 'But she's not wrong, Rach. Wedding-schmedding, what are we doing for the hen?'

'I'll tell you what we're not doing.' I closed my notebook to turn my full attention to the greasy, glorious bacon bounty he placed in front of me. 'No choreographed dance classes, no life drawing, no pole dancing and absolutely, positively zero plastic penises.'

Matthew stared at me with dead eyes. ‘So, nothing we did on my stag do then?’

‘I’m glad you said it, so I didn’t have to,’ I replied, biting into my sandwich. Bliss.

‘All well and good knowing what you don’t want to do but what about the things you *have* to do?’ Em said, popping the tab on a lukewarm can of Coke. ‘We can’t let you get married until you’re a full and complete woman. We need to go old school on this, let’s make a list of all the things you have to do before we can send you up the aisle.’

‘It’s down the aisle,’ Matthew corrected. ‘Down the aisle and up the arse. That’s how you remember it.’

‘Literally no one alive has ever needed that reminder before,’ I winced as the two of them cackled at his joke.

‘Whatever, open the notebook, start the bloody list,’ he said, holding a hand over his mouth as he swallowed and chewed. Ever the gentleman, was Matthew. ‘Number one, you need to learn to cook.’

Naturally, I did not take his first suggestion well.

‘What sort of patriarchal, misogynistic bullshit is that? You should be ashamed of yourself, Matthew Chase. We’re not getting married so I can stay at home chained to the kitchen sink, you know.’

‘No, but if you’re getting married, you’re acknowledging you’re an adult and an adult should be able to cook pasta without burning a hole through the bottom of the pan,’ he replied. ‘This is for your sake as much as Dan’s. And mine and Emelie’s and god forbid, any future children you might have, unless you’re planning to breastfeed until they go to university.’

I cupped my very small breasts and pouted.

‘He’s right,’ Em agreed. ‘You’re a disgrace. Paul is a better cook than you and he can’t do anything right.’ Mine and Matthew’s eyes met briefly at the first mention of my brother in twenty-four hours. Hardly an overwhelming declaration of love.

‘Even as someone who loves a list, I’ve got to say, this one is stupid,’ I said. ‘It’s not 1950, there’s literally nothing I can’t do once I’m married that I wouldn’t be able to do before. Dan’s not going to suddenly start wearing cardigans and puffing on a pipe and asking where I think I’m going at this hour of the day. If he was, I wouldn’t be marrying him, would I?’

‘We went along with your single girl’s to-do list and you’re going along with the hen night, bachelorette, bride-to-be to-do list, whatever-you-want-to-call-it,’ Matthew reminded me, with an arm-crossed, all-business Emelie nodding at his side. ‘We’re serious, Rachel, open that notebook and start this list. You know the rules, anything that goes on there is sacred and all list items must be carried out and verified before they can be crossed out.’

With great reluctance, I set aside my bacon sandwich and opened the notebook to another new page, picked up my pen and wrote in big, block letters ‘The Bride-to-Be’s To-Do List’.

‘Love it,’ Em said, trying to sneak my sandwich off my plate and getting a slapped hand in return. ‘Number one, learn to cook.’

‘You’re both hateful,’ I replied, writing it in and silently cursing their names.

‘Number two, you have to see at least one more penis before you tie the knot.’ Matthew held his hands out in front of him to silence my protestations. ‘I don’t make the rules, Rachel Lulu Summers, but as the token gay at this table I am obliged to enforce them.’

‘It’s nice to see you finally understand your position in this friendship,’ Emelie said sweetly.

He swatted at the back of her head, but she ducked just in time.

‘I’m not going to a strip club,’ I warned. ‘And I’ve already said no to a life-drawing class, so I don’t know how you’re going to manage this one.’

Matthew tapped his nose and winked. 'I have my ways,' he said with ominous surety.

'You're not going to show me yours, are you?' I asked, horrified.

'I'd rather chop it off and let you practise your cooking skills on it. What next?'

'If we're including life skills, there are a couple of things I'd like to learn to do,' I said, trying to get into the spirit of the list. 'Like, I don't know how to change a tyre. Or a plug.'

'That's a good one. Not the plug, you'd burn down the house, but it would be helpful to know how to change a tyre,' Em said, tapping my notebook. 'Write that down. You also need a lingerie makeover. I saw the state of your knicker drawer when we were packing. You've fallen back into bad habits and I won't stand for it.'

'Fine, clear out knicker drawer,' I said as I wrote. 'What else?'

For a moment, everyone was quiet as we concentrated on coming up with suggestions and finishing off the first lot of bacon butties, watching eagerly as Matthew fired up the pan for round two.

'One of Stephen's friends bought us a couple's massage course as a wedding present,' he said as he carefully laid the remaining rashers in the pan. 'I'm sure Dan would appreciate that.'

'How come you've never given me a massage?' Em asked.

'Or me?' I added.

He flashed a grin as he opened grabbed six more slices of bread. 'Wasn't that kind of massage class.'

I frowned into a can of Coke and tried to practise gratitude for my friend's full and satisfying sex life. Emelie shoved her fingers all the way to the back of her throat and gagged a little too realistically.

'I'll find a nice, non-sexual massage course we can all take,' he promised. 'We also took a wine class which felt very adult

and classy and exactly the opposite of everything you're *supposed* to do on a hen night so I'm assuming you'd be into that. Anything else you're itching to do?'

'I've never been to a festival,' I suggested brightly. 'That could be fun.'

'That's a good one! We're long overdue a road trip,' Emelie said. 'How about a weekend away, just the three of us?'

Matthew's face softened as he flipped the bacon. 'It has been a while,' he admitted. 'Rach, write this down, we have to stay up all night and see the sunrise.'

'But Nana gets very tired these days,' I said, somewhat alarmed at the idea. 'Can I take an afternoon nap or is that cheating?'

Em signalled her approval with a raised Coke can. 'I can't believe we had to wait for a stupid boy to propose to you to make plans like this but I'm already excited.'

As much as it pained me to admit it, she was right. We'd been seeing less and less of each other over the last few years. Ever since Matthew and Stephen got married and moved to Wimbledon and Emelie started seeing my brother, our regular routine of easy hangs had become somewhat stilted. When it was just the three of us, things were simple, there was always someone available to go to the pictures or drop everything for a cheeky midweek Nando's, but once we were all coupled up, trying to work with six different schedules became more and more difficult. Friday nights and weekends weren't automatically ours anymore. Friend hangs became date nights, and sleepovers were traded in for weekends away, destination weddings and DIY projects. We had more responsibilities and, if I was being entirely honest, different priorities. When I'd had a long week at work, the last thing I wanted was to go out on the lash when I could be at home watching something completely shit on Netflix with Dan. It had taken me moving out of the flat to bring us together for an entire day for the first time in months and that simply wasn't good enough.

'I've got it,' I said, scribbling down the tenth commandment. 'We need a Friendiversary.'

‘No offense,’ Matthew said, turning off the frying pan. ‘But that sounds like some straight girl shit.’

‘I will accept that criticism but we’re doing it anyway,’ I replied, scribbling it down. ‘We pick a day to get together every year and do something fun together. Come on, it’ll be fun.’

‘As long as you don’t make me get another tattoo, I’m in,’ Emelie said with a frown.

‘No more tattoos,’ I confirmed, eyeing the three-star design on the inside of my wrist, a permanent reminder of the last time the three of us made a list. ‘Matthew, you know you’re going to agree to it, so get it over with.’

‘You basic bitch,’ he said, smiling even as he rolled his eyes. ‘I’ll co-sign as long as you agree we don’t have to wear matching t-shirts and I’m allowed to drink throughout.’

‘Deal,’ I confirmed, underlining ‘Friendiversary’ on my list. ‘Right, that’s ten things and if I’m getting married at New Years, we’ve got six months to complete them all.’

‘And plan a wedding,’ Em reminded me.

‘And unpack this house,’ Matthew added.

‘And work,’ I groaned. ‘Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.’

‘You’ve agreed to it now,’ he replied with a wink. ‘No backing out.’

‘The list or the wedding?’ Em quipped, before wrapping her arm around my waist and giving me a squeeze. ‘I kid, it’s going to be great, the list *and* the wedding. We’re here, we’re going to help, everything will be perfect.’

I looked around my kitchen and the endless stacks of boxes that spilled out into the hallway, and the living room and the dining room and all the way upstairs. ‘What about the house?’ I asked. ‘And my job.’

She followed my gaze then screwed up her face. ‘Your job will be fine, but you’ll still be living in boxes by January.’

I looked over at Matthew as he shoved a second bacon sandwich into his mouth.

‘Even a broken clock is right twice a day,’ he shrugged. ‘I’d have said March but I’m the cynic.’

They really were the best friends a girl could ever ask for.

CHAPTER THREE

SPRING 2016

‘I can’t believe the last time we were all on a plane together, we were flying to Toronto,’ I said, jostling down the aisle with my little rolling suitcase bumping into each and every business class seat on the way.

‘Technically, the last time we were on a plane together, we were flying home from Toronto,’ Matthew, bridesmaid number one, pointed out. ‘But that turned out alright, I suppose.’

Bridesmaid number two, Emelie nodded in agreement. ‘If we hadn’t flown back that night, we might not be on our way for your bachelorette right now. Isn’t that wild?’

Bringing up the back of our party was Maddie Fraser, Dan’s little sister and my third and final bridesmaid. ‘Even though I still say you’re too good for my brother, I am extremely excited about this holiday,’ she said. ‘I’ve never been to California before; it’s going to be epic.’

It was April, we had barely got started on the to-do list and my fantasy of a quick and easy New Year’s Eve wedding had been dashed almost as quickly as it had been dreamt up. After we told Dan’s family, Maddie, a professional event planner, sat the pair of us down and asked us to list everything we wanted to include in our big day. Our requirements weren’t that intense but between the things Dan’s parents ‘thought might be nice’ and ‘the lessons I’ve learned’ lecture we got from my dad, the list of must-haves soon overwhelmed us, and Maddie had to break the news that there was no way we’d be able to satisfy all parties and still make our desired New Year’s date.

After that, the wedding had taken something of a backburner. Being engaged was nice, there wasn't really a rush, and until a month ago, we hadn't planned a single thing. It was only when Maddie called to say one of her clients had cancelled their wedding at Varden Hall that things got back on track. Varden Hall was a beautiful country house just outside of London and while it wasn't the venue I'd imagined for my wedding, I had to admit it was absolutely gorgeous. Plus, it was one of the few wedding venues my dad hadn't already used, so that was a bonus. But even with Maddie helping out, there was still so much to do and every ounce of it was exhausting. Dan and I had been working like maniacs since the day we moved and it was hard to muster up excitement for overpriced cake when you were working seven days a week, and if I couldn't muster up excitement for cake, what chance did seating arrangements have?

But now the date was set and the ball was rolling and the four of us were off to LA for my early hen do before flight prices went crazy. What we were doing when we got there was anyone's guess, but I was, as ever, packed for all eventualities. As long as we weren't attending any black-tie balls, I was fairly certain I had everything I could possibly need in my little suitcase.

'Don't let me forget to show you the sample menus,' Maddie said, tucking her light brown hair behind her ears as she peered at the seat numbers listed above the rows. 'I've got some quotes in from a few caterers that are available. Unless you don't want to talk wedding stuff today, which I totally understand.'

'There is never a bad time to talk about food,' I said, giving my soon-to-be sister-in-law a grateful glance. She really had been an absolute lifesaver. 'When we're done with the wedding, maybe we could talk about you taking over planning my entire life?'

She smiled and gave a small curtsy, pausing just long enough for Emelie to turn around and whack her in the face with her backpack.

‘*Excusez-moi,*’ Em breezed as Maddie squealed and pinched the bridge of her nose. ‘This is our row, *non?*’

I watched Matthew shake his head at her as he opened the overhead locker and slung his bag in first before taking my suitcase and sliding it in with ease.

‘I’m in the aisle seat,’ he declared as he gallantly hoisted Maddie’s weekend bag into the locker, leaving Emelie to wrestle with her overstuffed suitcase by herself.

‘What if I want the aisle?’ she asked, travel pillow fastened around her neck, travel sickness bands on her wrists.

‘Then you’re shit out of luck. I’m eighteen feet tall, you three are miniature. I’m in the aisle. And it’s Rachel’s hen so she’s in the window seat.’

‘Then I’m next to Rachel!’ she replied.

‘Sorry, Em, but I need Maddie next to me,’ I said, steeling myself for violence as Emelie’s green eyes flashed. ‘We need to sort out this caterer stuff.’

‘That won’t take very long,’ Maddie said quickly. ‘We can always switch after a bit. It is a long flight after all.’

‘Whatever,’ Em sniffed and yanked a silk eye mask out of her pocket and yanked it over her curls like a headband. ‘I get to sit next to you in the car though.’

‘Maybe she’ll let you hold her hand in assembly as well,’ Matthew said, shoving us down the row and into our seats as the next group of passengers began to board. ‘Sit down, fasten your seatbelt and for the love of god, somebody get me a drink.’

Shoving a handful of bridal magazines into the seatback pocket, I gave him a look. ‘Matthew, it’s eight o’clock in the morning.’

‘And, Rachel, I’ve been up since four,’ he replied. ‘So someone better find me a glass of something extremely strong before I tear this plane apart.’

‘All I’ve got is a bag of Haribo, but you’re welcome to them,’ Maddie offered.

With a dramatic sigh, Emelie produced a giant bottle of vodka from her backpack and passed it to a grabby-handed Matthew. ‘Thankfully, *one* of your bridesmaids was prepared for this eventuality. Don’t drink it all, you’ll die.’

‘Hen do off to a cracking start,’ I muttered as he unscrewed the lid and took a deep swig, with Emelie and Maddie chanting at him to chug.

Seven mystery days in California with my nearest and dearest.

What could possibly go wrong?

Los Angeles was blazingly hot. Sun-sizzling-the-air-until-it-burned-the-inside-of-your-nose hot, and none of us were prepared for it. We stood outside the car hire office, more than a little rough around the edges after our long-haul flight, melting into the concrete.

‘This sun is going to kill me,’ Emelie declared, covering her pale skin and auburn hair with an absolutely enormous hat. ‘There isn’t an SPF high enough for what is happening to my body right now.’

‘At least it’s a dry heat,’ Matthew replied, wrapping his hands around his eyes in lieu of the sunglasses he’d left in their case on the dining room table, next to the vase of powder-pink peonies. We knew this because he had told us all several thousand times over the course of the eleven-hour flight. ‘And you’d better get used to it Emmy-cakes, it’s not likely to be any less sunny in Palm Springs.’

Brightening at the reveal, I beamed at my friends. ‘We’re going to Palm Springs?’

‘Surprise,’ he confirmed with unenthusiastic jazz hands. ‘We’re driving out to the desert and taking you to IndioFest.’

Emelie threw back her head and stretched her arms up into the air and yelled.

‘Road triiiiiip!’

Matthew took hold of her wrists and clamped them back down by her sides. ‘That’s enough from you.’

‘Two things to tick off your list,’ she said, shaking him loose. ‘Tomorrow, we’re doing a cooking class so you can learn to cook, and I found a karaoke drag bar that’s open all night long so we can tick off staying out until dawn. That’s half the list done.’

If it was possible, I’d been even more slack with my Bride-to-Be To-Do list than I had with my wedding planning. We’d made a couple of false starts; there was the weekend away for Emelie’s birthday that we had to cancel when I got booked on a job in New York, and Matthew had attempted to book us on the same massage course he’d taken but then the organizer suffered a heart attack while teaching aerial yoga and we didn’t even get a refund.

‘This is going to be amazing,’ I said, my heart full to bursting. ‘It’s insane that I’ve only accomplished one thing in almost a year. Who even am I?’

‘Dan’s dad’s dressing gown falling open at the breakfast table does not count as seeing one last penis,’ Matthew said. ‘Sorry, Maddie.’

‘Don’t apologize, I was there,’ she replied, turning an attractive shade of puce. ‘It completely ruined Christmas. I’ve bought him a ten pack of boxers for his birthday.’

‘Oh god, so have we,’ I gagged quietly at the memory. ‘Speaking of knicker drawers, I did give mine an overhaul. Anything that looked dodgy or had dubious elastic went in the bin before the move so we can tick that off.’

‘Not unless you replaced them with sexy alternatives,’ Em said. ‘A fresh five pack from M&S won’t cut it here. Remember when you went crazy at Agent Provocateur? That’s what we’re looking for. Lacy, strappy, crotchless—’

‘Enough knicker talk,’ Matthew interrupted, a distasteful look on his face. ‘Here’s the car.’

On cue, a beautiful red convertible rolled to a stop in front of us with a pearly toothed child in the driver’s seat.

‘Here you go, Mr Chase,’ he said, switching off the engine and climbing out of the car. Seriously, he couldn’t have been

more than sixteen. I wondered if everyone in LA looked pre-pubescent. ‘All your paperwork is in the glove compartment, you’re good to go.’

‘Seriously?’ Em said as Matthew attempted to load all our luggage into the tiny boot. ‘This is our car? How are we supposed to get all our stuff in that tiny boot?’

‘We’re road tripping to Palm Springs to attend a music festival for a hen do,’ he replied. ‘What other car could I have possibly chosen but a cherry-red Mustang?’

‘A car with an actual boot,’ she snipped, ducking as he attempted to clip her around the back of the head.

‘Do they always fight like this?’ Maddie lowered her voice as Matthew and Emelie continued to bicker back and forth over whose luggage was going to be sent on after us by horse and cart.

‘Constantly,’ I confirmed. ‘Don’t worry about it, this is their love language. Although there has been an uptick in physical violence lately.’

‘Maybe they need a holiday,’ she suggested as Emelie flicked Matthew in the crotch and he knocked her hat off her head. ‘Bit of time to unwind.’

I watched Em attempt to wrap her arms around Matthew’s waist as she tried to pick up our much bigger friend and throw him into oncoming traffic. Given that Matthew was almost a foot taller than her, she was thankfully unsuccessful.

‘Yeah,’ I said, nodding. ‘That’s probably it.’

Maddie pulled her long brown hair away from her face and fastened it in a low ponytail with a happy, resigned sigh. ‘My friends, Lauren and Sarah, are exactly the same. They’ve been mates so long they take every little annoyance out on each other. Sometimes I have to give them a reset, turn them off and on again like an old laptop. A week of sunshine, a couple of cocktails, a splash around in the pool and they’ll be so in love with each other again they won’t want to leave.’

‘And then they’ll fight about that,’ I said, smiling. ‘I’m sure we’ll be OK. As long as there are no major bumps in the road,

they won't have anything to argue about.'

'No worries there,' Maddie said reassuringly. 'Everything's been booked, scheduled and double checked. It's all smooth sailing from here.'

And it was.

For exactly two hours and fourteen minutes.

'I cannot believe you killed the car,' Emelie grunted as the four of us stood next to the beautiful red convertible and its very flat tyre. 'How did you not see that pothole? It was the size of Spain.'

'It's just a flat, I'll change it and we'll be back on the road in two minutes.' Matthew planted his hands on his hips and kicked the deflated tyre with the white rubber toe of his Converse. 'Rach, isn't this on the list? Changing a tyre? Maybe it's a sign from the bridesmaids gods or something.'

'It's a sign that we're going to die out here,' Emelie said as she heaved her suitcase out of the boot, dropped it at the side of the road and sat down, just as the biggest lorry I had ever seen in my life roared past, showering us with grit and sand.

'Matthew, call the roadside assistant people.'

He looked at her as though she'd asked him to marry Justin Bieber and have all his babies.

'I most certainly will not,' he replied, drawing himself up to his full height, right as someone whipped by in a Fiat 500 and tossed a giant Starbucks cup out their window. Even while covered in iced coffee, Matthew was indignant. 'We're not calling anyone. Have you got any idea how much that'll cost? We've got phones, we've got YouTube, we're all accomplished, intelligent adults, we can change a tyre ourselves, can't we?'

The three of us looked at each other.

'No,' I replied. 'I don't think we can.'

'I can barely drive, let alone change a tyre,' Maddie admitted, settling beside Emelie on her upturned suitcase. 'Sorry, I vote we call the AA.'

Matthew pressed his lips together, tensing his jaw so tightly I was worried we were going to need an emergency dentist as well as roadside assistance.

‘I will not admit defeat before I’ve even tried!’ he shouted. ‘You three sit your arses down and I’ll have us up and running again in no time, just watch me.’

‘Oh, I intend to,’ Em replied, picking bits of grit out of her curly hair.

Squatting behind the car, I pulled the emergency Toblerone I’d bought at the airport out of my backpack and offered it around. ‘At least the scenery is nice,’ I said, holding one of the chocolate triangles up to the real-life actual mountain behind us, a dark sandy giant cut against the brightest, bluest sky. ‘How long until he lets us call for help?’

‘I’ve got the number here.’ Em held up her phone, then held out her hand for a piece of chocolate. ‘There’s a house with a hot tub not half an hour away and I’m being kept out of it by a fragile male ego. He gets fifteen minutes, then I’m making the call.’

‘Make it ten,’ Maddie suggested, pulling her cardigan over her head. ‘I haven’t got any sunscreen on and I’m starting to bake.’

‘I’ll split the difference and say he gives up in twelve,’ I guessed, a proud look on my face as Matthew battered the deflated tyre with a crowbar. ‘Anyway, tell me more about this hot tub ...’

CHAPTER FOUR

The house was perfection.

A gorgeous specimen of mid-century modern design, all sloping roof and sharp angles set off by warm colours and cosy furnishings. I loved the lushness of it, the plush green grass and towering palm trees that contrasted so starkly with the dusty desert that surrounded us. I adored the vintage features of the house, the retro tiling in the bathroom, the built-in bar in the living room and the kidney-shaped pool in the garden, and, most importantly of all, I loved that my friends had thought ahead and ordered many bottles of booze that were chilled and waiting for us on our arrival.

‘Do you think we should check on Matthew? He seemed a bit out of it when he went in.’

I stared up at the sky as the vivid blue faded away into inky darkness above us while Emelie and I drifted around the pool, draped over matching inflatable swans. It was just the two of us; Maddie had succumbed to her jetlag almost the moment we walked through the door and Matthew had given up the fight after a glass of wine and three packets of Cool Ranch Doritos.

‘He’s fine,’ Em said, waving an unconcerned hand. ‘All that hard work changing the tyre must have worn him out.’

‘He gave up after eight minutes.’

‘Eight minutes I could have been in this pool,’ she replied. ‘I thought it was nice of the Triple A guy to let you help him so you could tick it off your list. If you call holding a wrench and refusing to actually touch the tyre helping.’

‘He was nice,’ I smiled, remembering our first holiday friend, Carlo the mechanic, fondly as I raised my plastic goblet

into the air to toast him. It was twice the size of a regular wine glass, it had flamingos painted onto the sides and I loved it completely.

‘Thank you for filming it.’

She leaned over as far as she could to tap her glass against mine. ‘Anything for my best friend. Isn’t it wild that we’re on your hen do? All those late nights at uni we spent talking about moments like these, now they’re finally here. You imagine them for so long but it’s surreal when you’re actually living them.’

‘Don’t,’ I said, my head lolling back. ‘I’m too jetlagged to process concepts like that. Anyway, uni me would never believe us if we went back in time and told her about all of this. Palm Springs? Our own pool? She just wouldn’t have it. I don’t think I even knew where Palm Springs was back then.’

‘Uni me would believe it,’ Em said with confidence. ‘I always knew you were destined for greatness, even when I was off my tits on Aftershock and peach schnapps.’

I laughed and took a grateful sip of my very nice rosé. ‘Wish you’d filled me in, could have saved myself three years of an English degree when I ended up as a make-up artist.’

‘But then who would have done my make-up every night for three years?’ she asked.

‘That is a fair point.’

I rested my head against my swan’s neck and smiled, pleasantly woozy from the wine, the sweet smell of jasmine and having been awake for twenty-four hours. ‘This place is heaven, isn’t it? I can’t believe Maddie’s friend is letting us stay here for free.’

‘I would have found somewhere if she hadn’t,’ she replied, more than a little bit defensive. ‘This place is a bit old fashioned for my taste, to be honest.’

It absolutely wasn’t.

Emelie loved all things vintage, and I’d seen the look on her face when we walked through the door and she spotted the

cool wicker chair suspended from the ceiling. We'd already had three Instagram photoshoots and I suspected there would be many more before the week was out.

'And it sucks that we don't have our own rooms,' she added.

'You could have had your own room,' I told her, unable to stop myself from yawning. Jetlag was slowly but surely starting to creep in. 'I offered to share with Maddie.'

With a completely neutral expression, Em stretched out her legs until her feet rested flat against the side of the pool, bent her knees and pushed off, zooming away from me, across the water in silence. I knocked back the rest of my wine and kicked my legs on either side of the swan, splashing myself in the face as I followed her.

'Are you OK? What's going on?'

'Nothing.'

'You don't like Maddie?'

'I'm sure she's fine.'

Ouch.

'She's more than fine,' I replied gently. 'She's brilliant. Plus she's Dan's sister, my friend and let's not forget, your fellow bridesmaid.'

'I've already said, it's nothing,' she insisted, dipping her toes into the warm water. 'I just don't know her that well. I haven't spent as much time with her as you have. I mean, I don't even spend as much time with you as she does these days.'

Every word that came out of her mouth was loaded and I was not in the right frame of mind to navigate that particular minefield. So, for reasons I couldn't quite explain, I decided to dive face first into another one.

'How are things with you and Paul?' I asked. 'He's been awfully quiet lately and Mum says she hasn't heard much from him either.'

She tilted her head back, letting her hair float away behind her, Ophelia in a pink bikini.

‘We’ve both been really busy,’ she replied robotically. ‘Work has been mad for me, and he’s at the shop twelve hours a day, seven days a week.’

Spending that much time at work would be a red flag for anyone, but where my brother was concerned, it felt less like a flag and more like someone running up to you in the middle of the street, knocking you off your feet and wrapping you up in a red blanket while shouting ‘Something’s going on! Something’s going on!’. I loved Paul, but he hadn’t been faithful to a single woman in his entire life.

At least, not until he started seeing Emelie.

When they got together, I promised I would be supportive and when they moved in together, I was so happy for them. Then, on New Year’s Eve, when he drunkenly told me he was thinking about proposing, I even gave him my best friend blessing. But that was months ago and so far, there had been no evidence of a proposal. When I tried to ask him about it, he pretended he didn’t know what I was talking about, dumping me squarely between a rock and a hard place and I didn’t like it one little bit.

‘You want to talk about it?’ I asked.

‘If there was anything to talk about, I would,’ she replied. ‘Is there anything you want to talk about? Like the fact you’ve barely started planning the most important day of your life and instead you’re handing all the decisions off to Dan’s little sister?’

‘No,’ I answered, more snippily than I’d intended. ‘Not really.’

‘Anyone would think you don’t even want to get married,’ she said, eyebrows raised as she took a sip.

‘I can’t wait to get married,’ I replied. This time I was exactly as snippy as I intended to be. ‘I’m dying to get married. I’d get married tomorrow if I could.’

‘Well, that told me,’ Emelie said as she paddled over to the steps, sliding off her inflatable swan with far more elegance than I could hope for. ‘I’m going in. I need to shower before I pass out. Do you need anything?’

‘No, thank you.’ A rush of bone-deep tiredness washed over me as I trailed my fingertips in the water and my momentary obnoxious mood passed. ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

She hung onto the sliding door that led back into the house and smiled, both of us softening at the exact same moment.

‘Happy Hen Do, Rachel Summers.’

I blew her a kiss as she closed the door behind her and stared up at the stars. I’d never seen so many. In London, only the biggest and brightest made their presence known but out here, on my own, I was able to see the bigger picture. Closer and bolder or smaller and far away, they were all beautiful. So many stars had been sprinkled liberally across the Californian sky, and I wished right down to my toes that Dan was here with me to see them.

‘Maybe we’ll come back on our honeymoon,’ I sighed as I paddled towards the steps Emelie had used to climb so elegantly off her swan, only to flop face first into the water.

Our honeymoon. I blew saltwater out of my nose and sighed. Another thing to add to the to-do list. I used to be so good with my lists, writing things down and ticking them off but lately, they felt so overwhelming. No matter how many things I accomplished, five more popped up to take their place. I just couldn’t keep up. Once upon a time I would have been more excited about planning a once-in-a-lifetime romantic holiday than I would have been about going on the bloody thing but now it all felt like such a tremendous degree of effort.

‘The only thing on my to-do list right now is go to sleep,’ I told the giant cactus that stood sentry by the back patio doors, arms aloft in a permanent, prickly high five. ‘And I think I can manage that without too much trouble.’

The cactus didn't reply but something about the perkiness of its spikes told me it had faith in me.

My jetlag did not come to play.

We all woke up at different times the next morning, Matthew surrendered at five a.m. and the smell of freshly ground coffee had me up and out of bed just half an hour later. Maddie was next, dragging herself out onto the patio bleary eyed and yawning an hour later and we were all about ready to turn in for a mid-morning nap when Emelie appeared in a blue and white polka-dot bikini at half past nine.

'I offered you all sleeping tablets,' she said, stretching high then bending over to limber up before she dived straight into the pool. 'Come on, get in! It'll wake you up.'

'She's probably right,' I said, staring zombie-like from my sun lounger.

'But it's so far,' Maddie reached out an arm, straining towards the pool that was a whole twenty feet away.

'Maybe if we're very lucky, she'll drown and that will shut her up,' Matthew replied, pouring out the last of our third pot of coffee while Emelie powered into her second lap of the pool.

I lowered my sunglasses so he could see my frown.

'That's not nice.'

'Wasn't meant to be.'

'I'm excited for the cooking class today,' Maddie said quickly. 'My cooking skills start and end at spaghetti Bolognese and I still wouldn't serve it to guests.'

'Is Tom a good cook?' I asked, smiling as she coloured up at the mention of her boyfriend. They hadn't been together that long, but you didn't need psychic powers to see that they were meant to be. In all honesty, I'd half-expected them to beat us down the aisle at the rate they were going. Tom was such a smitten kitten and Maddie was still suffering from a severe case of mentionitis, a year after they met.

‘Much better than me,’ she nodded. ‘He’s really good at working out recipes, trying different cuisines. He’s the chef, I’m more of a straightforward cook. My specialty is fish fingers and Smash.’

‘I’m so hungry I would eat dry Smash right now,’ Matthew groaned. ‘Stephen is a thousand times better in the kitchen than I am as well. You know, these are the things they should put in women’s magazines. Don’t worry about how good a shag he is or how much money he makes, can the fucker cook, does he question how many ASOS packages arrive in your name and how many mini Magnums can he put away in one sitting? These are the real things that keep a relationship going when times get hard.’

‘What’s so funny?’ Emelie panted as she came to a stop, treading water in front of us.

‘I was just congratulating us all on choosing men who are better cooks than we are,’ Matthew replied. ‘What’s Paul like in the kitchen? I know you said he was better than Rachel but that could just mean he’s capable of opening a tin of beans.’

Without a word, she disappeared under the water and swam away.

‘Have I missed something?’ Maddie asked, looking to me and Matthew for an answer we didn’t have. ‘Have she and your brother had a fight?’

Pulling up my legs, I wrapped my arms around my thighs and rested my chin on my knees while my friend continued to slice through the water like a hot blade through butter.

‘I think so,’ I nodded. ‘I tried to talk to her about it last night, but she shut me down. Obviously, it’s weird because Paul’s my brother, but that’s never stopped her before. I mean, I’ve called him far worse things than she ever has and if she feels awkward at all, it didn’t stop her from sharing that delightful story about the time they tried bondage and he threw his back out while he was handcuffed to the bedframe. I think things might be really bad between them.’

‘Thanks for reminding me about the handcuffs, you’ve completely killed my appetite,’ Matthew said. ‘Want me to talk to her? See if I can crack the nut?’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘Can you have a civil conversation without sniping her to death?’

He arched one eyebrow as he sipped his coffee. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Why don’t I start breakfast?’ Maddie heaved her legs over the side of her sun lounger, looking as though she was keen to make herself scarce. ‘Pretty sure I saw all the ingredients for pancakes in the kitchen. Something to put us on until cookery class.’

‘You’re an angel,’ Matthew craned his head to grin at her as she let herself inside the house, before turning back to me. ‘She’s an angel. Can we keep her?’

‘Yes, but only if you’re going to look after her properly. And that means feeding, cleaning, taking her for walks and not ignoring the friends you already have.’ We both looked across the garden where Emelie was climbing out of the pool and into the hot tub. ‘You two are a nightmare at the minute.’

‘She knows I’m only joking,’ he said, absolving himself of any guilt with a shrug. ‘And she’s been so bloody needy lately, what with Paul working all these extra hours and weekends. All the late-night texts, wanting to hang out all the time, it’s too much. Stephen loves her as much as I do but if she had her way, we’d be a throuple by now. Aren’t you sick of it? I can’t see Dan going for a lodger with all the hours he works.’

My forehead creased with concern. I hadn’t had a barrage of late-night texts or hangout requests. I’d barely heard from Emelie in months.

‘She really hasn’t said anything about what’s going on with them?’ I asked, properly worried now.

Matthew shook his head. ‘Just says he’s busy all the time. He hasn’t said anything to you?’

I scoffed and reached forward to squeeze my big toes. ‘No, my little brother has not gone out of his way to talk to me

about any relationship problems he might be having with my best friend.'

He inclined his head slightly to acknowledge the situation.

'What do we do if they're on the outs?'

'You mean, what do we do if my best friend and bridesmaid breaks up with my brother and groomsman, mere weeks before my wedding?'

We both watched Emelie as dove back into the pool, sailing up and down, her strong arms pulling her through the water, lean legs kicking cleanly behind her.

'I don't know,' I said, sinking back against my sunbed. 'I really don't know.'

'Next, you're going to take your ground pork and place it in your large, blue mixing bowl.'

Staring at the myriad of confusing ingredients in front of me, I sighed. Several hours and even more pancakes later, I was standing behind a large stainless-steel table in the kitchen of some fancy restaurant, halfway through a 'round the world' cooking class with ten other people, none of whom looked as confused as I did, attempting to make xiaolongbao. In a surprising twist, Emelie and Maddie had partnered up and were absolutely killing it. Their food looked edible, they were both smiling and given how many extremely sharp knives were in the vicinity, I couldn't have been more pleased. Despite his big mouth, my partner, Matthew, was even less use than I was, and I'd already seen him sneaking mouthfuls of cooking wine, which did not bode well for what was to come.

'What's next?' he asked, wiping his hands down the front of a stiff blue apron.

'I don't know,' I confessed, hurling a handful of chopped spring onions into the pork. 'But I do know I'm not eating whatever this ends up as. What disease is it you get from undercooked pork?'

'Myxomatosis?'

‘That’s rabbits,’ I said, uncorking a bottle and trying not to retch at the unpleasant fishy smell of the liquid inside. ‘You mean trichinosis.’

‘No one is getting trichinosis,’ the chef yelled. ‘Before we go on, did everyone sign the waiver at the beginning of class?’

‘I thought this was going to be more fun and less absolutely fucking dreadful,’ I whispered, trying not to attract the attention of the not-at-all-friendly maniac in charge. The chef from The Little Mermaid had more charm than this man. So far, he’d shouted at me twice, told Matthew his gnocchi looked like ‘little turds’ and I couldn’t say for sure, but I was pretty certain the second time Maddie excused herself to use the bathroom, she went for a cry.

‘So, we’re agreed the class is horrendous and we should leave?’ Matthew picked up a slightly-too-brown-to-pass-as-golden spring roll and bit into it. ‘This is edible.’

‘Thank you for the compliment and no we’re not leaving,’ I said, stirring a tablespoon of chopped ginger into the mixing bowl before squinting at the recipe. Did that say a tablespoon or a teaspoon? Oops. Well, who didn’t like ginger? ‘You can have mine. I can’t help thinking they taste a bit like hand sanitizer.’

‘That’s probably because I had sanitizer on my hands when we were rolling them,’ he said, happily munching on the second roll. ‘Doesn’t bother me.’

‘Do not eat any of the finished items!’ the chef yelled, waving over at our station. ‘We’ll all eat together at the end of the cooking session.’

‘When is the end of the cooking session?’ I asked, looking longingly out the window at the blazing sunshine.

‘We only have three more hours to turn you into a passable cook,’ he replied, almost mournfully. ‘Next we move on to our goat curry.’

‘Or we could sneak out and get a drink,’ Matthew hissed in my ear.

The idea was not without its merits.

‘We can’t just leave,’ I said. ‘What if I go to the loo and call you and pretend to have an emergency?’

‘Or, what if we’re actual adults who have paid for the class and if we want to leave, we can?’

I stared at him, aghast. ‘You mean, just say we’re leaving and leave?’

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘Like grownups.’

‘But that’s so rude.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the chef will think we’re not having a nice time.’

Matthew looked over at the chef in his black coat and a little puffed-up hat and shrugged. ‘We’re not.’

I narrowed my eyes and turned back to my pork, ginger and onion mixture. ‘No, but we don’t want him to know that, do we?’

‘Alright, enough is enough.’ Matthew unfastened his apron and pulled it over his head, dumping it in a pile on the table. ‘Sorry, Chef, I just got a phone call from my great aunt to say her guinea pig has gone into hyperglycaemic shock and I have to go to the shop and get it some M&Ms before it dies.’

Chef said nothing as me, Emelie, Maddie and the rest of the class looked on in shock as he strode out of the kitchen, throwing his arms up into the air as the sunshine blessed his face, like Nicole Kidman getting her divorce papers, only happier.

‘I’d better go with him,’ I said, my apron fastening catching in my high ponytail as I fumbled to remove it. ‘Just in case, you know, something happens to the guinea pig, because they’re very close and I know he’d be devastated, and I wouldn’t want him to go through that alone. Thank you so much for the class, it was just brilliant, and we’re gutted to be leaving but yes, just brilliant, totally great. Enjoy the goat.’

I bowed as I walked, bobbing up and down and pressing my hands together in prayer, offering up what I hoped was a

winsome, apologetic and somewhat believable smile before scuttling out the door.

‘Ready?’ Matthew asked as I reached for a railing, the dry desert air burning up my lungs.

‘Wait a minute,’ I said, refastening my ponytail and counting to ten.

The door opened again and Emelie and Maddie emerged arm in arm.

‘Thank god for you, Matthew, that was godawful,’ Maddie said, pressing a kiss against his cheek. ‘You saved us.’

‘If only he wasn’t the one who booked the class in the first place,’ Emelie said with a sly smile. ‘But no need to assign blame. What now?’

‘Have you ever been to a tiki bar?’ I asked, eyes fixed on a straw-roofed building across the street.

‘Oh, this will be fun,’ she replied, skipping right into the road without waiting for a red light. ‘First round is on Matthew!’

I glanced over my shoulder through the door into the restaurant kitchen and saw chef sniffing one of our spring rolls while a sweet-looking woman with a springy black ponytail whisked a bowl of something, tears running down her face. Whatever else the tiki bar might be, it would almost certainly be more fun than the cooking class.

‘Onward!’ Matthew cried, barrelling over the road after Emelie. ‘Daiquiris on me!’

‘Why do I get the feeling this could get messy?’ Maddie asked as we waited for a walk signal before following my friends.

‘Because you’re very insightful, intuitive and you’ve spent more than four minutes in their company,’ I replied. ‘Don’t worry, I make sure things stay relatively sensible.’

‘Relative to what?’

I considered my options before I answered. 'I imagine we're looking at something between afternoon tea at The Ritz and a full-blown bacchanal?'

Maddie shrugged and crossed the strap of her handbag over her head. The official move of a woman who means business. 'Sod it, I'm game.'

'And that's why I like you,' I said, giving her arm a squeeze. 'Come on, let's get a drink.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Maddie and I walked into the tiki bar one minute after Emelie and Matthew and we were already too late. Four tequila shots lined the bar while the bartender whizzed up a delicious but deathly concoction in a blender, a huge smile on his handsome face.

‘You’ve got to do a shot on your hen do,’ Emelie ordered. ‘That should be on the list.’

‘She’s not wrong, it’s the law,’ Matthew confirmed, handing me an overly full glass and a wedge of lime. ‘Get it down you.’

‘The first one is always the worst,’ Maddie added, accepting her own shot and steeling herself as though she was about to go to war. Which, knowing my friends, she was, only the enemy was her liver and there would be no waving of a white flag.

‘One shot and one shot only,’ I warned, carefully clinking my glass against the others before tipping the contents down my throat before I could taste it. I bit down on the lime, embraced the tequila shivers and stuck out my tongue. ‘Please tell me the next round will actually taste good?’

‘So good we have to limit you to two each,’ the bartender confirmed. ‘Have you ever had a Zombie before?’

‘Only if you count my ex.’

‘Which one?’ Matthew asked as Emelie snorted tequila back through her nose.

‘Fair point,’ I said, picking up the tropical-looking cocktail with both hands. I took a small taste and rejoiced. It was delicious, like sunshine in a glass. ‘It’s just like juice!’ I told the bartender. ‘I could drink ten of these.’

‘That’s why we limit you to two,’ he replied with hard-earned wisdom. ‘Go steady.’

‘Pssh,’ I waved away his concerns and took a seat at one of the dark wood booths opposite the bar. ‘He’s just not used to dealing with British drinkers. I could easily knock back four of these before they even touched the sides. It’s practically an alcopop.’

‘If you say so,’ Matthew said, taking the seat opposite, his eyes popping wide as he sucked through his straw. ‘Christ, that does go down easily. What did the bartender say? Maximum two of these?’

‘Et tu Matthew? Don’t be such a wuss,’ I groaned, the cool fruity drink soothing my tequila burn more and more with every sip. ‘It’s almost entirely juice, nothing boozy could taste this good. What was it you just said? Get it down you?’

‘I’ll remember that two drinks from now,’ he said as I happily guzzled my drink, beaming at my brilliant pals.

‘So, you’d fuck Batman, marry Superman and kill Spider-Man?’ Maddie asked, scribbling the order down on the back of a napkin.

‘No, no, no, marry Batman and do Superman,’ I corrected. ‘Superman is far too earnest, and Batman is loaded.’

‘Poor Spider-Man though,’ Em said with a slight slur in her voice. ‘He seems nice.’

‘You couldn’t marry him though, he lives with his auntie,’ I replied. ‘Also, he’s twelve.’

Matthew nodded as he pushed aside eight empty tiki mugs. Two Zombies each and we could barely string a sentence together.

‘What about Captain America?’ he asked.

I shook my head. ‘We’re only doing DC.’

‘But Spider-Man is Marvel.’

I slapped my hands against my face. ‘Fuuuuuck, you’re right. OK, OK, Aquaman?’

‘Fuck Aquaman,’ all three of my friend stated in unison.

‘And kill Superman?’

‘I might marry Superman,’ Maddie said. ‘It would be ever so handy to have a flying husband. Bruce Wayne is rich but what if you really fancied a bag of Mini Eggs? Superman could go and get them and be back on the settee before you’d even missed him. Bruce would still have to get the car out and drive to the shop, that’s going to take a lot longer.’

‘If I was married to Bruce Wayne, I’d have a lifetime supply of Mini Eggs at Wayne Manor,’ I replied. ‘I’d have an entire room full of Mini Eggs, Twirls, pickled onion Monster Munch and Ben & Jerry’s Phish Food and I’d be the only one with the key.’

Em didn’t look entirely convinced. ‘He’s such a moody bastard though. Wouldn’t you rather have a nice, sincere, loving man like Clark?’

‘I wouldn’t mind being married to Batman,’ Matthew said. ‘I like to have time to myself and I think I’d enjoy having a butler.’

‘We’re terrible people,’ I said, shaking my head in disgrace. ‘All of us choosing the wanker billionaire over the lovely thoughtful alien.’

‘There’s a theory that if he jizzed inside you it would actually tear you apart so don’t worry about it too much,’ Matthew said, patting my hand. ‘Everyone has a flaw.’

‘And speak for yourself,’ Em said. ‘I’ve had enough of assholes and emotionally unavailable men. I wish I could go back in time and tell baby me to ignore all the assholes and choose a nice, dependable guy.’

Craning my neck, I put my lips around the straw and slurped the remnants of my drink to stop myself from asking one of the million follow-up questions that hovered on the tip of my tongue.

‘Oh!’ Maddie clapped her hands on the table and all of us jumped. ‘I meant to tell you, the florist confirmed while we were in the cookery class, the one you liked from Instagram?’

I gave her a double thumbs up without letting go of my straw.

‘Can I see?’ Emelie asked, cosying up to her new buddy.

Maddie nodded and pulled out her phone. ‘Aren’t they lovely? She does fantash ... fantastish ... brilliant work.’

‘They are and don’t take this the wrong way,’ Em said, immediately ensuring I would. ‘But this is not the wedding I imagined for you.’

Narrowing my eyes at my best friend, I pursed my lips as I tried to decide how to respond. There she was, sat across the table with a sunny expression on her beautiful face, curly hair tied back, her red polka-dot dress still glowing in the low light of the bar, but I could tell from the look on her face that she was more than ready to stir up some shit.

‘I wonder if the bartender would let us split one more Zombie,’ Matthew mused as he shuffled out of the booth and made a hasty escape.

‘Go on then, tell me. What kind of wedding did you imagine for me?’ I asked, unable to stop myself.

She started with a disappointed sigh, tossing her ponytail away over her shoulder. ‘Not this. Everything I’ve seen so far, it’s just so traditional. Big venue, Instagram florist, chicken or fish. I thought you’d been to enough of those weddings to last a lifetime and that’s only if we’re counting your dad’s. And for the life of me, I simply cannot work out why you’re using a cookie-cutter wedding planner, I thought you’d go more unique. No offense, Maddie.’

Said wedding planner glanced over at me, her shoulder blades drawing tightly together. ‘I might pop outside,’ she said. ‘Get a bit of fresh air.’

‘No, stay, we don’t need a minute, Emelie needs to apologise,’ I insisted. ‘If it weren’t for Maddie, there wouldn’t even be a wedding, Em. You’ve got no idea how much work goes into planning it all.’

‘No,’ she replied tartly. ‘I haven’t.’

If looks could kill, I'd have been dead, resurrected then chopped up into a thousand tiny pieces in under a second.

'I didn't mean because you aren't married, I meant—'

'And neither did I,' Em interrupted. 'I literally meant what I said. You're right, I have no idea what it's like to plan your wedding because you haven't involved me in it at all.'

Flushing a deep and humiliating red, I stared at my engagement ring, willing it to come up with a helpful response. It was true, I hadn't included her. Partly because Maddie offered her professional services for free and partly because I didn't want to ask my friend to deal with my wedding plans when I was so confused about her own relationship status. It didn't seem fair to drag her into my wedding planning if things weren't going well with her boyfriend.

'Well, you're so busy,' I blustered, trying to come up with a good excuse. 'You know, with work and traveling and Paul and ...'

My list of excuses dried up very quickly.

'OK, Rach.' She laughed but it was hollow. 'Thank you for being so considerate. Just tell me you haven't booked a DJ for the reception.'

'He's very good,' Maddie answered quietly on my behalf.

Emelie looked away, her brows disappearing into her wild curls as she rolled her eyes.

'The wedding is going to be perfect,' I said, my confidence uncertain. In that moment, I could barely remember a single thing we'd confirmed. 'Maddie's done an amazing job and you're going to be right there with me through the whole thing and how long is Matthew taking with those drinks?'

'Just didn't have you pegged for something so ... basic,' Emelie said before turning to Maddie with a saccharine smile. 'No offense.'

'Sorry but loads of offense taken,' she replied, taking a deep breath in and puffing up her chest. The truce was over, the

gloves were off and was it me or was the room spinning just a little bit? ‘What’s the real problem here, Emelie? Have I done something to upset you?’

‘Not at all, like I said, it’s just not how I envisioned Rachel’s wedding.’ Emelie stirred the fruit in the bottom of the glass with her straw, her voice rising as if she couldn’t understand why Maddie was so upset. ‘This won’t mean much to you, but it seems to me what the two of you have cooked up is more of a “Simon” wedding than a “Rachel” wedding, if you know what I mean.’

The colour drained from my face, but it wasn’t the casual mention of my ex that was the problem. It was the unnerving and undeniable sensation that she was right.

‘I’m going to the toilet,’ Em declared before standing abruptly. ‘Back in a minute.’

Maddie and I sat side-by-side in silence in the booth. I bit my lip and stared at the textured wallpaper, the pin-up photos on the wall and, was that a puffer fish lampshade?

‘If there’s anything you want to change about the wedding, it is one hundred per cent OK,’ she said eventually, her voice as kind and sensible as ever. ‘The only way you can get it wrong is to not have the wedding you want. Nothing is locked in, everything can be changed. I just want you and Dan to have a perfect day.’

‘No, it’s fine, it’s brilliant, it’s all ...’ I trailed off before I could fully reassure her or myself. ‘God, it’s all so confusing. The problem is, I’m not even sure what I want. Everything we’ve planned so far is so wonderful.’

Maddie gave a knowing smile.

‘But maybe not for you? You can say it, Rachel, I won’t be offended. The wedding we’ve planned will be gorgeous but that doesn’t mean it’s right for you.’

I ran my hands through my hair and sighed. ‘It started out as what we wanted but now I think it might have turned into something else. It will be more your mum’s and my dad’s dream wedding.’

‘That’s a terrifying thought,’ she laughed. ‘But trust me. We’ll work it out. That’s what I’m here for.’

She squeezed my hand and I realized there was a reason her company was so successful. I would have jumped off a cliff if she’d said it was for the best.

‘All right, what did you say to Madam?’ Matthew asked, sliding back into the booth with a tray full of fresh drinks and four large glasses of water.

I picked up one of the water glasses and drained half of it in one gulp. ‘We were just talking about the wedding.’

‘And that made her leave?’

‘What are you talking about,’ I asked, switching my head left and right around the tiny bar. ‘She went to the lav.’

‘No, she went home.’

He presented me with his WhatsApp inbox, the latest message from Em at the bottom of the page with telltale double blue ticks.

Gone back to the house. Jetlagged.

‘Oh, bollocking bollocks,’ I groaned. ‘I should go after her.’

‘You should let her be,’ he countered. ‘She’s drunk, jetlagged and she’s angry. We both know this is not the time to attempt to get to the bottom of whatever’s going on with her, unless one or both of you want to end up in prison.’

‘I’m going to end up in prison one way or another,’ I bristled. ‘Because when we get home, I’m going to kill Paul. This is his fault, I’m sure of it.’

Matthew put his phone back in his pocket and pushed a second glass of water towards me. ‘Don’t ruin your day thinking about your wanker brother. Right now, we should be celebrating, this is your hen do, isn’t it? What else is on that list of yours? Let’s do something fun.’

‘Well, we’re not learning about wine today,’ I said, sipping from my glass of water. The room had stopped spinning, but my liver hadn’t forgiven me for thinking I knew better than a

bartender, and I was sure I could feel it working as I pulled out my notebook. ‘What else is there? We’ve done the road trip and the cooking class, and I learned the best way to change a tyre is to pay someone else to do it. The festival is tomorrow, and I already know I won’t be out until dawn tonight so that leaves a massage course, sorting out my knicker drawer, declaring a friendiversary and seeing one last penis.’

‘Would it count as taking a course if we were to get massages?’ Maddie suggested. ‘Very important to see how the professionals do it before you try to do something yourself and I could totally go for a rub down.’

‘You are very wise,’ Matthew replied with a confirming nod. ‘There must be a spa around here somewhere.’

‘I can have all three of us booked in at The Parker inside the hour,’ she said, tapping away at her phone. ‘There’s a chance I did some background research, just in case.’

‘Should we call Emelie and see if she wants to come?’ I asked. I felt guilty about leaving her behind but excited to go to the spa and more than anything else, still quite drunk.

‘I’ll text her,’ Matthew promised. ‘All you need to worry about is having a good time.’

Having a good time, fixing things with my best friend, ticking off everything on my list and whether or not a massage at a fancy spa was the best idea when I was half cut at the very best. More like three-quarters cut, maybe even seven-eighths.

‘We’re going to need to see a bit more enthusiasm, otherwise I’m bringing out the big guns,’ he warned. ‘Just know I’ve got four pairs of penis deelyboppers in my bag and I am not afraid to use them.’

‘I’m fine, everything’s fine,’ I insisted, finishing off the second glass of water then rattling my hands against the table and cheering loudly. ‘Let’s get massages! Woo, hen party! Let’s go!’

‘OK, not that much enthusiasm,’ he said with a scowl. ‘We are British, after all.’

‘Thank god,’ I muttered, following Maddie towards the door. ‘And you don’t really have penis deelyboppers, do you?’

‘Why would you ask a question if you don’t want to know the answer?’ he replied, resting one hand on the back of my neck and guiding me out of the bar. ‘Just do as you’re told and you don’t need to worry about it, do you?’

CHAPTER SIX

The spa at The Parker hotel had left me a squidgy pile of bliss with rubbery limbs and an intense desire to see that all was right with the world. Also, I'd had another cocktail at the hotel bar before we left and fully believed I was in the absolute perfect state in which to engage my best friend in a proper deep and meaningful.

While Matthew and Maddie made margaritas out by the pool, I opened the door to our bedroom as quietly as possible which was, in all fairness, not that quietly at all.

'Emelie?'

She was in bed, silk sleep mask pulled down over her eyes, her curly hair tethered in a top knot, warm and rich against the white silk pillowcase she always travelled with.

'I'm asleep.'

'You're not asleep,' I replied, tiptoeing across the room and carefully sitting on the edge of her bed. 'I want to talk to you.'

'Unfortunately, I *am* asleep,' she insisted. 'Please try again during office hours.'

'Fine, I'll talk, and you can listen.' I rolled my head around in a slow circle, my neck turning to jelly. *Such* a good massage. 'I love you, you're my oldest friend and I want you to know how much I appreciate you. I'm sorry if you've felt left out of the wedding planning and I'm sorry if you feel like I haven't been around enough lately or that I've been spending more time with Maddie than you, but I want you to know you can talk to me about anything ever, even if it's Paul and even if he's done something shitty and you think it'll be weird.'

Pulling the sleep mask up onto her forehead, Emelie squinted at me out of one eye.

‘As someone who watches at least fourteen YouTube videos a day, I want you to know that was a terrible apology.’

Pouting, I put on my best hangdog expression and held out my arms for a hug.

‘Oh, you’re pathetic,’ she breathed, sitting up and pulling me in close. ‘OK, listen up. I’m sorry I’ve been so difficult with Maddie, I’ll apologize to her in the morning, and I’m sorry I Irish Goodbyed you at the tiki bar, it was rude and childish. See? That’s how it’s done, direct accountability and measurable action. Real apologies don’t have the word “if” in them, Rachel.’

‘I wish you’d tell me what’s going on with Paul,’ I whispered into her hair.

‘And I wish you’d go and brush your teeth,’ she replied, pushing me away. ‘You stink of booze. Now piss off, I’m sleeping. You can try again tomorrow.’

‘You’re not coming out to the pool?’

Emelie pulled her sleep mask back down over her eyes with one short, sharp tug.

‘Goodnight, Rachel.’

‘Goodnight, Em,’ I said, sneaking back across the bedroom like a pantomime burglar. ‘Love you.’

‘As you should,’ she replied as she pulled the duvet over her head.

‘I can’t believe this is your first festival,’ Maddie said as we rolled down a long, dusty trail on the back of a VIP golf cart the next day, passing other festival goers as they trekked the miles-long length of the car park on foot. ‘You never did Reading? Glastonbury?’

‘I have a natural aversion to tents,’ I replied. Emelie held her hand up for an approving high five. ‘This is much more my speed. Golf carts, cocktail bars, *proper toilets*. This is a dream.’

‘It’s still filthy,’ Matthew said, tightening the bandana he’d fastened over his nose and mouth. ‘If I’d known it was going

to be this dusty, I wouldn't have approved it.'

'This is why I made a prep package,' Maddie said, clucking her tongue. 'Bandanas, SPF, closed-toe shoes and sunglasses. IndioFest essentials.'

'If only I hadn't left my sunglasses—'

'In their case, on the dining room table, next to the vase of powder-pink peonies,' Emelie, Maddie and I chorused together.

Without wanting to curse the hours ahead of us, the day was going well so far. Emelie had woken up in a much better mood than the day before and hadn't picked a fight with a single soul. In fact, she'd even let Matthew use her special conditioner to soothe his pool-ravaged hair *and* walked to the coffee shop on the strip for the muffins Maddie's friend recommended to us in their house notes.

But she was still Emelie.

'We know, you asshole,' she groaned. 'I told you to buy some more this morning.'

'Not at those prices,' he grumbled, pulling the peak of his five-dollar 'I Heart Palm Springs' baseball cap lower over his eyes. The combination of baby-blue tourist tat hat and the pink paisley bandana covering his face made him look as though he was on his way to hold up a sweet shop. The campest outlaw in the west. 'I feel like a rabid badger's asshole. I knew we shouldn't have finished the night with shots.'

'Not we,' Maddie reminded him. 'You.'

'This might be the first time in history you've been hungover when we aren't,' I marvelled as the golf cart took a sharp left turn, almost bouncing all four of us out of our seats. 'This momentous occasion needs to be marked somehow.'

'It should be our friendiversary,' Em declared. 'I would definitely like to be reminded of the look on his face every year for the rest of my life.'

'Oh, I like that,' I agreed, clinging to the handle on the roof of the cart as our driver turned another corner, this time on two

wheels. 'If we make it to the festival alive, we'll make it official.'

'That's three more things ticked off your list. Friendiversary, festival and your knicker drawer overhaul. How are you getting on with your new pants?'

Shifting uncomfortably in my seat, I grimaced slightly, too afraid to let go of the golf cart to adjust the perma-wedgie I'd had ever since I put on the other thing Em picked up when she went out for muffins. 'I just don't think crotchless lace thongs necessarily scream "married woman",' I replied.

'More like they're quietly whispering "yeast infection",' Maddie said, looking at my baggy denim dungarees with some concern. 'You're going to end up with a vag full of sand, I'm sorry, Rachel but it's true.'

'A natural exfoliant,' Em said with an OK sign. 'Don't worry about it.'

'Do you mind? I'm hungover,' Matthew yelled. 'Enough vagina talk!'

Our driver's foot slipped off the accelerator, sending us all flying forward at the mere mention of the V word. He would not do well with us for a prolonged period of time. 'Sorry,' he mumbled as we rearranged ourselves and I pulled the long strap of my handbag over my head and across my body. 'I'll have you at the gate in two more minutes.'

'Would that we live that long,' Matthew muttered. 'Someone tell Stephen that my last thought was of him.'

'You're sure it won't be of your sunglasses?' Maddie asked innocently.

'On the dining room table?' I added.

'Next to the vase of powder-pink peonies?' Emelie finished.

'I hate you all,' he said, pulling the brim of his hat down even lower. 'The three witches of IndioFest.'

'And don't you forget it,' Em said draping her arms over mine and Maddie's shoulders with a huge grin on her face.

Everything about the festival was overwhelming. We checked in at the ticket gate, exchanging paper printouts for laminated cards as I did a full 360 spin, taking in the sights, the sounds and dear god, the smells. It was like the inside of a sauna mixed with a student union and a particularly well-trafficked branch of Lush. Thousands of people in bold, bright colours swarmed around us in an olfactory orgy of sickly sweet sunscreens, cheap body spray and BO. No wonder no one made a music festival-scented candle. In the near distance, I saw the famous Ferris wheel turning slowly while people milled around us, laughing, singing and holding hands. A low, hot wind blew across the bone-dry festival ground, kicking up a dust storm, and I couldn't have been more grateful for Maddie's impeccable preparation if I'd tried. We all had hats, we were all lathered in factor 100 and we were all wearing variations on a boot theme — me in Em's prized vintage cowboy boots, Em and Matthew in matching desert boots and Maddie in a pair of extremely well-worn-in cherry-red Doc Martens. I'd fought against the footwear back at the house but in the five minutes since we hopped off the golf cart-cum-death trap, I'd already seen four different women trip over their own flip-flops, and I was all but kicking my heels together and shouting 'yee-haw!'. If she chose it, Maddie was going to make the most incredible mum one day. Any of Dan's genetic inclination towards an attention to detail seemed to have been funnelled into his job as a photographer and as she passed a bottle of hand sanitizer around, I wondered, not for the first time, if I hadn't agreed to marry the wrong sibling.

'Right,' Em said, pulling up the spaghetti strap of her little green dress. 'Drinks?'

'Absolutely fucking not,' Matthew replied. 'I need a quiet corner with several thousand fewer people in it. Aren't we VIP? Isn't there a VIP area? I'm mostly looking to be in the kind of place Jared Leto might choose to hang out.'

I checked the map on the laminated card that now hung from a lanyard around my neck and nodded. 'Over there,' I said, pointing to a still suspiciously crowded-looking area beyond a second check point. 'Although it doesn't say anything about Jared.'

‘Believe it and he will come,’ he said, pressing a hand against his flat stomach. ‘I’m off to use the bogs before they turn into The Somme. I’ll meet you at the VIP bar.’

‘Maddie, want to help me get the drinks in?’ Em said as he set off with a purposeful stride.

‘Um, OK?’ She had a look on her face that suggested she thought this might be a trap. As did I. ‘Are you coming, Rach?’

Emelie shook her head quickly as I fumbled for a response.

‘No, I want to look at that stall over there,’ I said, pointing at the closest possible thing.

Maddie followed my finger and squinted. ‘You want to talk to someone about the flat earth conspiracy and the lizard people who live among us?’

‘What can I say?’ I replied with a shrug. ‘I’m a people person. I’ll find you by the bar.’

The two of them set off for the VIP area, leaving me in the middle of the dried-out field, surrounded by women wearing flower crowns, bikini tops and glittery body art and the kind of men who were completely confident wearing sheer neon mesh vests in the middle of the day. One of said men, this one in a large leather cowboy hat, his nipples poking through his green tank top, stopped in front of me.

‘Hey, you looking for something, mami?’

‘Um, no?’ I replied, wondering whether or not I should offer him SPF for his nips. ‘But thank you?’

‘Whatever you need, I got,’ he said with a wink. My eyes skirted down to his crotch where he was pointing at me from inside the pocket of his denim hotpants. Unless my gaydar was completely on the blink, I was sure he couldn’t mean his penis, which only meant ...

‘Oh, you mean drugs!’ I exclaimed happily, before looking around for undercover policemen and holding my breath. ‘Thanks for the offer but I’m alright, thank you though, thanks a lot. None for me. Thanks.’

‘It’s all good,’ he breezed off, arms stretched out on either side of him like a human aeroplane, a rhythmic wave rippling from the tips of his left fingers all the way to the tips of the right.

‘Why aren’t people afraid of getting arrested?’ I exhaled as I watched him go, remembering the time I left a black-tie ball in the back of a police car, handcuffed, with Emelie by my side. Not something I was looking to repeat on this trip.

After ten minutes of aimless wandering and hovering at the edge of huge crowds dancing to bands I’d never heard of, I set off for the VIP area. Surely ten minutes was long enough for Matthew to do whatever he needed to do in the lavs and for Emelie and Maddie to make peace. Not that Maddie had been difficult with Em in the slightest, she was used to dealing with stressed-out drama queens and bearing the brunt of other people’s meltdowns from her job. She was well practiced in the art of not taking things personally, but it meant a lot to me that Emelie wanted to apologize and make peace. I had a sneaking suspicion they could actually end up being very good friends.

I pulled out my phone to snap a photo for Dan but before I could press send, his name appeared on my screen.

‘I was just about to text you!’ I said, accepting his call with glee. ‘A man in a cowboy hat just offered me drugs.’

‘And that made you think of me?’ Dan replied. ‘Did you take them?’

‘No. Do you think I should have?’

‘If you’re going to take drugs for the first time in your entire life, I don’t think it should be some random pill you got from a man in a cowboy hat at a music festival.’

‘Where did you first take drugs?’ I asked.

‘At a music festival,’ he replied. ‘But what would your mother say?’

‘Nothing because she’d already be in a drum circle, chugging ayahuasca.’ I rested my hand on the top of my straw hat and smiled. ‘What are you doing up so early?’

‘Early shoot. Got to get my arse over to Parsons Green for half eight and I knew if I didn’t call you now, I wouldn’t get hold of you all day. Are you having fun?’

I heard cupboard doors opening and closing, the tap running while he spoke and my smile broadened at the thought of him trotting around the kitchen in his t-shirt and boxers, still bleary eyed before his first cup of tea.

‘I am,’ I confirmed. ‘The house is gorgeous. You would love the pool and I think there’s more tequila in my body than actual blood. I feel like shit all the time, it’s brilliant.’

‘Sounds like a successful hen do,’ he replied. ‘Maddie having a good time?’

‘We haven’t lost her or damaged her in any way if that’s what you’re worried about.’ Even though I knew she was perfectly capable of holding her own, I couldn’t help but think it was sweet, how protective he was of his sister. ‘Emelie’s been in a bit of a dickhead mood but there haven’t been any fist fights yet.’

‘What kind of dickhead mood?’

I breathed in deeply, then exhaled heavily through my nose. ‘Just being contrary, you know? Snide comments. I think there’s something going on with her and Paul, but she won’t talk to me about it. All I’ve got out of her so far is that he’s working a lot and they never see each other. If he’s cheating on her, I’m going to skin him alive.’

‘Have you asked him?’

A scandalous idea.

‘No?’

‘If she won’t talk to you, maybe you should,’ Dan said. ‘He is your brother, you are entitled to know.’

But I wasn’t so sure.

‘Feels a bit like going behind her back,’ I replied with a frown. ‘I can’t just call him out of the blue and ask whether or not he’s cheating on my friend, can I?’

‘No, but you could call him to ask about something else *then* ask whether or not he’s cheating on your friend. Rach, I know you. You’re not going to be able to relax until you know what’s going on and she’s not going to tell you while you’re on your hen do, is she?’

I wasn’t just marrying him for his looks, although that was a big part of it.

‘Call him,’ Dan repeated. ‘You don’t have to tell her you’ve spoken to him but maybe if you have a better idea of what’s going on, you’ll be able to handle her a bit better. Don’t let this ruin your week away.’

‘You could be right,’ I said, darting out the way as a whole gaggle of women ran past, several of them riding on the shoulders of their friends and screaming as they went. ‘Also, um, I’ve been thinking about the wedding.’

‘You’re not going to dump me over the phone while you’re on your hen, are you?’ he began to laugh but it choked out quickly. ‘Rach, you’re not, are you?’

‘No, you’re not getting out of it that easily,’ I said with a grin that was just for me. It was nice to know I could still make him shit himself if necessary. ‘Em’s been a bit of a dick but she also brought up a couple of good points. I’m not one hundred per cent certain I’m into Varden Hall as a venue.’

‘You’re not?’

‘No.’

‘You truly mean that?’

‘I truly do.’

‘Oh, thank god.’ The sigh of relief that came down the line almost blew my brain out of my ear. ‘It’s not my cup of tea at all but I thought you really wanted it.’

A rush of emotion that felt awfully close to freedom almost knocked me off my feet. ‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ I asked.

There was a pause as I heard the kettle boiling. ‘Because if it made you happy it made me happy. But yeah, full

disclosure, I wasn't completely in love with it. It's so grand and formal and ...'

'Basic?'

He laughed and I took that as a yes. 'Have you talked to Maddie about it?'

'Sort of,' I nodded. 'But we should talk about this properly before I ask her to cancel, work out what we really want to do.'

'All I need is you and me and none of the rest of it matters,' he said in a low, rough voice that made me squirm in the most delightful way. 'Whether it's Westminster Abbey or the Little White Chapel in Las Vegas, I don't care as long as it's what you want. We should cancel, let someone else have it.'

'I love you,' I said, meaning every word. 'And I'd better go and find the others. Have a good shoot.'

'Love you too,' he replied. 'Text me if you speak to Paul. And tell Maddie to behave.'

'Dan, she's thirty-two,' I reminded him. 'What do you think she's going to get up to?'

'With you three?' he laughed. 'Anything is possible.'

I ended the call and stared at the screen for a long moment. Em might be mad if I called Paul but the right thing wasn't always the popular thing, was it? Safe in the knowledge Maddie had three different portable phone chargers in her handbag, I gritted my teeth and dialled my brother's number.

'What the fuck do you want?'

At least it was nice of him to pick up on the first ring.

'Hello, Paul, how are you? I'm well, thank you for asking,' I said, already regretting my decision.

'It's seven o'clock in the morning,' he replied, his voice thick with sleep. 'What's wrong? Is it Mum?'

'Nothing's wrong ...' Gnawing on my thumbnail, I struggled to come up with a reason for my call. I definitely could have thought this through better before I picked up the

phone. 'I was just talking to Emelie and Maddie about some wedding stuff and I wanted to check whether or not you're planning to come down on Friday night or Saturday morning?'

Silence.

'Uh, if you're coming Friday night, I'll need to book you a room,' I added. 'But you can come Saturday morning, it doesn't matter which.'

'What did Emelie say?' he asked.

'She said to ask you.'

More silence.

'Is everything alright with you two?' I asked in what I hoped was a breezy voice.

'You'd better ask her,' he replied coolly. My brother and I weren't Ross-and-Monica close, but I knew him well enough to know something was definitely wrong. Paul had never been afraid to call a spade a dickhead and he didn't do defensive or evasive. Until now.

'That's all it was, I'll let you go,' I said quickly. 'I'm sure you need to be getting ready for work.'

'I'm off on Fridays, aren't I?' Paul said through an accusative yawn.

'Oh yeah,' I fudged, wincing as he poked holes in Emelie's version of what was going on. 'Fridays and ...'

'Mondays and Tuesday mornings.'

'But you're open Sundays?'

'Twelve to six. I'm there every other week.'

'Right.'

'Why the sudden interest in my work schedule?' he asked. 'Is this because I told Mum I couldn't help her build her ceremonial tipi? Because that has nothing to do with work and everything to do with the fact it's a fucking insane idea. Obviously, I couldn't tell her that.'

'Obviously,' I agreed. 'Your secret is safe with me.'

I said goodbye and ended the call, hoping our conversation would stay a secret as well.

CHAPTER SEVEN

If ever solid evidence was needed that this was my first festival, the fact I'd assumed I'd be able to find my friends 'somewhere near the bar' would surely stand up in court. More than an hour had passed since I left Emelie, Maddie and Matthew and I couldn't find them anywhere. My texts weren't going through and the VIP area appeared to be some sort of mobile phone dead spot where calls went to die. That or they'd all been abducted by aliens or the Kardashians or some other higher lifeform that did not allow iPhones in their presence.

There were at least four different bands playing on four different stages and from my sad spot in between three different bars, their music merged into one discordant yowl. Keyboards battled guitars battled soft female vocals and a scream that would have sent me running for help if it hadn't been coming from a stage. It was safe to say my festival fantasies had been somewhat different to the reality so far. I'd been thinking cool, washed-out photos of the four of us throwing up peace signs and bopping along to cute indie boys in between drinking overpriced beers and eating a twenty-dollar hot dog that would probably give me the runs, but unless I found my friends very soon, it seemed as though the rest of my day was going to be spent being jostled by an Urban Outfitters catalogue come to life and dangerous levels of dehydration. I mean, who decided to have a festival in the middle of the desert? It was at least forty degrees out and the entire festival ground was nothing but a dry, flat, sun-soaked field. People were insane. Giving up on my plan to find the others, I strode off towards a small patch of what looked like covered space in the VIP area, delirious enough to think I was starring in my own movie, *IndioFest: The Search For Shade*.

'Rach?'

Of course. The moment I stopped looking for them, they found me.

‘Christ on a bike, I am so happy to see you,’ I said, pushing my sunglasses off my head and blinking at Emelie, Maddie and Matthew, rubbing my eyes to make sure they weren’t a mirage. ‘I’ve been looking everywhere, I thought I’d never find you.’

But the three of them didn’t look nearly as happy to see me.

‘Is everything alright?’ I asked. My bad vibes alarm was going off and not only because I could see someone walking away from me wearing assless chaps.

‘I don’t feel very well,’ Matthew said, suddenly folding himself into a small package on the floor and crossing his legs. ‘Has anyone got any water?’

‘I told you not to take that pill,’ Emelie said as Maddie passed him a bottle. ‘You never take anything anyone gives you at a festival.’

‘It wasn’t a pill, it was a tablet. No one gives perfectly good drugs away for free.’ He drained the bottle in three deep swigs then held his hands out for more. ‘I said I had a headache and he said he had a tablet.’

‘That does not mean it was a paracetamol.’

‘Should we get help?’ I asked as he folded forward onto his knees and began flexing his back and neck. ‘There must be first aid somewhere?’

‘I’ll be alright,’ he said, breathing out slowly as he pulled his shoulders back. ‘Let me do some stretches. Some nice centring stretches. Bit of cow and cat.’

I looked up at Maddie and Em. Yoga? Matthew Chase was doing yoga in the middle of the VIP area at a music festival when Jared Leto really could show up at any second? If I wasn’t worried about him before, I was now.

‘Did you call Paul?’ Emelie asked.

From the look on her face, I could tell she already knew the answer.

‘I had to ask him something about Mum’s wedding,’ I said, hating myself for lying even more than I already hated myself for calling Paul in the first place.

‘I told you there was nothing wrong.’ Her face was turning redder and redder as she spoke, and I knew it couldn’t possibly be sunburn because no one took better care of their skin than Emelie. ‘Why couldn’t you stay out of it?’

‘Sorry, I wasn’t trying to make trouble,’ I said, glancing down at Matthew who had started to purr loudly and rub himself against Maddie’s legs. ‘But I knew something was wrong and you wouldn’t talk to me and you’ve been so upset and I wanted to help and—’

‘And if I wanted your help, I would have asked for it!’ she yelled. Several people turned to look at us, one of them brazenly pulling his sunglasses down to get a better view. ‘Why couldn’t you do as I asked? I don’t want you involved in my relationship!’

‘Because Paul’s my brother?’ I asked, stung.

‘Yes!’ she replied as though it was obvious. And really, it was. ‘And because I’m not ready to talk about it yet, with you or anybody. I know you love to discuss your problems and have us pull you back together when you fall apart but I’m not like that, I’m not you. If things are difficult in my life, I fix them.’

I threw out my hands, hoping to pick an answer out of thin air.

‘Then what’s the point in having friends?’ I asked.

‘That’s a good question,’ she answered, her accent getting stronger and stronger with every word. ‘Because right now I don’t feel like I have any friends.’

‘I know this isn’t very good timing,’ Maddie interrupted as Emelie and I stared each other down. ‘But I do think we ought to do something about Matthew.’

I looked over to see he was now shirtless, licking his hand and rubbing it against his face.

‘Matthew?’ I said, eyes opening wide as he reached for his fly. ‘Nope, we’re not taking our trousers off. Bad kitty.’

‘Miaow?’ he replied, looking up at me with big blank eyes.

‘The man that gave him the tablet, he wasn’t wearing a neon-green vest by any chance?’ I asked Maddie.

She nodded. ‘And a cowboy hat.’

‘Why did you call him?’ Emelie demanded as Matthew curled up on the floor and closed his eyes.

‘Because you’ve been shutting me out,’ I answered truthfully. Honesty was better late than never. ‘I wanted to help but I didn’t know how.’

‘I’ve been shutting you out? You’ve been shutting me out. You haven’t included me in any of your wedding plans, I never see you, you cancel on me all the time. It’s hard to explain what’s going on in my life when I can’t get more than fifteen minutes of your time to myself. This is so you, Rachel, you are so selfish.’

Selfish? I was selfish?

‘I didn’t want to drag you into the wedding plans when I had a feeling things weren’t going that well with you and Paul, how is that selfish?’ I protested as I picked Matthew’s shirt up off the floor and tried to pull it back over his head. But the moment I touched him, he promptly rolled onto his back and tried to scratch me.

‘It wasn’t out of concern for me, it was out of concern for yourself,’ Em countered. ‘You didn’t care if I felt bad, you only cared that you would feel awkward, so you cut me out.’

And the second she said it, I knew it was at least partly true.

‘I know he told you he was going to propose,’ she added, the heat gone from her voice, leaving her raw and fragile. ‘I know you’ve been waiting for it to happen.’

‘He told you he told me he was planning to propose?’ I repeated, trying to work out the mental arithmetic.

Em tipped her head back and looked up at the clear blue sky, her curly hair rippling almost all the way down to her bum.

‘He proposed, then he told me he’d already told you.’

‘Paul proposed?’ It was like my brain had short-circuited. Surely I hadn’t been so caught up in work and moving and not-wedding planning to miss my best friend and little brother’s engagement?

‘A few months ago,’ she confirmed. ‘And I said no.’

The crowd around us gasped like my own personal Greek chorus and I stared at Emelie and it was like I was seeing her for the first time in years. Full red lips, Snow White skin and an unbearable amount of pain in her eyes.

‘You turned him down?’

She nodded and I saw tears welling up as she tried to fight them back. ‘I said I wanted to think about it and he said if that was the case, there wasn’t much point. We’re still figuring things out, it’s confusing. I wanted to talk to you about it but how could I? He’s your brother and I’m not stupid, Rachel, you *have* been avoiding me.’

‘Not because I don’t want to see you,’ I choked, realizing I was crying now as well. ‘Because I was worried something bad had happened between you and Paul and I didn’t know how to handle it. Why did you turn him down? What has he done?’

‘Don’t be mad at him, he hasn’t done anything wrong,’ Em said with a sad smile. ‘But things have been not great between us for a while, I thought they would get better when we moved in together but no. I’m working like crazy and when he’s not at the shop, he just wants to lie around and play computer games. I want to have a family and travel and have adventures; he wants to get high and play *Call of Duty*. We’ve grown apart, we don’t want the same things, all the clichés. I’m not the one for him and he’s not the one for me.’

So that was it. Paul *had* proposed but Emelie turned him down. And I had been a short-sighted, selfish monster, leaving

her completely alone when she needed someone the most. I felt dreadful.

‘I couldn’t talk to you about it because he’s your brother. I’m just your friend. If we break up, you’re going to choose him,’ she reasoned. ‘You already have my replacement all lined up.’ She nodded over at Maddie as the tears spilled on to her cheeks. ‘No offense.’

‘None taken,’ Maddie replied, her arms looped around Cat Matthew’s neck as he nuzzled her armpit.

‘Oh, come here, you plank,’ I said, stumbling into my friend and wrapping her up in the biggest, tightest hug I could muster. ‘I might be stuck with Paul because he’s family, but you’re stuck with me because we chose each other. I love you, Em. Even if I am a selfish twat who really should know better than to avoid things rather than confronting them. When you didn’t get engaged, I assumed he’d bottled it because he’s a moron, then I felt so awkward about asking you to help with the wedding. It never occurred to me that you would have turned him down. I’m a complete prat, a total idiot.’

‘Hey,’ she said, snorting back tears inside my hair. ‘Please don’t talk about my best friend like that. I should have told you, you’re not psychic. And I suppose I have been a little bit passive aggressive recently.’

‘Not at all,’ I lied. She got a pass on this one. She got all the passes because I loved her.

‘And I’m sorry for what I said about your wedding,’ she went on. ‘Sorry to you and to Maddie. I’m sure it will be so beautiful, and I really want to help however I can.’

‘About that.’ I loosened my grip around Emelie’s shoulders and turned to look at my future sister-in-law. ‘This probably isn’t the right time, but I talked to Dan and we’re thinking maybe Varden Hall isn’t entirely right for us?’

‘Yeah, I think you’re probably right,’ she agreed, gently scratching Matthew behind his ears as he kicked off his shoes and made muffins on the sand. ‘My assistant emailed me this

morning to say one of the couples of *Love Island* booked it for their wedding and if that's not a sign, I don't know what is.'

'Oh, *tabarnak*,' Em gasped, hurling herself to the ground just in time as Matthew shuffled out of his shorts and boxers in one swift move. He was impressively dexterous for someone who was barely conscious.

'I think we should get him out of here,' Maddie suggested as Emelie yanked his underwear back into place before he added himself to my Bride-to-Be To-Do list. 'Do you think the three of us will be able to carry him?'

'I think we'll be able to drag him by his hair,' I replied, positioning myself under his left arm while Em took his right. 'We can get him to the gate.'

'I can't believe this is how you're spending your first day at your first ever festival,' Emelie groaned as we set off on our slow, plodding journey, surrounded by onlookers, none of whom offered to help despite the fact half of them looked as though they'd come straight from bench pressing a tractor.

'I can,' I said, managing half a laugh. 'This feels deeply appropriate for us.'

And as we staggered out of IndioFest with Matthew in our arms and Maddie leading the way and our day ending before it had really even begun, I found myself smiling. Grateful for my friends, for everything we'd been through in the past and everything we'd go through in the future because even though I loved Dan completely and was excited to get married, I knew I already had my soulmates with me.

Even if one of them currently thought he was a cat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three days later, we reached our last evening in Palm Springs and the rest of the trip had been uneventful in the best possible way. The second day of IndioFest was far more successful than the first, even if Matthew decided to sit it out and stayed at the house, drinking the eight bottles of green juice he'd bought from a health food store he found on Goop and meditating alone until he stopped craving sushi. As I'd predicted, Emelie and Maddie were already the best of friends and already making plans to hang out when we got home. I'd watched with pride as they held on to each other, singing along to every word of The Stills' set at the end of the night, fireworks exploding in the sky and lighting up their shining faces.

The rest of our days were spent mostly in the pool, although we did break our cover to attend a wine class at a steakhouse on the main strip where I discovered I enjoyed Pinot Noirs and Zinfandels, but I did not care for Merlot in the slightest. Or at least that's what I told Matthew, and he seemed to approve. The reality was, if it was red and wet, I would drink it. Truly, I would never be a connoisseur when I'd spent so many years tuning my palate to translate the finer subtleties of all the different flavours in a packet of Haribo Starmix.

'I've told Dan you're coming to stay with us,' I told Emelie as I floated around the pool, back on my swan. The sun had painted the sky with the most incredible colours, blues that ran into purples that ran into pinks, and I couldn't quite believe that this time tomorrow, we'd all be on a plane. 'He said he's got the spare room all set up.'

'And you're more than welcome to stay with me and Tom if they get too annoying,' Maddie offered, sipping a cocktail out of a coconut while riding a newly purchased inflatable unicorn

around the pool. ‘The house is enormous. I got lost once, couldn’t find my way back to the kitchen for an entire hour.’

‘I won’t pretend I’m not tempted,’ Em laughed before looking over at Matthew. ‘What about you? Aren’t you going to offer to save me from the streets?’

‘No,’ he answered immediately from his sun lounge without looking over. ‘You’re rich and I don’t have the room.’

‘This is why I didn’t tell him about my situation,’ she said, pointing accusingly across the garden. ‘He doesn’t love me at all.’

‘I tolerate you all equally,’ he replied. ‘But I’m too lazy to make new friends so I’m stuck with you.’

I dropped one leg into the pool, letting it warm up in the water as my swan bumped against the concrete side then bobbed along to the deep end. Maddie smiled at me from her unicorn and I saw Emelie peck Matthew on the top of his head as she disappeared inside, Matthew blowing her a kiss in return.

Then no one said anything for a while. No one needed to.

‘This place is paradise,’ Emelie declared when she returned to the garden with a fresh bottle of rosé and a giant bag of Ruffles. ‘Rachel, you should get married here.’

‘About that,’ I replied, tossing my sunglasses onto the grass. The sun was almost all the way down behind the mountains and I really didn’t need them anymore. ‘When I was talking to Dan, he had a suggestion. How would you three feel about Vegas?’

Matthew immediately popped up out of his seat and cast his new sunglasses, a gift from me, Maddie and Emelie, aside. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Deadly.’

‘When?’ Em looked almost as happy about the idea as I did.

‘New Year’s Eve,’ I replied, my cheeks aching from the width of my smile. ‘Just us.’

‘What about family?’ she asked, twisting the end of her ponytail around her finger.

‘Dan’s going to ask his mum and dad and your sister,’ I answered, looking to Maddie. ‘I’m sure my mum will want to come, Dad can if he wants to and, if it’s OK with you, we’ll invite Paul. But you’re my maid of honour, so if he wants to come, he has to be able to work with that.’

‘It’s your wedding, he will come, and we will behave perfectly,’ she said with complete conviction. ‘It will be perfect.’

‘Have you made the to-do list already?’ Matthew asked with a smirk, but it disappeared when I shook my head.

‘It’s all done. Dan booked the hotel and the flights, I’ve ordered a dress from Whistles, there’s nothing else to plan.’

‘Just as well, since you did a terrible job with your Bride-to-Be To-Do list,’ Em pointed out. ‘We leave tomorrow morning and you still haven’t seen a penis. Shame on you, Rachel, shame on all of us.’

With a loud and theatrical sigh, Matthew stood up, stripped off his t-shirt and huffed at the top of his voice. ‘Fine!’ he shouted. ‘If it’ll complete the list, you can see my knob.’

‘Matthew, no!’ I yelled but it was too late. His swim shorts were gone and without a word of warning, my most prudish friend sprinted across the lawn and cannonballed into the pool, completely naked. Maddie and I clung to our inflatables, but it was futile. I rolled off my swan trying to swim and laugh at the same time, another impossible ask, and Maddie held her coconut cocktail high up above the waterline, her head well below.

‘Are you happy?’ Matthew asked, swiping his hair out of his face as he broke the surface. ‘Fifteen years of friendship destroyed for the sake of a bloody list?’

‘You didn’t let me finish,’ I gasped, clinging to the side of the pool like my life depended on it as Maddie emerged, spluttering. ‘I was going to say we didn’t have to finish the list. I’ve been thinking about it and it might be time to let them

go, they used to be helpful, now they just stress me out. I don't need them anymore.'

'Well, that would have been nice to know before I flashed you all,' he fumed, flapping around in the water, totally starkers.

'For the record, I thought it was a nice penis,' Em said. 'You've always been so prudish, I just assumed there was something wrong with it.'

'Tip-top cock,' Maddie agreed with a thumbs up. 'Lucky Stephen.'

'I hate you all,' Matthew muttered as he doggy-paddled towards the stairs, cupping his manhood with his hands. 'Emelie, throw me my shorts and pour me a drink, not in that order.'

'You don't hate us,' I said, smiling at my friends and basking in the knowledge that this was one of those moments. One I'd remember for the rest of my life. 'You love us so much.'

And even though he didn't say it out loud, he didn't have to.

Because what they say is true. When it's real love, you just know.

About the Author

Lindsey Kelk is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author, podcaster and internet oversharer. Born and brought up in Doncaster, South Yorkshire, she worked in London as a children's editor before writing her first book, *I Heart New York*, and moving to Brooklyn. Lindsey's novels include the I Heart series, *The Christmas Wish* and *On a Night Like This*. She now lives in Los Angeles with her husband.

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