

PORTIA MACINTOSH



It's Not
YOU,
It's
Them

FIRST COMES LOVE. THEN COMES FAMILY...

First comes love. Then comes family...

After a lifetime of kissing frogs, Roxie Pratt has given up on finding her own fairytale romance. That is, until she meets her very own Prince Charming, Mark Wright, and he sweeps Roxie off her feet!

So when Mark finally gets down on one knee and pops the question, there's only one thing left to do: meet the family! And when everything has been picture-perfect so far, what could *possibly* go wrong...?

An irresistible, feel-good romance, perfect for fans of Rosie Blake, Sophie Kinsella and Lindsey Kelk.

[Also by Portia MacIntosh:](#)

Between a Rockstar and a Hard Place

How Not to Be Starstruck

Bad Bridesmaid

Drive Me Crazy

Truth or Date

It's Not You, It's Them

Portia MacIntosh



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has been ‘making stuff up’ for as long as she can remember – or so she says. Whether it was blaming her siblings for that broken vase when she was growing up, blagging her way backstage during her rock chick phase or, most recently, whatever justification she can fabricate to explain away those lunchtime cocktails, Portia just loves telling tales. After years working as a music journalist, Portia decided it was time to use her powers for good and started writing novels. Taking inspiration from her experiences on tour with bands, the real struggle of dating in your twenties and just trying to survive as an adult human female generally, Portia writes about what it’s really like for women who don’t find this life stuff as easy as it seems. You can follow her on Twitter at: [@PortiaMacIntosh](#)

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For JWN

I love you like Marie loves purple

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Prologue

When I met my boyfriend one year ago, I couldn't believe my luck.

You're probably not going to believe me when I tell you this, but the way we met was like a fairy tale.

I was covering an event for work: a big, fancy-dress ball hosted by a children's charity. I'm not much of a comic-book nerd, but the second I saw Margot Robbie dressed as Harley Quinn in the *Suicide Squad* movie, I knew that was who I wanted to dress up as. I pulled my long, blonde hair into pigtails before temporarily spraying the ends blue on one side, pink on the other. I watched hours of make-up tutorials so that my face was just right and then I slipped on a tight-fitting T-shirt, some hot pants and some Converse and was ready to go. I grabbed my baseball bat, brandishing it at myself in the mirror as I got ready to leave the flat, just as my flatmate Gil walked by me.

'You're showing your arse at a children's charity ball?' he said, laughing.

'There won't actually be any children there,' I replied casually, making a pouty face as I snapped a photo in the mirror. But as I headed to the ball, I did worry that maybe Gil was right. Funny really, considering what a hot mess he is for a forty-something man. That's actors for you, though.

Thankfully, when I arrived, there wasn't a minor in sight – unless you count a guy I recognised from *Game of Thrones* who had, bizarrely, turned up dressed as a baby. The huge ballroom was packed with celebrities, journalists and people who worked for the charity... and then there was Mark. Mark Wright, head of PR for the charity, was the brain behind this fundraising ball,

and very much the man of the hour. People were crowding around him – mostly women, I couldn't help but notice – just to talk to him, get a quote from him, buy him a drink – or just anything, really, that would capture his attention for a few seconds.

Amid the chaos, our eyes met across a crowded room – I know, that old one – but they did. My body not having quite the same proportions as Margot's, I was just starting to feel self-conscious in my hot pants, awkwardly pulling at them – like that was going to make them any longer – when I spotted Mark, sitting at the bar, facing out into the room, people all around him, trying to get a piece of him. He was dressed as The Joker (Heath Ledger's portrayal, not Jared Leto's – but that's not important) so I smiled at him. His reaction was to applaud me, tilting his head down a little and narrowing his eyes, perfectly replicating Heath's sarcastic clap in *The Dark Knight*, before turning his attention back to his audience.

Despite Mark's temporarily messy green hair, that ghostly white face, black eyes and red, twisted smile, I could tell he was gorgeous. I don't even think it was the usual characteristics that attracted me to him physically; it was the fact he had a smile on his face every time I looked at him (a real one, not the one painted on so he could tell everyone to ask him 'how he got those scars'). He had kind eyes and, when he gave people his attention, I saw them light up – that's Mark, though. With his good looks, charm and kind nature, he makes you feel like the most important person in the world when he talks to you.

Twenty seconds of attention from him and I was smitten, so I spent the rest of the night subtly following this unconventional Prince Charming around the ball, just trying to find a way to get his attention, but feeling like an unworthy Cinderella and chickening out.

Growing up around theatre folk, I'd always liked the idea of having a gay bestie. Someone I could have awesome girly nights with and who could give me amazing advice whenever I needed it. Instead, I wound up with Gil, the most alpha-male gay guy I have ever met – and he's pretty shocking at advice, too. We were texting all night, and as he was getting progressively drunker, his advice was getting progressively worse. As I anxiously shovelled cake into my mouth I received a message from him saying he'd lost his keys and that he was going to climb the fire escape to get into our flat. When Gil

drinks he loses control of his senses and his actions (and totally forgets his lack of athleticism) – one time he even lost half of his little finger, so I know that if he says he’s going to try and scale a building, he’s definitely going to do it. I pulled my shorts down one last time before deciding to call it a night – at just 11:45. What a lightweight.

I made my way outside the hotel, booking my Uber as I took the stairs, before heading outside into the cool air to wait for my ride. As I stood there, I felt a hand touch my arse and, before I knew what I was doing, I spun around and struck my attacker with my baseball bat.

‘Hey, hey, calm down,’ Mark said reassuringly, his Yorkshire accent instantly soothing me. He took my bat from me and placed it on the wall next to us – I imagine just in case I tried to strike him again. ‘You just... you’ve got some frosting on your shorts.’

‘Sorry, I thought you were a pervert,’ I babbled.

Mark laughed as he rubbed his arm.

‘I think you broke my arm,’ he teased.

Convinced I’d blown my chance to seem cool in front of him, I gave up trying and let who I really was take over.

‘Are you kidding me? I think your arm broke my bat,’ I joked as I nodded towards his bicep.

That first night when I met Mark, I took two things from his appearance: first of all, I knew he must have a great sense of humour, because rather than opting for the usual Joker costume of a green and purple suit, he decided on the female nurse outfit from *The Dark Knight*. The other thing I could tell was just how sexy his body was – yes, even in a dress.

‘I’m Mark,’ he told me, offering me a hand to shake. ‘I’ve seen you around all night. Do you work for us? Are you in a girl band?’ he joked.

‘I’m Roxie,’ I replied, shaking his hand. ‘I’m a journalist.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ he teased.

Typically, just as I’d finally got Mark’s full attention, my taxi pulled up.

‘Well, it was nice to meet you,’ I told him as I opened the car door.

‘You’re going?’ he asked, a look of genuine disappointment on his face. ‘It’s only five to twelve.’

‘I know, but I have to go,’ I told him, images of Gil lying on the pavement outside our flat with a couple of compound fractures invading my thoughts.

‘Does your Uber turn back into a pumpkin at midnight?’ he asked with a cheeky laugh.

My God, I wanted to stay with him. Every second of my Uber home I wished I had, and then when I arrived home and found Gil fast asleep in bed, having found his keys in his pocket, I metaphorically kicked myself to sleep.

The next day at work I was just sitting at my desk, thinking about what I could’ve said or done differently, when one of the receptionists came running up.

‘There’s a man in reception saying he wants a word with you,’ she informed me.

‘Whatever I’m supposed to have done, it wasn’t me,’ I lied instinctively as she literally dragged me to the reception. Mark was waiting for me there.

‘Hello,’ I said cautiously.

‘Hi,’ he replied coolly. ‘So I was at a party last night, and some girl assaulted me with this.’ He pulled my baseball bat out from behind his back. ‘I’ve spent all morning visiting the offices of every media outlet we invited, to see if I could find a girl who could give me a bruise with this bat as impressive as this one.’

Mark rolled up the sleeve of his white polo shirt, flashing me his bruised bicep.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I told him again.

‘Don’t be sorry,’ he replied. ‘Just have dinner with me tonight.’

Chapter One

Everyone seems perfect when you first start dating them, right? You love everything about them – even their bad habits are cute and amusing. But it's fine, because they find you utterly charming, too, like when you only shave your legs as much as you need to in accordance with the length of what you are wearing, or how you can't ever walk along cobbled roads because cobbles and heels just don't work together.

When I met Mark it felt like a modern-day fairy tale, and things only got better from that moment on. Now that we're a year into our relationship, I bet you're wondering whether or not things are still as romantic as they were when we met...

'I can't believe you're on *Call of fucking Duty* again,' I say with a big sigh as I stare out of the window, shaking my head.

Mark laughs.

I glance over my shoulder and look at him sitting on the sofa, that cheeky smile still there but his eyes glued to the home cinema screen in front of him. He's clutching a controller in his hands and he's got his headset on his ear, his microphone hovering just in front of his mouth in case he needs to smack-talk any 14-year-olds playing in America. Trust me, if there's one thing worse than watching your boyfriend play video games, it's watching him play them in one-hundred-and-fifty inches with surround sound so immersive, it keeps occurring to me to call my mum and tell her I love her every time I hear an explosion. And if there's one thing even worse than that, it's when he watches football on it. But the absolute worst thing of all the things that the love of my life does is play *FIFA*, because that's a video game

and football combined – and beyond boring for me.

‘Is watching me play not piquing your interest in warfare?’ he asks cheekily.

‘The only thing that watching you play is doing is making me crave the sweet release of death via a headshot,’ I say wryly.

Mark throws his head back as he laughs.

‘You’re too funny,’ he tells me. ‘This match is nearly over, then we can do whatever you want.’

‘Thank God, because it’s Sunday, and you know I hate Sundays.’

‘I know you do, but I still don’t understand why, you weirdo.’

‘They’re just so boring,’ I explain – for the millionth time. Mark just doesn’t understand my hatred of the day. ‘Everywhere closes early, everyone is miserable about the impending Monday morning, nothing really happens – I’ve *never* had a good Sunday.’

I think I’m possibly the only person in the world who loves Mondays – but it’s exclusively because it means that Sunday is as far away as it can possibly be.

‘So, basically, because you can’t shop as much and you have to get up early tomorrow?’ he asks.

‘Nailed it,’ I reply.

Our corner apartment boasts the most incredible view of London. The first time Mark invited me over, I nearly gave myself an RSI Instagramming from the large, floor-to-ceiling, living-room window that looks out over the river. By day you can take in the beautiful buildings, people-watching the buzz of activity on the riverbanks and checking out who and what is travelling along the Thames. By night, the view transforms into this picture-perfect skyline; silhouetted buildings like something from a cityscape photography book, littered with a sea of twinkling lights. Simply breathtaking, no matter what time of day you’re looking out, and all the more enjoyable if you have the time to sit and watch as the afternoon slips into evening, the sky changing so gradually, and yet before you know it, it’s dark, and you’ve been aimlessly gazing out of the window for two hours.

‘So, who are you spying on today?’ Mark asks, attempting conversation despite being in the final stages of an especially tough mission.

‘There’s a little old lady, sitting by the river,’ I tell him.

‘Nice place for a Sunday stroll,’ Mark replies.

‘She looks lonely,’ I say with a sigh. ‘Even from up here, I can tell. The only thing that could make Sundays worse would be spending them alone.’

I don’t even realise Mark has moved from the sofa until I feel his hands creep around my waist from behind me.

‘You’re not going to end up alone,’ he assures me.

‘I’m already a video game widow,’ I tease him with a laugh, placing my hands on his, which are now resting lightly on my tummy.

Mark rests his chin on my shoulder and gives me a tight squeeze, because he knows that I love it when he squeezes me. He’s strong, with big muscular arms, and when he locks them around me I feel so safe and adored.

‘You know that I love you, right?’ he asks.

I turn around in his embrace to face him, placing my hands on his cheeks as I look him in the eye.

‘Of course I do,’ I assure him. ‘You know I’m only joking about the video-game-widow stuff, right?’

‘I do,’ he laughs.

Yes, I find it boring watching him play video games, but I’d never tell him not to, because he enjoys it. I reserve the right to tease him about it, though; that’s what girlfriends are for.

‘It’s just... fuck it,’ Mark says, wiggling free of my grasp before kneeling down on the floor.

‘No, come back and talk to me, give me physical contact,’ I whine. ‘If you’re taking another video game out of that box, so help me God...’

‘Roxie Pratt,’ he interrupts me as he rummages around in the pocket of his shorts. ‘You are the smartest, funniest, most beautiful woman I have ever

met. I know it's only been a year, but we've spent pretty much every second of that time together and it hasn't just made me realise that you are impossible to grow bored of, but also that I can't bear the thought of spending a single second without you.'

I stare at him, blankly. Unable to do anything but blink.

'More?' he asks with a laugh. 'OK. Before we met, sure, I was happy, but I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what I was missing. And this place just didn't feel like a home until you moved in – and not just because you keep the fridge fully stocked,' he jokes.

'Tell me about it,' I reply. 'I remember when I used to stay over here, and I was having to have banana-flavoured milk on my Frosties because that was all you bought – and I was having to eat Frosties for three meals a day because all you had in your cupboards was cereal.'

'Well, that's because we stopped going out; we just stayed in and had sex all the time.'

'Unlike now?' I ask as a cheeky smile creeps across my face.

'Well, now we just do both – sometimes at the same time,' he says with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

The first time I slept with Mark, it was so good, I thought I'd died and gone to sex heaven. Seriously. We went out a lot when we first started dating, but as soon as we realised how explosive things were in the bedroom for us (not that we've ever thought it necessary to limit ourselves to that one room), that was it; we would just stay in and have sex all the time, breaking only to go to work (give or take a few 'sick days') and eat Frosties (and one time, we didn't even bother taking a break from having sex to eat cereal – we're still finding Frosties in our bedroom to this day).

'Roxie,' he continues, as his hand finally emerges from his pocket with a small black box in it. 'Will you marry me?'

Ever since I was a little girl, I've wondered about how my future husband would pop the question to me. I've thought about the location, the words he would use, what the ring would be like. What I never gave much consideration to was how I would react – but what's important is for me to be

cool, calm and ladylike, right?

‘Fuck off,’ I blurt out, my London accent having never sounded stronger.

Mark laughs.

‘I’m going to assume you’re saying that in disbelief and not as a firm “no”,’ he says with a nervous laugh.

I don’t know why, but I crouch down on the floor in front of him, so we’re at eye level again.

‘Of course it’s not a “no”, it’s a “yes” – it’s a “fuck yes”,’ I babble.

‘You haven’t even looked at your ring,’ he tells me.

I take the box from him and place it to one side.

‘Whatever it is will be perfect, I’m sure. But all I want is you,’ I tell him sincerely. Sure, it would be nice to have a pretty rock on my finger, but if there’s one thing I am always telling people, it’s that Mark is way too good for me, and I don’t mean that because I don’t think much of myself. I just cannot believe my luck. How did I wind up with a man this perfect?

‘The plan was to wait until Christmas Day and ask you then, but I’ve been carrying this ring around for two days and the thought of waiting a few more weeks seemed liked torture. I did have this big romantic thing planned out, but... sorry,’ he laughs awkwardly.

Tears of happiness fall from my eyes, ruining the perfectly applied make-up I spent a chunk of the morning on.

‘No, don’t cry, how will you take a selfie?’ he teases.

I wipe my eyes with my hands.

‘We’ll just have to take one later and pretend we took it now,’ I half joke.

Mark jumps to his feet and offers me a hand.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look more gorgeous,’ he tells me, despite the sniffing noises I’m making. ‘Now, sorry to ruin the moment, but sex was briefly mentioned about five minutes ago and I’ve been desperate to get my hands on you since.’

I laugh as Mark lifts me up from the floor before pinning me down on the sofa.

‘Ooh,’ I squeak. ‘Something is going in my butt.’

‘Well, if you insist,’ Mark replies as he kisses his way down from my neck to my stomach, tugging at my dress with urgency until I’m down to my underwear.

‘That wasn’t a demand,’ I laugh. ‘There’s something under me on the sofa.’

An explosion booms through the surround sound, causing us both to jump in fright.

‘Oh, shit, you must be on the controller. You’ve started a new game,’ he laughs.

‘Oops,’ I giggle. ‘Quick, turn it off, you’ve still got your headset on.’

Mark grabs me by the thighs and pulls my body closer to his, laying me flat on my back.

‘Let the nerds listen.’

I gasp as he presses down on top of me.

‘You are a bad boy,’ I whisper into his ear.

‘I’m just trying to change your opinion of Sundays,’ he tells me. ‘And while I’m around, I promise you, all of your Sundays are going to be this amazing.’

Another explosion booms through the living-room speakers.

I close my eyes and bite my lip in sheer pleasure.

‘Don’t you want to pause your game?’ I ask him.

‘Why?’

I glance at the screen.

‘Someone keeps blowing you up,’ I half say, half moan.

‘Roxie, I could be on fire in real life and I wouldn’t stop having sex with you,’ he laughs. ‘We’ll just have to drown out their explosions with a few of our own.’

‘My kind of video game,’ I reply breathlessly.

‘There’s only one thing left to do now,’ he begins, struggling to form sentences as he gets ready to focus on the mission at hand. ‘You need to finally meet my parents.’

Chapter Two

Being in a relationship with a lifestyle writer must be absolute hell, because everything we do is for an article – and even if it isn't, we'll most often realise we can get an article out of it anyway.

I am as guilty of this as the next writer, plagiarising my real life for my work. From the very first time I picked up a pen (or a Macbook, as I started taking my career more seriously), I was dipping into my real life for my work, and I found that's when I wrote my best material. If you've ever tried to do anything creative, whether it's writing a story or painting a picture, you'll often find people drawing upon what they already know, because what better way to create something genuine than to inspire yourself with genuine experience?

I like to think Mark is used to this now, but it's not something he'd ever considered before he met me and it took him a little getting used to. It's not so bad when I'm writing about places we visit or things we do for fun, but I will often write about things I've experienced in my personal life and what I learned from it all. I can justify this, of course, because if sharing my relationship mistakes can prevent someone else from making the same error, then I'm making a difference. The same cannot be said for my other avenue of inspiration, where I do things in real life just so I can write about them. That's actually what I'm writing about today.

Sitting at my desk at work, I crack open a packet of chocolate buttons, stretch out my fingers and get ready to write.

'You look like you mean business,' my friend Polly, who sits at the desk opposite me, says. 'What are you writing about today?'

I met Polly when I started working here; we were both hired by the news website we write for in the same week, so we were newbies together. Well, I say news website, but don't think you're getting the hard-hitting journalism of the *Guardian*. We write for one of those contemporary online news sources that present news, lifestyle advice and other miscellaneous content in a humorous and relevant format. My focus, here at *Viralist*, is on all things dating, romance, relationships and love. I told Mark what my job was on our first date, but I don't think he realised when he started dating me just how honest I was in my articles, and just how heavily he would feature in them.

“10 things I did to see if my boyfriend noticed”, I tell her.

‘Ooh, tell me more,’ Polly demands, leaning over to grab a handful of chocolate. She drops them into her mouth all at once before sitting comfortably, ready for all the details.

‘Well,’ I start, laughing to myself as I consider everything I've done over the past couple of weeks in the name of journalism. ‘I just made a few subtle changes to our day-to-day life to see how he'd react – or if he'd even notice. First up, I didn't wear make-up for a day.’

My original idea was to do it for a week, but then I realised I desperately need make-up to look like a living human female. If I'd gone without any slap for an entire week, people might've worried I was seriously ill.

‘And did he notice?’ Polly asks, completely into the idea.

‘Well, he didn't say anything at the time, but the day after, when I was winging my eyeliner in the bathroom mirror, he hovered behind me. I could tell he was thinking about saying something; the anguish on his face was impossible for him to hide. Eventually he blurted out: “You know, you look better when you don't put all that... stuff on your eyes.” I asked him if he meant eyeliner and he nodded.’

Polly pulls a thoughtful face.

‘Well, that's almost a compliment,’ she reasons. ‘What next?’

‘I bought a skirt that was not me at all – it was *floor-length*,’ I say, stressing the last three words for emphasis. I'm what you might call a follower of fashion, always keeping on top of the latest trends and wearing whatever is

cool at the time, even if others might find it questionable. My mum, however, would tease that my wardrobe is far too revealing. Today I'm wearing a short black skirt, with one of Mark's white shirts, tied in a Daisy Duke-style knot at the stomach – low down enough to ensure full coverage for work. 'Well, he told me he liked it – he rarely comments on my clothes. But he still didn't really twig that much was different.'

'Another compliment,' Polly laughs. 'Next?'

'I started deep-cleaning the flat every day. The kitchen was spotless, there was never a dirty dish, I would clean the bathroom *each day* without fail.'

'And?'

'Of course he didn't notice,' I laugh. 'Next up: I didn't shave my legs for, like, two weeks – not a word from him on the matter.'

'So did he actually notice anything?' Polly enquires.

'I stopped wearing knickers.'

'And he noticed that?' she asks sarcastically, faking shock.

I wiggle my eyebrows.

'You better believe he did,' I giggle. 'The first time he was like: "You've no knickers on!" and it made him pounce on me even quicker than he usually does. On the third day I came in from work and I was getting changed, and he just let out a casual observation: "You don't wear knickers any more."' "

Polly grabs more chocolate, eagerly listening to my story with the level of attention and volume of snacking you'd usually reserve for the cinema.

'Should've known he'd notice that one – you guys are like horny teenagers.'

Still sitting at my desk chair, I attempt to take a bow. It's only as I wave my hand theatrically in front of my face that my friend finally notices the engagement ring on my finger. Getting Polly to notice my ring without me telling her has taken three hours of constantly reaching for things from her desk, gesticulating wildly when I speak and hammering the keys on my computer as hard as possible to try and draw attention to my hands. I thought that letting Polly notice my ring on her own would be a much cooler way for her to find out, rather than me just telling her, but as the hours have ticked

away, my patience has been growing thin. It's almost a relief she's finally spotted it. I thought I was going to have to give in and just tell her.

'Oh, my God,' she squeaks. 'Is that an engagement ring? Are you and Mark getting married?'

I nod my head, unable to contain my smile for a second longer.

'Oh, my God,' she squeaks again, climbing on her desk chair. 'Everyone, listen up: Roxie is engaged!'

Applause fills the *Viralist* office.

'Thank you,' I say with an awkward wave. My relationship with self-confidence is a strange one because, while completely happy with who I am, I am uncomfortable being the centre of attention and will do anything to avoid the spotlight. That's why I like being a writer; I can get my message to people while still hiding behind my words. Writing about lifestyle and relationships isn't so bad, but when I was reporting on celebrity stuff, and I would dare to say something that wasn't entirely complimentary about Justin Bieber's hair, that would be it: war would be declared in the comments on my posts, death threats would be issued – the works. One time I jokily referred to Liam Payne as the fifth sexiest member of One Direction, and one girl threatened to hit me in the face with a sledgehammer. So, yeah, hiding behind a computer is not only preferable when it comes to dealing with, shall we say, constructive criticism, but it also protects me from the crazies.

Kath, our editor, pokes her head out from her office door.

'You're engaged, Roxie?'

'I am,' I reply, my smile stretching from one side of the office to the other.

'That's great, there's got to be an article in that.' She pauses thoughtfully. 'We'll figure it out.'

'OK,' I laugh. That's Kath for you; *everything* is an article. She's probably already working out what GIFs I should use to accompany my words.

As the buzz from Polly's announcement dies down, and everyone gets back to their work, we resume our conversation.

'God, that's not an engagement ring, that's a deposit on a house,' she jokes,

admiring my bling. ‘Hey, maybe Mark will finally introduce you to his parents,’ she adds cheekily.

‘That’s what I’m worried about,’ I say, nervously. ‘I was on top of the world when he asked me; then, as soon as he mentioned me meeting them, I freaked out.’

‘Just be on your best behaviour,’ Polly reminds me. ‘If you have a “best behaviour”,’ she adds with a giggle.

I widen my eyes with horror. My friend doesn’t take this as her cue to go easy on me; instead she persists with her teasing.

‘Maybe he hasn’t let you meet them because he’s worried they won’t like you. So it’s just safer to keep you from them. Except, now he’s popped the question, it’s forced his hand.’

Mark is *not* purposefully keeping me from his family, but it is true that I haven’t met any of them yet. His family all live in the middle of nowhere, in the Yorkshire Dales. He’s been to visit them a few times while I’ve known him but at first it was too early in our relationship, and then, when he did start inviting me, I wasn’t able to get the time off work. He hasn’t been to visit them since, but they do know I exist, so that’s encouraging.

‘Oh, my God, stop, have mercy. I’m already freaking out as it is,’ I remind her.

‘Do you know much about them?’ Polly enquires.

‘Erm, not really,’ I tell her, honestly. ‘I know that they live kind of out of the way of civilisation – and from what Mark has told me about their house, it sounds amazing. It’s just his mum and dad living there now, but he has two sisters, one older and one younger. I know their names and stuff, but not really much about them. I’ve seen the occasional photo of his siblings on Facebook, but his parents don’t use it.’

‘That’s weird, I think,’ Polly says, pondering the issue.

‘It is and it isn’t,’ I laugh. ‘I suppose almost everyone is on there now, so it seems weird when people don’t use it, but it’s probably not that weird...’

‘Well, *I* think it’s weird,’ she laughs. ‘Like they’re dinosaurs who haven’t

embraced modern technology.’

‘Maybe,’ I laugh.

I am of the generation where we rely too heavily on being able to cyber-stalk people we’ve just met, or are yet to meet, to try and figure out what kind of personality they have. It sure would make my life easier if I knew what his parents were like – what kind of people they were, how they dressed, what their interests were. You can tell a lot about a person from stuff like that.

I am what my mum sometimes describes as an ‘acquired taste’. I am the very definition of a millennial – although that might have a lot to do with my job, too. Sometimes my parents think I’m speaking a second language – because they don’t know their YOLO from their FOMO – and my passion for fashion often leaves them scratching their heads. But I think it’s important to be current, and move with the times. Take my hair, for example. In the summer I had it longer and lighter, but now that we’re in December, in the midst of winter, I’ve opted for a honey-coloured lob – because that’s what is in fashion right now. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with wanting to be cool, even if people don’t really get it, but it would be nice to get a heads-up on whether or not his parents are more on the conservative side of the spectrum, because even though I don’t want to pretend to be something I’m not, I do really want to impress them. I care what they think, but only because I love Mark so much, and I want his family to see that and want me to be a part of their family because they like me, not just because I’m marrying into it. You hear all these stories and watch all these movies about evil in-laws, but that’s not the reality, is it? Mums who think no woman is good enough for their son – that’s just a clichéd character.

Still, it’s not like I have to worry about that right now, is it? I only got engaged yesterday. As fast as we’ve been flying through the motions so far, I’m just taking this engagement a day at a time.

I think to myself for a moment. That’s it! The idea for my next article: ‘10 Things to Consider Before You Meet Your Boyfriend’s Parents for the First Time’.

Chapter Three

What is the quickest way to get back in a man's good books? I know the fastest way to a man's heart is via his stomach, but I'll bet the quickest way to his good books is via his pants. To make sure I have all bases covered, my plan of attack involves both. You see, my article went live this afternoon, and judging by the number of times it's been shared already, and the number of comments it's had on Facebook, it's only a matter of time before Mark sees it. You know what they say: it's easier to get forgiveness than permission – that's my strategy with Mark because, if I told him what I was planning on writing, I don't think he'd be down for it, but once I've finished the article and it's live, he always tells me what a great job I did.

Mark has never once been mad at me for writing about our relationship, and yet I always have this little mini panic between hitting the 'publish' button and him reading it and telling me that he still loves me, even though I share our most personal relationship details (arguments, sexual malfunctions, etc.) with everyone who has an internet connection. This article is a little different, though, because I've been messing with him for weeks, testing him, and that does sometimes feel just a little dishonest, even if it is all in the name of journalism. That's why I stopped at Ann Summers on my way home and bought myself the most alarmingly intimidating set of underwear I could find, in an attempt to disarm and confuse him, so that by the time I'm done with him, and I tell him what my latest article is about, he'll be too happy and tired to care.

I walk up to my full-length mirror to admire my new underwear, but for some reason it doesn't compliment my body quite as well as it did the mannequin in the window. I imagine that's because she was made of hard plastic,

whereas my normal, slightly squishy body is harder to contain with all these peepholes. Trying to wrangle my natural boobs in this cupless bra is proving more difficult than I thought it would, but if I make sure I'm lying down when Mark gets home, he won't notice the fighting battle I'm losing with gravity. It doesn't matter that I'm only twenty-nine years old; real boobs are a law unto themselves.

That's the plan of attack on his boxers sorted; now all I need to do is dash to the kitchen and grab a can of whipped cream so I can carefully apply it to my body and then wait on the bed for him to come home and devour me.

I open the fridge and glance around a few times, but I can't find the whipped cream anywhere. I only bought it last week, and I know I haven't used it. Dammit, what can I use instead? So long as it's something I can spread on my body that Mark loves the taste of, it'll be fine, right?

Hmm, somehow I don't think a tub of Philadelphia is the best option, even if it is Mark's favourite kind of cheese. Ditto that jar of passata. Spying another jar on the shelf, I grab it, reading the nutritional information, as though that has some bearing on whether or not I'm going to smother it all over my nipples – I'm just trying to think of a better idea. That's when I spy another jar on the worktop and, with no alternative options popping into my head, I take them both to the bedroom with me.

I lie back on the bed, strategically positioning my body in just the right way so that my boobs don't disappear under my arms and my thong at least covers something, because I'm suddenly a little dubious about whether or not crotchless underwear looks sexy or terrifying. Then I grab my two jars. Well, peanut butter and jam sandwiches are Mark's favourite... so I can't go wrong, can I? I don't imagine mixing them together to make a kind of sticky, cloudy paste is going to look all that great, so I do what any sensible, sound-minded, sexy woman would do and smear strawberry jam all over one boob and peanut butter all over the other. Glancing down at my handiwork I can confirm that – as delicious I smell – this doesn't look as sexy as I had imagined. I wanted to swirl big dollops of whipped cream straight from the can that my lover could wrap his lips around as he devoured it – instead, he's going to be alternating trying to eat crunchy peanut butter from around one nipple, and picking strawberry seeds from his teeth after having a go at the

other. Well, this doesn't look sexy or appetising, so I guess I'll wash it off and just hope the sexy underwear does the trick, except...

'Hello,' I hear Mark call, closing the front door behind him.

Fuck.

'Hi,' I call back. 'I'll be out in a second.'

'It's OK, I'm coming to get changed,' he calls back.

Double fuck. I've got about thirty seconds, during which I decide that, as awful as this looks, the only way I could make it look worse would be for Mark to see this vertically. Probably best I just stay lying down and hope for the best.

'You had a good... oh, my God,' Mark exclaims, dumbstruck as he walks through the bedroom door. 'What... er... what is that all over you?'

'Peanut butter and strawberry jam,' I say, owning it.

'Of course it is,' he replies, laughing at me with his eyes. God, I love it when he does that. His deep-brown eyes just light up and I can tell exactly what he's thinking – it's usually: 'what the hell is going on in this girl's head?' But it isn't a judgemental laugh; it's warm and eternally forgiving, and I just know that, no matter how daft I am, Mark isn't going anywhere.

Mark unbuttons his shirt and kicks off his trousers before jumping on the bed.

'Well, I am starving,' he laughs, kissing his way from my ankle to my thigh.

I gasp and wiggle involuntarily, the way I always do the second I feel his lips on my body.

'OK, seriously, this was misjudged, I look ridiculous, and I do not expect you to have sex with me while I look like this,' I tell him.

'Have you seen that underwear you've got on?' he asks me, gently kissing his way up my body until he's on top of me. 'You could've smeared mud all over yourself and I'd still have sex with you. You look sexy as fuck.'

'Even with the jam?' I laugh.

'Especially with the jam,' he replies, kissing my chest, covering his face in it.

As he looks into my eyes, he smiles, and even though it's sticky with strawberry jam, it still takes my breath away how handsome he is. I run my hand through his hair and sigh.

'I love you,' I blurt out.

'I love you, too,' he laughs. 'But I hope this isn't my tea...'

I laugh and roll my eyes.

'I bought stuff for dinner, too,' I assure him. 'The plan was to cover myself in whipped cream, but we didn't have any – I thought we did.'

'We did, I ate it,' he tells me casually. I feel his body tense up as he presses down on me harder – Mark's tell that he's too turned on to think straight.

'Oh, OK,' I reply. 'Wait, when did you eat it?' I ask. 'With what?'

'Just on its own,' he tells me breathlessly, grinding his body against mine.

'What, like straight from the can?' I persist with my questioning.

'Yeah.'

'You ate the entire can?'

'Yeah,' he laughs. 'While I was watching *Match of the Day*. Now will you just shut up and kiss me, please?' he demands impatiently.

I laugh quietly to myself at the image of my sexy boyfriend sitting on the sofa, squirting whipped cream straight into his mouth as he yells at the TV in protest at an unjustly given yellow card.

As he passionately kisses me on the lips, I feel jam transfer from his face to mine. As sticky as it is, I'm too turned on to care right now. Our white bed sheets be damned.

Mark jumps to his feet, offering me his hand to pull me up.

'Stand up. I want to get a proper look at this underwear,' he demands.

As self-conscious as I feel in my awkward undies, I own it, and stand up proudly.

'Wow,' Mark exclaims as he takes it all in. 'OK, no more snacking. I've got

to have you.'

Grabbing me by the hips, Mark pushes me up against the wall. I lock my legs around his waist. Suddenly I can appreciate the plus points of crotchless, peephole underwear – I can keep it on and still have sex, and it does just enough to hide my small body hang-ups.

Lying on the bed, exhausted, elated and covered in a gross mixture of strawberry jam, peanut butter and sweat, I exhale deeply.

'That was amazing,' I tell him. 'You're amazing.'

'You weren't so bad yourself,' he tells me. 'And you shaved your legs for the occasion.'

'I did... wait, you notice stuff like that?' I ask.

'Of course,' he laughs. 'You really think I didn't feel how prickly your legs were every time I ran my hands up and down them for the past two weeks?'

'I really did think that,' I tell him.

'I know you did,' he laughs, rolling onto his side, resting his head on his hand as he faces me. 'I read your article.'

I sit up straight.

'Oh, you've already seen it?' I ask, pointlessly. 'Erm... what did you think?'

'That I'm more observant than you give me credit for,' he replies.

'So you're not mad?'

'Am I ever?' he laughs. 'So is that what all this was in aid of?'

'Kind of,' I reply. That's what the extra effort was for, but it's not exactly out of character for me to jump on him the second he walks through the door after work of an evening. I think I'm freaking out today more than usual, though, because I can't get the thought of meeting his parents out of my head. I'm scared to put a foot wrong – although somehow I don't think my seducing their son by smothering my body with spreads usually reserved for

toast would buy me much favour with them, do you?

‘You’re too good for me,’ I tell him. ‘Right, I suppose I’d better make you some dinner.’

As I make the grand gesture of pulling myself to my feet, Mark grabs my wrist and pulls me close, squeezing me tightly.

‘Before you go, I spoke to my mum today – she’s invited the family to visit for Christmas. I figured we could go see your mum and dad, then head up to the Dales, spend the night there – give everyone the good news about us getting engaged!’

‘That would be awesome,’ I tell him, smiling widely like I do every time I remember we’re engaged.

‘We’d be travelling back on Christmas Eve, but we’re all prepared for Christmas anyway, right?’

‘We are indeed.’

I glance at my engagement ring, only to realise it’s covered in jam.

‘OK,’ I laugh, ‘I really need a shower. Then I’ll make dinner.’

Wriggling free of Mark’s grasp, I slip my expensive, spread-covered underwear off, throwing my bra and kicking my knickers to one side.

‘I could do with a shower, too. I feel dirty,’ he calls after me. ‘Whack it up to full, I’ll be right behind you.’

Chapter Four

‘You’re not going to need... all that this weekend,’ Mark tells me as he carefully places balled-up pairs of socks into his overnight bag.

I glance up from clipping my stocking to my suspenders.

‘Erm, I do need “all this” because I have to wear stockings on my super-white legs, because someone won’t let me use fake tan any more.’

‘To take a leaf out of your book, here’s a list of three reasons I won’t let my girlfriend use fake tan any more... Number one: it smells so bad – like you ate a spice rack and then threw it up on your legs. Number two: our white sheets and towels are no longer white. Number three: you...’

‘All right, all right.’ I wave a pair of Mark’s white boxers in the air to show surrender. ‘I get it, you think I’m gross.’

‘If you’ll allow me to finish,’ Mark starts, sitting down on the bed behind me. ‘Number three: you’re perfect as you are.’

‘Even with my ghostly white, white legs?’ I ask, a huge grin spreading across my face.

‘Yes,’ he replies, taking my chin between his thumb and finger as he kisses me gently.

My grin dissolves into a sigh.

‘Come on, what’s up?’ Mark asks me as he gets back to packing.

I sit down on the bed and cross my legs, running a hand through my hair as I try to find the right words.

‘I... I’m nervous about meeting your family,’ I admit.

‘What? Why?’ he asks, surprised. ‘They’re going to love you.’

I know he’s right. It is his family, after all, so he knows them better than anyone. I guess I’ve just watched too many movies.

‘That said...’ he starts, ‘are you sure you’re packing the right kind of clothing? They keep saying it’s going to snow. Shouldn’t you pack some flat boots of some kind?’

‘I haven’t weather-proofed my new Uggs yet, so I can’t wear those’.

‘So you’re just going to wear heels?’

I shrug casually. He knows I am. But I only need to get to the car and back, it’s no big deal.

As I stuff the last few things into my overnight bag, I struggle with the zip.

‘Help me out here, buddy,’ I demand, pouting my lip a little. ‘I’ll hold it tightly, you pull it.’

‘That’s what she said,’ my cheeky fiancé jokes. ‘OK, here we go.’

Mark’s bulging biceps come in handy all the time. If I need a jar opening, he pops the lid off like it’s nothing. When it comes to bedroom antics, he can throw me around the room with ease. And it’s pretty much guaranteed that no one will dare harass us in the street because he looks like he could crush someone’s brain with one effortless headlock. I know that he’s a sweetheart, who probably wouldn’t really know what to do in a fight, but the hours he spends in the gym deceive everyone and he looks as tough as he is strong. Yep, usually Mark’s strength is useful, but not today. Today my hubby-to-be pulls the zip with such strength it rips clean off my bag.

‘Oh, shit, I’m sorry. It just came off in my hand.’

‘That’s what she said,’ I reply, echoing his cheeky joke. He was only trying to help; I can’t be mad at him. I do have a problem now, though. ‘Erm, OK, so I’ll...’

‘No, you stay there – I’ll go grab you another one. You finish getting ready,’ Mark insists, grabbing his keys before kissing me on the forehead and

dashing out of the door.

‘Thank you,’ I call after him.

Living in the city centre has its perks, like being able to go out and buy whatever you need, whenever you need it. I’ve lived in London my entire life so it’s all I know, but Mark still finds it amazing when he can get a pizza delivered to his flat at three o’clock in the morning.

I can’t wait to see where he grew up. As much as Mark prefers city centre life, he talks fondly about growing up in Rippledale – a village in the Yorkshire Dales I’ve never even heard of. Apparently it’s tiny, remote and in the middle of a valley, so the mobile phone signal is sparse.

I’ve never actually been to Yorkshire before so, in my head, I’m only going on what I’ve seen in *Emmerdale* – not sure how accurate that is. I’m happy to admit that, being born and raised in London, I’m one of those people who thinks it is the greatest place, and that nowhere else in England compares. It’s just that everything happens here; it is the capital, after all. If I need a break, I go abroad; I don’t drive over two hundred miles to sit in a field. I’ve just never had any reason to head up north, that is until now. I’m excited to meet Mark’s family, I just can’t begin to imagine them. All I know are the stereotypes; that northerners are tight and pour gravy on everything – I’m also smart enough to know that stereotypes are not a realistic representation of a county. Anyway, Mark isn’t tight at all, and I’ve never noticed his gravy consumption to be anything other than average...

So maybe signal-free, gravy-rich Yorkshire wouldn’t be my first choice of places to get away to, but I’ve been under so much pressure at work lately, it will just be nice to take a break – even if it’s only for a couple of days. I know what you’re thinking: but Roxie, don’t you just write about how to get a boyfriend and crack dick jokes all day? And, yes, you’re right – the work I produce may not be particularly important in the grand scheme of things; but I do work hard on it, and I do have an editor breathing down my neck, and deadlines to hit, and – do you know what? – my dick jokes are fire, and I won’t let anyone tell me otherwise.

Unable to pack until Mark arrives with my bag, I lie back on my bed, stretching out, ready for a relaxing few days. I think a bit of solitude will do

me good. I feel my muscles slowly begin to relax, one at a time, my body slowly slipping into holiday mode until my phone rings, and all at once every inch of me tenses up again. Shit, it's Kath, my editor. I know I'm supposed to be on holiday, but I can't exactly swerve her call, can I?

'Hey, boss, how's it going?' I ask cheerily, hoping she hasn't called to bollock me for something or, worse, revoke my holiday for some reason that I haven't had chance to start panicking about yet.

'Oh, you know,' she says in reply. I'm not sure I do, but we'll leave it at that. 'What's happening?'

'Just about to hit the road,' I reply. 'I'm going away with Mark for a few days.'

Just in case Kath was thinking of asking me to head into work for something, I pretend to shout to Mark in the next room.

'What's that, babe?' I call – and, no, I don't ever call him babe. 'Sure, I'm ready to go.' I turn my attention back to Kath. 'Sorry, Kath, Mark is nagging me to hit the road; apparently we're going to be late to meet his parents.'

'That's why I'm calling you,' Kath tells me.

'Oh?'

'Oh, indeed. Why didn't you tell me you were going to meet your fiancé's parents for the first time?' she asks.

I think for a moment. Why would I tell her?

'I...' I start, but no more words come out. Luckily for me, Kath makes her point clear.

'I want you to write an article about it,' she tells me.

'About meeting Mark's family?' I ask.

'Yeah,' she replies casually. 'This is a golden opportunity. You need to make the most of it.'

Writing about my personal life is something I do all the time, and I'm happy to do it, but when it comes to writing about my love life, I'm very careful. I would never mention Mark by name, or just straight up write about him. I

will often mention ‘my boyfriend’ in relation to things that I am saying and doing, but that’s it. He’s just a nameless, faceless character in my life that people don’t really think too much about when they read the articles, because they’re not reading to find out about my life, they’re reading to work out how to learn from my mistakes to make their life better. Writing about meeting Mark’s family, though – that’s a completely different thing. He might be able to forgive me for writing about our bedroom antics, but dragging his family into my work isn’t something he is going to be OK with – well, who would?

‘Well, I just finished a piece on things to consider before you meet your boyfriend’s parents for the first time – I don’t want my readers to think I’m rehashing old material, or bragging about how engaged I am, you know?’

‘Who is your editor?’ she asks me pointlessly.

‘You are,’ I reply. ‘But...’

‘But you’ll do it?’ she asks. Well, it sounds like a question, but we both know it isn’t. ‘I’m thinking we can cover the whole engagement, wedding – beyond that, even. “How to choose your bridesmaids” to “Thoughts you’ll have while walking down the aisle” – there’s just so much material here.’

I think for a second. Appealing to Kath’s better nature might be a long shot, but it’s worth a try, right?

‘Mark has been pretty cool when it comes to what I write about, but I think writing about his family will be a step too far, Kath,’ I tell her frankly.

‘It’s too good an opportunity to waste, Roxie. Readers will love this. You’re a smart girl; find a way and turn it in next week – no excuses, OK?’

‘But Kath...’

‘I said no excuses,’ she snaps. ‘Have a wonderful few days.’

‘Thanks,’ I reply. ‘See you soon.’

I hang up and lie back on my bed, completely unable to relax now. There’s just no way I can write about something like this. Endless silly things, yes. But I can’t review his family and then tell people how to ‘cope’ with such an ordeal. That’s so disrespectful.

When I started working at *Viralist*, I knew how lucky I was to land a job

there, and when I finally bagged my own virtual column, I really couldn't believe my luck. But my success has come at a cost, like Kath thinking my private life is public property. Sometimes it feels a little like I've sold my soul to the devil, but I couldn't imagine being happy in any other job. In situations like this, I usually find that I can compromise my way out of having to reveal too much about my real life. My only real option is to write a completely different article – but an even better one; that way, when Kath reads it and thinks it's the best thing I've ever written, she won't even care about the fact I went off topic and completely ignored her orders.

I know I'm only going to be away for a day/night, but I'll be travelling back on Christmas Eve, and with this being mine and Mark's first proper Christmas together, I promised him I wouldn't work. I'm going to have to take my laptop with me and write either in the car, or through the night, when I'll most likely not be able to sleep for worrying about this.

'I'm back,' Mark calls to me from the living room.

'Hey,' I call back to him.

'Here we are, one new overnight bag, and in the lady's favourite colour, too: black.'

'Like my heart,' I tease.

'So, we're good to go? Nothing else to stress about?'

'Nothing,' I lie.

'OK, then,' Mark says excitedly with a clap of his hands. 'Let's hit the road.'

Chapter Five

I've been thinking about the answer to a pretty straightforward question recently: would I describe myself as a materialistic person? I'd like to say that the answer is no, but I'm not so sure. My parents didn't raise me with a taste for the finer things in life; they're a very easygoing couple. Joseph and Juliet met at stage school when they were in their teens, and if I had to describe their relationship in one word, it would be 'easy'. Realising they had everything in common, they started dating and fell hard and fast for each other. They had a small, simple wedding. They had one (probably perfect and impossible to better – although I am biased) child and that was enough for them. They have both always worked in theatre, whether they were acting, teaching, directing or composing, which gave me the most culturally diverse upbringing I could've hoped for. I have met people from all different backgrounds, in front of the backdrop of an industry that embraces diversity, and for that I am thankful. They brought me up to be accepting, tolerant, and to embrace what I loved, even if what I loved was dressing as a cat for the eight months that followed my watching *Cats* for the first time when I was a child. But being materialistic is one thing they didn't encourage, so I guess any bad habits I've picked up along those lines, I only have myself to blame for.

Before I met Mark, I lived in a pretty small flat above a shop that sells e-cigarettes, which I shared with my friend Gilgamesh who I met through my parents' theatre company. I have always suspected Gil chose himself a stage name before we met, because when I quizzed him about having such an unusual name he went on to insist his parents named him that, and I feel like, from that moment on, he made a conscious effort to hide all forms of

identification from me. Still, it is possible; my parents did name me Roxie, after all.

Back when I was a struggling writer – still just an office junior at *Viralist* – and Gil was a struggling actor, our vape-stinking flat was all we could afford, but we were happy there. Still, I'm sure my parents were wondering about what my life intentions were, given that I was living like a student with a forty-something gay guy, so when I moved in with Mark they were delighted. It's not that I can't look after myself, but I think they worried about me less, knowing I had Mark taking care of me, rather than a wild-child Peter Pan who would convince me to go out drinking with him several nights a week.

Moving in with Mark was a change, and one that I quickly adapted to. I've always been a pop culture junkie, whether I was lusting after the celebrity lifestyles I saw in *Starstruck* magazine, or just trying to keep up with whatever the Kardashians were telling me to smear all over my face to stay 'on fleek'. Moving in with Mark, who is in charge of public relations for a huge children's charity, meant moving into the lifestyle I had dreamed of. I'd finally been promoted to staff writer the year before I met Mark, but I'd kept living where I was – mostly because life with Gil was just such a great source of material for my lifestyle column. This meant lots of extra income for all the silly stuff I was certain I needed to be happy. Moving into a big, flashy apartment with my devastatingly sexy boyfriend made my life complete; so, yes, I guess you could say I'm materialistic. I know that the most important things in life cannot be bought, but I acknowledge just how happy 'things' make me.

I would say that Mark is less materialistic than I am, but he's always had more material. From his comfy furnishings to his cinema screen to the BMW with the matte black finish that we're currently travelling to my parents' house in, Mark has it all. And yet, I don't think he'd care if he lost it. He doesn't love his car like many men do; he just thinks it's cool. When I jokily asked if I could learn to drive in it, he said yes, whereas most men would've uttered a two-word reply and the second word would have definitely been 'off'.

I do like to be stylish, but I don't necessarily have to spend a lot of money to do that. I could when I lived in my cheap flat with Gil, but now that I'm

living with Mark, my contribution to the bills costs me way more, which means less to spend on lip kits and manicures, but I'm OK with that. I am so happy and so in love with Mark, and as much as he tells me I don't need to contribute as much to our bills, I do. I couldn't not; it wouldn't sit right with me. Lucky for me, I bought most of my expensive clothing, shoes and accessories when I had a lot of spare cash, and this stuff lasts a lifetime. Unlucky for me, the overnight bag that Mark panic-bought for me is significantly smaller than its predecessor, so I've had to pack less than I intended to take with me – plus my laptop. I know I'm only going to be away a couple of days, but I figured I'd be able to make notes if an idea came to me, or I can work in the car... I just need to make sure I have something to turn in. Something so good, my editor won't miss an exposé piece on the Wright family.

'God, I'm bored,' I whine, like a petulant child. 'I hate long car journeys.'

Mark laughs.

'We're five minutes from home, Roxie,' he reminds me. 'And fifteen minutes from your parents' house. Still nervous?'

'Still nervous,' I reply.

It just feels so strange to be meeting the parents *after* getting engaged, like we're doing things in the wrong order.

'They'll love you,' Mark tells me for the millionth time. 'It's a long journey; you can't spend it worrying.'

'I know, I know. At least we're making a stop to see my parents, then we can get a nice, warm coffee in us. It's freezing!'

'Oh, no, I know how this goes,' Mark laughs. 'You'll drink too much, and we'll have to stop so you can use the loo every ten miles...'

'Oi,' I laugh. 'I'm a grown-ass woman. I'll be thirty next year. I'm fully in control of my bladder, thank you.'

I shudder a little, at the thought of turning thirty. 'Next year' makes it sound like it's a long way away, but it's December now, and my birthday is in February. Mark doesn't think it's a big deal – he's thirty-two, and assures me

that nothing changes when you hit the big 3-0. He's promised me that my face won't instantly wrinkle, that I won't become boring overnight, and that I won't suddenly be turned away from night clubs for looking too old. While I fear that, as I grow older, things are only going to go downhill for me looks-wise, Mark only gets better with age. Mark is the very definition of tall, dark and handsome, and even though a few grey hairs are starting to creep in on the sides of his head – my God – it looks so sexy. My newly cut blonde lob might have a few greys in there, maybe, but I wouldn't know because I have my hair routinely highlighted. If I did have grey hair showing, though, it would not look good. On Mark it looks hot and this is beyond unfair. Like he's not already out of my league; as we grow older, the fact we're in different leagues is only going to seem more obvious. Can't wait for the day he's walking around all George Clooney and I'm looking like Mrs Doubtfire.

'Here we are,' Mark announces, pulling up outside my mum and dad's house. 'So, how are you going to play this?'

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'How are you going to announce it to them? Have you got some big thing planned?'

'I already told them,' I reply. 'I called them the same day while you were in the shower. I told you that they said congratulations when... oh, my God, you were ignoring me because you were playing *Call of Duty*, weren't you?'

'Woman, have you ever tried doing two things at once?' he jokes. 'It's hard work.'

I roll my eyes. How can he be so annoying and so cute at the same time?

As Mark makes a move to get out of the car, I put a hand on his arm to stop him.

'Wait. You've told your family, right?'

'Erm, no,' he replies with a cheeky laugh. 'I thought we'd surprise them.'

'But they've never even met me,' I squeak. 'You can't just turn up with me and be like: OK, we're here, meet my girlfriend for the first time – by the way, we're engaged.'

‘Why not?’ he laughs.

‘Oh, God.’ My stomach churns as I somehow find a way to feel even more nervous. ‘At least they know they’re finally going to meet me.’

As I go to get out of the car, it’s Mark’s turn to stop me.

‘Except...’ he starts.

‘Mark Wright, please tell me that you told your parents that you’re taking me to meet them. Please tell me you’re not just going to turn up with me and be like: ta-da, this is my bird...’

‘I thought it might be a nice surprise,’ he laughs awkwardly, except I can tell he’s maybe starting to think that he’s done the wrong thing.

‘Oh, my God, call them right now and warn them that you’re bringing me with you. I can’t just turn up to stay at their house uninvited.’

‘I invited you,’ he tells me, suddenly straight-faced. ‘We’re a team. You go where I go, I go where you go.’

I pull a face.

‘Your smart, easy way with words isn’t going to get you out of this one,’ I tell him as we walk up the driveway. ‘Call them, now.’

‘No way, I want to surprise them,’ he insists, opening the front door for me.

‘You’re an idiot sometimes, do you know that?’ I ask rhetorically, around the same time my parents both yell ‘surprise’ and fire party poppers in our direction.

I watch as their faces fall, their beaming grins slipping away into nothing. The room falls silent, but only for a second.

‘Hello,’ I say warmly. My parents follow suit and greet me with a hug.

‘Everything OK?’ my mum asks.

‘Oh, we’re fine,’ I reply honestly. ‘I’m just teasing Mark over a questionable decision.’

I give my hubby-to-be a playful nudge. He’s impossible to be mad at.

‘We’ll ask no more,’ my dad says before pulling Mark in for a handshake/hug. ‘Come here, you. Congratulations. And thank you, we didn’t think anyone would be taking this one off our hands.’

‘Hey,’ I laugh. ‘What do you mean “off your hands”? I moved out when I was eighteen.’

I’ve always wanted to be independent, even when I was a little kid. My mum, liking to think she’s a bit of a psychologist, puts this down to my being an only child. I don’t know what the reason is; all I know is that I feel more comfortable doing things for myself. That’s why I can’t let Mark pay for everything. That’s why I spent years living in that tiny hellhole with Gil, so that I could take care of myself while I was working my way up the career ladder. It’s good, though, because I can be proud of everything I’ve worked for, and know that I’ve done it all on my own.

‘Yeah, we just never thought you’d be the marrying kind,’ my dad explains. There’s a smile on his face, but it sounds like there’s a little truth in there. ‘You know, being so career-minded, your wild nights out... We’re just so pleased you’ve got Mark and that he takes care of you.’

I feel my brow furrow at the thought of needing someone taking care of me, but I suppose he’s right that Mark does do his best to take care of me, and I wouldn’t change the way he is for anything. To have someone give so much of a shit about you feels amazing.

‘I’d say we should crack open a bottle, but with Mark driving... I’ll put kettle on?’ my dad suggests, clapping his hands as he jumps to his feet.

‘I’ll give you a hand,’ Mark replies. Being a typical Yorkshire lad, Mark loves a good cup of tea, whereas I’m more of a coffee person.

As soon as the men are out of the room, my mum sits on the sofa next to me and grabs my hand.

‘That is one beautiful ring,’ she gushes.

As I examine my hand, I can’t help but agree. My boy not only has great taste, but he knows me so well. So well, that he knows I’ve been on a rose-gold kick for as long as I can remember, and when I happened to mention that I liked the look of champagne sapphires – my boy was listening

carefully.

At the time, he laughed. He said that some girls demanded platinum rings with a big rock of a diamond in there, but I told him I didn't care about that. Well, I don't. If I'm going to wear a ring every day, it should be something that I actually want to wear every day, because I think it looks cool, not because it's expensive. It would seem that, as a compromise, Mark opted for a rose-gold ring with a big, champagne sapphire, surrounded by diamonds. I might not have wanted a ridiculously expensive ring (mostly because I'm so clumsy and forgetful), but Mark insisted I deserved it. I'm wearing it right now, because I imagine it would look pretty bad if I didn't, but as soon as we're back home I'll probably just lock it away in the safe and wear something cheap as a placeholder. Something I can accidentally leave in a bathroom or fling straight off my finger as I gesture wildly while I'm telling a story at work.

'So, time to meet the in-laws,' my mum says, pulling a face.

'What does that face mean?' I laugh.

'I just remember meeting your dad's family for the first time,' she recalls. 'Your Grandma Pratt did not like me at all. Straight away, from the moment she met me, that was it – instant dislike.'

'I never knew that,' I reply.

'Well, while she was alive, it didn't seem fair to badmouth your gran to you, and we did eventually find a way to tolerate each other...'

'Mum, this is not helping at all.'

My mum thinks for a moment, like she's wracking her brains for some words of comfort for me.

'Your Uncle Ben's wedding was only a few weeks before you were born. Now, you were a big baby, so by this stage I was huge and I was heavy. I spent ages looking for the right outfit, and some shoes that I could actually walk in because I'd been living in trainers, and there was no way I could wear trainers to a wedding, not without your gran having a pop at me. So I got this long, green dress, and it was nice, but I was just so big, I didn't exactly look like a Victoria's Secret model in it, and I got these black shoes

that had a bit of a heel on them – best I could do if I wanted to be able to walk.’

‘That’s fair enough,’ I reply. ‘Who would criticise the outfit of a pregnant woman?’

‘Your gran,’ my mum says with a laugh. ‘She told me that I looked like a hill, and that my shoes looked like orthopaedic aids for correcting what she called “wonky feet”.’

‘That’s harsh,’ I admit, suddenly not finding things so funny.

‘It was OK, though,’ my mum continues. ‘Because later that night your gran took a tumble in the ridiculously high heels she was wearing and ended up with a shiner of a black eye. So whenever she was horrible to me, to cheer myself up, I would watch the video of her gliding face-first across the dance floor. Suddenly, things wouldn’t seem too bad.’

I gasp.

‘Mum, I can’t believe you’re saying that.’

‘What? She was an old bag. She suggested I put you on a diet when you were two years old. God rest her soul,’ my mum hastily adds.

‘Whose soul are we resting?’ my dad asks, carrying a tray of mugs into the room, Mark not far behind him with a plate of biscuits.

‘Your mother’s,’ my mum replies, taking a cup of coffee from him.

‘Aw, if only she knew how missed she was,’ my dad says wistfully with a smile.

‘If only,’ my mum replies with a smile of her own.

I’d always kind of figured that my mum and my gran didn’t really get along that well, but I never realised she made comments like that to my mum. Is the urban legend of the evil mother-in-law not a legend at all? But that can’t be true. Sure, that’s the way things are in movies, and maybe my gran did make a few remarks to my mum, but maybe her outfit *was* rubbish, and I was a chubby toddler – I still am, in some ways.

My mum, ever the actress, is obviously embellishing – but with perfect

comedic timing, as usual. Growing up with actor parents was interesting, to say the least. For one thing, their poker faces were flawless. When I was misbehaving, and they would pull up alongside the local children's home saying they were going to give me away, I believed them! They really sold it, and I would instantly cease whatever I was doing that was causing them stress. Their easy confidence wasn't always my favourite thing either, especially when it came to having friends around or school events. It was like they were always performing, always the centre of attention, always cracking jokes. It did have its plus points, too, though. They definitely told the best bedtime stories when I was younger, often working together to put on a performance at the end of my bed, and they were the 'coolest' parents a teenager could hope to have.

'So, what did Gil make of the news?' my mum asks.

Gil, a serial player, has never been big on the idea of monogamy, and he couldn't hide his disappointment when I 'caught it from Mark' as he so beautifully put it. While he does adore Mark, and has always been happy for the two of us, we might have a problem...

'Shit!' I exclaim. 'I forgot to tell him.'

'You didn't tell your best friend?' Mark laughs. 'That makes me even for not telling my parents.'

'You haven't told your parents?' my mum echoes. 'Why ever not?'

'I want to surprise them,' he replies, that cheeky smile of his more persuasive than ever. I don't know if it's the cute dimples planted perfectly on his handsome face that just give him this look, like he could get away with murder exclusively because you forgave him, just because he smiled at you. Mark's smile will be my downfall, I'm just weak for it.

'Well, that will be a nice surprise for your future mother-in-law,' my mum tells me. There's a smug look of warning in her eyes.

I metaphorically bite my lip.

'I need to call Gil and tell him,' I say, grabbing my phone.

'Call him on loudspeaker,' my dad insists. 'We miss him.'

As instructed, I call Gil on loudspeaker so that everyone can talk to him, because everyone loves Gil. I find this especially hilarious, because other than me, my family, his family and a very small percentage of his friendship circle, Gil hates everyone. Perhaps it's an actor thing – and, if it is, it's very telling of how talented he is – but Gil has the ultimate fake smile, and he uses it to get away with saying whatever he wants, straight to a person's face, and it confuses them so much, they don't even realise he's offending them. I remember when I lived with him, and I was dating this guy who had a bit of a body odour problem, and Gil just couldn't keep quiet about it. He would spray him with deodorant, that big smile plastered across his face as he did it, asking him if he liked the way it smelt – multiple times, just to make sure he got an informed opinion from him. One time the smelly guy (as Gil has always referred to him behind his back) said that he was tired, so Gil told him to go home and have a nice, long bath. An insult, if you really think about it, but coming from Gil everything sounds charming. I guess you should never underestimate the power of a good smile.

'Hello, stranger,' Gil answers.

'Hey, mister, how are you?' I ask, holding back my exciting news as best I can for as long as I can.

'Same old, same old,' he tells me. 'You?'

'Mark asked me to marry him,' I squeak.

'Roxie, that's amazing,' he replies. 'You said yes, right?'

'Erm, obviously,' I laugh.

As I exchange glances with Mark and my parents, I can not only tell that Gil is sincerely happy for me, but that everyone else that matters to me is happy too. Nothing could ruin this perfect moment.

'I should've known you'd say yes,' Mark continues. 'Remember that time you called me up and said he'd made you orgasm, like, eight times in a row? I knew then that you'd never let him go. Plus, when you told me how well-endowed he was...'

I quickly hit the button that takes my phone off loudspeaker, cutting Gil off, but still very much shutting the stable door after the (well-hung) horse has

bolted.

I laugh awkwardly.

‘Anyway, call you later,’ I babble, hanging up.

Mark, bless him, looks mortified, but my parents see the funny side. Not only because they’re used to Gil, but because – I told you – they’re cool.

My dad slaps Mark on the back playfully, laughing wildly.

‘I can’t believe you find this funny,’ Mark says, his body still looking a little stiff with fear. ‘Shouldn’t you be punching me in the face?’

‘Why?’ my dad laughs. ‘You clearly make my daughter very happy.’

I laugh, but I still find this embarrassing. I should’ve known the loudspeaker was a terrible idea.

‘Man, you guys are great,’ Mark says, relaxing. ‘My parents aren’t like you guys at all.’

I feel a pang of panic. I’ve been brought up around my parents; they’re the only kind of parents I’m used to.

‘Why? What are you parents like?’ I ask. I can’t believe I’ve never asked, but you know what it’s like when you start dating someone. As fast as things were moving, I still didn’t want to seem like a psycho, asking loads of weird questions.

‘The opposite to yours,’ Mark laughs. ‘You guys are so cool and easygoing. The way you laughed about what Gil said – my parents would not find that funny at all. They’re quite traditional, they don’t swear – I don’t swear when I’m around them. My dad would blow his top if he heard me swear, even now.’

I wouldn’t say that I swore excessively, but I do swear both often and casually – on autopilot, really.

‘So I shouldn’t swear in front of your parents,’ I reiterate.

‘It would be better if you didn’t,’ Mark laughs. ‘Don’t look so worried, you’ll be fine. You have a real adult job where you function perfectly,’ he reminds me.

‘Except I don’t,’ I tell him, anxiously. ‘I know I’ve had a good day at the office if I’ve written some fire dick puns. And I don’t need to worry about swearing in front of my boss because, one time, she genuinely shouted across the office at me to demand I write a top five list of things to put up your butt during sex.’

‘I’d be interested to read that,’ my mum whispers softly, leaning over to me – see what I mean about her perfect comic timing?

‘You don’t need to worry,’ Mark stresses, grabbing a biscuit from the table.

I think for a moment. If he isn’t worried, then why am I? Because he knows what his parents are like, and he knows what I’m like – better than I know myself – and if he thinks I’ll be fine around them, then I’m sure I will be, right?

So why am I still so worried?

Chapter Six

I wake up suddenly, cold, starving and disorientated – and with a pain in my back from sitting in a car for too long; but as I look out of my window and take in all the greenery, I have to admit that Yorkshire is beautiful. Despite it being a cold December day, I can still appreciate the scenery.

‘So this is Yorkshire...’ I say, stretching my aching back.

‘No, this is the M1. We haven’t been on the road for an hour yet, Roxie,’ Mark informs me with a chuckle.

‘You’re kidding?’ I reply. ‘Oh, my God, I’m so bored. Car journeys are so boring. And I’m so hungry!’

‘You’re so like a child,’ Mark replies. ‘You ate maybe six chocolate digestives little more than an hour ago. You can’t be hungry.’

‘Well, I am. Hungry and bored. Are we going to stop along the way?’

‘Well, I was going to try and make the entire journey without stopping, so that we had longer to spend with my parents today, but if we do stop, the plan was to be at least half of the way there by then.’

I pull an unimpressed face, tapping my nails impatiently on the dashboard. Ergh, this journey is going to be so long. And what is Mark even listening to? He’s got Radio 4 on; it’s so boring.

I lean over and change the station to Radio 1, but the latest *X Factor* winner’s single isn’t doing much to lift my mood either.

‘Hey, I was listening to the weather forecast,’ Mark informs me.

‘They’re only talking about how cold it’s going to be – it’s depressing.’

‘Come on, what’s up? Are you still anxious?’

‘I’m very anxious,’ I reply honestly. ‘I’m just so freaked out by all of this.’

‘Maybe it will help if I tell you more about my family. I know I’ve told you bits and pieces before, but I’ll give you a recap. How does that sound?’

‘That would be good, thank you,’ I reply.

‘So we’ve got my mum and dad, Valerie and Oscar, and my two sisters, Millie and Mel.’

‘Millie, Mark and Mel,’ I giggle.

‘Erm, Mildred, Marcus and Melody,’ he corrects me with a laugh. ‘And you thought Roxie was bad.’

‘Will anyone else be there?’

‘Yeah, Millie’s husband, Alex, and Mel’s boyfriend, Ste. Alex is cool – a bit boring, but you don’t worry about the sister that marries a boring doctor, you worry about the one who winds up with twat after twat... which brings me on to Ste.’

‘You don’t like him, do you?’

‘I don’t. I’ve only met him once, but he was too confident, too familiar... He and my sister don’t seem to have all that much in common, but she’s the baby of the family, typical youngest child. She can’t stand to be single; she’d rather have the wrong person than no person at all. The opposite of me, really.’

Mark and I have never really spoken too much about our love lives before we met – well, what’s the point? I know he had a serious girlfriend in Yorkshire, before he moved to London, and he always tells me that before he met me he was way too busy for any kind of a love life. When he used to tell me this when we first got together, I didn’t believe him. I’ve seen how women throw themselves at him. But as I’ve got to know him better and fallen in love with him, I’ve realised that he takes things seriously when they are important to him. I can imagine him putting his job first, and he’s so loyal that, when he says he isn’t into one-night stands, I believe him. Who is into one-night

stands, anyway? They're horrible.

'I'm the only member of the family to have left the county – the village, actually. Everyone else still lives there and no one has any desire to move. You know how we love city living? The fact that the city never sleeps, the bright twinkling lights, Deliveroo?' he laughs. 'My parents would hate it. They like peace and quiet, early nights and good home cooking made with locally sourced ingredients.'

'I see,' I reply.

Each to their own, but I couldn't imagine living outside the city centre.

'Would you ever want to move back there?' I ask him curiously.

'Nope,' he replies quickly and firmly. 'My mum would love me to – she talks about it all the time – but I'd miss the city. I couldn't do my job from the village, and I've got a thing for foul-mouthed southerners.'

'I'd better fucking be your favourite,' I reply jokily.

'My one and only,' he laughs. 'Feeling any less worried now?'

'No, I'm still terrified,' I reply honestly.

'So, plan B is to just distract you, until we get to a service station and I can get you something to eat, thus fixing "bored" and "hungry" – how does that sound?'

I feel my body melt into my chair a little.

'That sounds great,' I tell him.

'OK, so what's a good distraction?' Mark wonders out loud.

I clap my hands excitedly.

'We should play "Would You Rather".'

'Really?' Mark laughs. 'That's what the lady wants? OK, sure. You go first.'

'OK.' I think for a second. 'Would you rather... give up football or video games?'

'Ouch!' Mark jokes. 'Going in for the kill straight away. Let me think about

it for a second...'

Mark does indeed think this one over for a while. I don't think I could've asked him a more difficult question.

'Right, I'd have to give up video games,' he concludes. 'Because I love football, and I love going to games with my family, and you just never know what's going to happen. With video games, I know I'll always dominate.'

'Nice,' I reply.

'OK, my turn,' Mark starts excitedly, like he's got a good one for me. 'Would you rather give up having sex or wearing make-up?'

'Ah, well, that's a catch-22 situation right there, because if I gave up wearing make-up, no one would want to have sex with me...'

'You know I'd rather you went without it,' he reminds me.

'Sex or make-up?' I joke, raising my eyebrows, but I know what he means. 'OK, well, with that in mind, I'm going to have to say I'd give up make-up – because at least you'll still have sex with me.'

'Ah, the winner by default,' he laughs. 'Next question?'

'Would you rather... have a Disney Princess-themed wedding, or only be allowed to drive hot-pink-coloured cars for the rest of your life?'

For five seconds Mark doesn't say anything, until...

'Disney Princess wedding,' he says sheepishly.

I laugh wildly.

'Buddy, did you pause for just long enough to make it seem like you're not totally into this Disney Princess thing, when in fact you're mad for it?' I tease.

'OK, OK, if we're on to the big, life-changing questions – would you rather live in a house decorated by a *Star Wars* fanatic, or name your first baby Yoda?'

My heart skips a beat. He's never mentioned wanting kids before.

'Erm,' I stall for a moment because I don't know what to say. Well, I do –

it's that I don't want kids. But if he's asking a question like this then he obviously does, right? 'Probably the second one.'

'Really?' he laughs. 'You'd give our poor first baby that as a name before you'd put up with a bit of geeky wallpaper and a few light sabres on the wall?'

Well, we're not going to have one, so obviously picking that option is pretty low risk.

I shrug my shoulders casually.

Does Mark want kids? It's not something we've ever spoken about. I guess we were so busy with our whirlwind romance, focusing on how in love we are right now, that we never really thought about our future. I mean, Mark's proposal was definitely a surprise, but I knew I wanted to marry him – and of course, he asked, so it's not like neither of us has thought about our future together. We've just been too busy being the perfect couple to discuss the details. Perhaps I don't know Mark as well as I thought I did. I guess I just always figured I'd learn all the things I didn't know as we spent more time together. All I know is that now is definitely not the time to talk about it.

'I'm a bit tired, actually,' I lie. 'Do you mind if I have a snooze until we hit a service station?'

'Yeah, sure. You sure you're OK?'

'Maybe it's just low blood sugar,' I lie again.

'It's definitely not low blood sugar given how many biscuits I saw you smash at your parents' house, but OK,' he laughs. 'I'll wake you when we get there.'

Lying back a little, closing my eyes, I try my best not to think about Mark wanting kids. Well, of course he does; all normal grown adults do, right? Apart from me. The maternal instinct just skipped me, for some reason. It's not like it's just the thought of having to take care of a small human for at least eighteen years, what it does to your career, or your social life, or the expense – the thought of carrying a baby for nine months before giving birth actually makes me feel sick. I just can't handle the thought of it, being ill all that time, irreparably ruining my body, going through the excruciating agony

of labour. I have the upmost respect for anyone who chooses to do it, but I choose not to.

I cannot think about this right now. I just need to try and get some rest and concentrate on the task at hand. Getting through a night at my country-bumpkin future in-laws' place.

I feel my body jolt forwards before my fast-acting seatbelt snaps me straight back into place.

'What the hell are you doing?' Mark yells at the vehicle in front of us.

'What's happening?' I ask, rubbing my chest under my seatbelt. That's the thing about boobs and seatbelts; the seatbelt doesn't stay over your chest so you have to decide between putting it under or over them. I opted for over.

'I was pulling into the service station when this lorry driver pulled out in front of me. We nearly crashed – it's a good job my brakes work.'

We pull into the service station safe and sound.

'There's the prick who nearly made us crash,' Mark points out, as a man hops out of a lorry not too far from us in the car park.

Maybe it's because I'm anxious, stressed or just pissed off, but before I know what I'm doing, I'm getting out of the car and marching over there.

'Roxie, what are you doing? Come back,' Mark calls after me, but I'm too far gone. I march over to the bright-yellow lorry. On the side of it the name 'Starr Haul' is printed in huge black letters, so I take out my phone and begin googling it to try and get a number to call up so I can report this reckless driver to them.

'Oi, what are you doing?' the driver calls out, having glanced back just in time to see me making a note of his registration number.

'I'm reporting you,' I inform him. 'You could've killed us.'

'Could I fuck,' he snaps. 'Get on yer way.'

'What's your name?' I ask him.

'I'm nae telling you,' he replies firmly in his strong Glaswegian accent. 'Here you, Jimmy. You want tae control yer lassie.'

Mark takes me by the arm and whispers into my ear: 'Look, I only understood maybe every fourth word of what he just said but I can tell he's mad, so let's just go.'

I shrug him off. As I peer around the front of the lorry, I can see that the driver has a number plate in his window with his name on: Tommy.

'Tommy, is it?' I say victoriously. 'Jog on, mate. I've got all I need to report you.'

'You'll shut yer gob, or I'll heid yer fella through that windae,' he warns.

'Again,' Mark starts, 'not a clue what he's talking about, but I'm pretty sure he just threatened me, so let's go.'

'Aye, do as yer told,' the big, burly, bald driver says victoriously.

'I ain't doing shit, Shrek,' I snap back, and as I see the anger bubbling up in his brain, I suddenly realise that I've maybe let my temper get the better of me.

Luckily, Mark takes matters into his own hands, picking me up, throwing me over his shoulder and hurrying me into the service station, presumably because he thinks this guy won't kill us in front of people.

Mark plonks me down on a bench.

'Roxie, what is going on with you?' he asks.

'I'm sorry, I know I'm acting out today,' I start. 'I just... I'm so stressed out, I can't think straight. Everything is annoying me.'

'I can tell, but you need to relax. Nothing is worth getting this stressed over.'

'You are worth getting this stressed over,' I tell him honestly. 'I just want your parents to like me.'

'They will love you,' Mark tells me again, pausing between each word to kiss me on the forehead. 'It's a shame we're not at home; having sex with you is the fastest way I know to chill you out.'

I feel my eyebrows shoot up my forehead.

'Which toilets, the ones by KFC or the ones by Greggs?' I ask.

Mark laughs for a few seconds.

‘Oh, God, you’re serious, aren’t you?’

‘Very,’ I reply, biting my lip because I know he can’t resist me when I bite my lip.

‘Oh, my God – fine. If that is what it’s going to take to make you normal again before I introduce you to my parents then I’ll do it; I’ll have sex with you in the toilets.’

‘Aw, babe, you’re so romantic,’ I tease sarcastically. ‘OK, follow me.’

I grab Mark by the hand and lead him over towards the loos. The entrances to both the gents’ and ladies’ are quite busy so, thinking fast, I quickly push Mark into one of the disabled/baby-changing loos next to where we are standing.

‘This is so dirty,’ he tells me as I start kissing him.

‘I know, right? So hot,’ I reply breathlessly.

‘No, I mean literally. It’s so dirty in here; there’s a used nappy on the floor.’

‘Ignore it,’ I demand.

Mark does as I ask, lifting up my dress before picking me up and pinning me against the wall. I wrap my legs tightly around his waist and do my best to keep as quiet as possible – something I always struggle with.

As I feel myself letting go of everything that is making me feel stressed, I feel like myself again. Sadly, along with my stress, I let go of my sense, and as I lean one hand against the wall to steady myself, it gets caught in the orange string hanging from the ceiling. As I absentmindedly shake it off, I pull on it a little too hard, setting off the help alarm.

‘Oh, shit,’ I blurt.

‘Oh, God, what have you done?’ Mark asks, his brain realising a second later. He quickly puts me down and we both begin wrestling our clothes back into the right place as two members of staff burst through the door.

‘It’s not what it looks like,’ I tell them.

Chapter Seven

‘Ten minutes and we’ll be there,’ Mark tells me.

The latter half of our journey has been a little on the quiet side.

‘Good,’ I reply. ‘I cannot wait for this drive to be over.’

‘Is that because you got us banned from a service station?’ he asks.

‘Erm, I think blame is divided 50/50 on that one,’ I insist.

‘We’re lucky we didn’t get arrested,’ he starts, before softening, his face melting into that handsome smile of his. ‘It was pretty funny, though.’

‘Wasn’t it?’ I laugh.

‘But, seriously, my parents aren’t as cool as yours. We can’t be behaving like horny teenagers in front of them.’

‘I know,’ I reply, keeping my cool. I swore to myself that I would calm down and expect the best from people, so that’s what I’m going to do.

‘So, now that we’re actually in the Dales, what do you think?’

‘I think I have no signal,’ I reply, as I lock my phone screen in frustration. But then I look up from my screen and truly take in my surroundings, and it’s beautiful. It’s starting to get dark now that it’s late afternoon, and there are bare trees and frost is creeping up the dry stone walls that line the windy roads.

‘Nice, right?’ Mark says with a smile, obviously seeing the sense of wonderment on my face. ‘And it looks even better in the summer. One minute you can see for miles, the next you’re surrounded by trees in the

depths of a valley.’

‘You were right, it is beautiful.’

‘And this, right here, at the top of this driveway, is the house I grew up in.’

It’s more like a private road than a driveway; my parents have a driveway and it’s just about big enough to fit a Ford Focus on it – not that either of them drives. That’s probably why I never learned. We’re true Londoners, fully able to zip around our little bubble on public transport.

The Wright family driveway is a long stretch of road lined with trees so tall, I feel dizzy glancing up out of my window to try and see the top of them. They’ve lost all of their leaves but the thick trunks are covered with ivy creeping up and around them.

At the top of the driveway, when I finally clap eyes on the house, the picture-perfect scene is complete. Like something fresh out of a rom-com, the large cottage looks like it’s made up of maybe two or three terraced houses knocked into one. It is situated in a large garden that I can imagine full of flowers in the summertime, but as it’s December the only green to see is from the evergreen trees and the ivy creeping up the stone walls, framing the Georgian windows. I can still make out the green of the grass, but things are looking increasingly frosty, and as we step out of the car, the cold hits me like sharp knives all over my body. My black skirt (the longest one I own, because I’ve never been a fan of long skirts – I just feel like they make my chubby thighs seem ten times as wide) is cut just above the knee, so I pull at it in that way I always do to adjust my clothing when I’m self-conscious, in some sort of pointless attempt to try and keep myself warm. Thankfully, I teamed it with a black (yes, you’ve guessed it, black again), off-the-shoulder jumper and a pair of black (are you starting to notice a pattern here?) over-the-knee boots. I realise that, with a four-and-a-half-inch heel, these boots seem impractical, but the fact that they come up to my thigh does mean they keep my legs warm. Anyway, I’ve been wearing heels for so long I can walk in them steadier than I can with bare feet. From the second I slipped on a pair of my mum’s shoes when I was younger, trotting around the house in her size sixes that were much too big for me, I perfected the art, and then, as I grew up, got some pairs of my own and found myself frequently having to dash for

trains in them or try to stay upright when I was tipsy, I really refined the skill. I feel like I could compete in the Olympics in them and totally kick everyone's arses – my complete lack of athleticism aside, obviously.

Outside the house four cars are already parked. As we're taking our overnight bags from Mark's car, a woman rushes out of the house, runs up to Mark and wraps her arms around him.

'Oh, my goodness, come here,' she insists, squeezing him. 'I haven't seen you in so long. Are you even more handsome than the last time I saw you? Is that possible?' she asks with a big grin.

'Nah,' Mark says modestly.

'And this...' she starts, clapping eyes on me. 'This must be Roxie. I had no idea he was bringing you. And look at those boots! I love them.'

As Mark's mum grabs me for a hug, suddenly all of my worries disappear. I should've known that there was no way a kind, funny sweetheart like Mark could have come from a family that was anything less than lovely. It's just such a huge relief.

Finally, releasing me from her warm hug, she turns her attention back to Mark.

'I just popped up to borrow some batteries. This house is always stocked and prepared for whatever the elements have to throw at us; I suppose you have to be like that living in the middle of nowhere. Not that we've ever been so prepared at the pub, but when times get tough, there's always alcohol,' she laughs. 'You heard about the bad weather heading this way?'

'Not really,' Mark says. 'Someone turned the weather forecast off on the drive up here.'

As Mark shoots me a cheeky glance, I feel my face muscles tense up with puzzlement. Luckily, Mark spots that I'm confused straight away, and explains the situation to me.

'Sorry, Roxie, I didn't even think to introduce you. This is my auntie, Gail. She and my uncle own the pub/B&B up the hill.'

'Nice to meet you,' I tell her honestly. She may not be his mum, but she's

lovely. ‘So you’re Mark’s mum’s sister?’

‘Actually, I’m married to Mark’s dad’s brother,’ she explains, giggling to herself. ‘This family stuff is confusing, isn’t it? Just wait until you step inside there and meet everyone. There’s a real houseful; the whole gang has got together, ready for Christmas.’

‘Will you be at dinner tonight?’ Mark asks.

‘Not tonight, love, sorry. Your Uncle Malcolm and I have a lot of guests at the B&B – what with the weather forecast apparently not being so good and all. But maybe you can swing by the pub for lunch tomorrow before you guys head home?’

‘That would be great,’ Mark tells her, hugging her one last time before she hops in her car and heads off down the driveway.

‘So that’s my auntie,’ he tells me. ‘How are we doing do far?’

‘Great,’ I smile.

‘And she loved you!’

‘I hope so,’ I reply, puffing air out of my cheeks. ‘So there’s a house full of people... OK, let’s do this.’

Full of confidence, we grab our bags and head for the front door.

Stepping inside, the first thing I notice is the large, oak staircase that is situated in the centre of the house. If possible, it seems even bigger now that I’m inside and can see that there are rooms to the left, right and back of the staircase deeper into the house. It’s got a nice, homely feel to it, with framed photos all over the walls, shoes lined up neatly in the hallway, coats hung on a rack. You can tell this is a family home, used to accommodating lots of people. It’s got such a warm feel to it – and not just because it smells like they’ve got a nice, warm fire on the go.

‘Hello,’ Mark calls out. ‘I’m home.’

‘Marcus, darling,’ a thin, pristinely dressed sixty-something lady calls out as she rushes into the room. Realising that she’s just as warm as her sister-in-law only goes further in putting me at ease – until she claps eyes on me, and her face falls.

‘Oh, hello,’ she says, in a much more subdued tone.

‘Mum, I want you to meet Roxie. Roxie, this is my mum, Valerie,’ Mark says, making the introductions.

With Valerie not offering me the same hug as Mark’s auntie, I offer her a hand to shake, which she politely accepts.

‘It’s lovely to meet you,’ Valerie says. ‘Unexpected, but lovely.’

‘Yeah, erm, Mark never told me he was surprising you with me,’ I add with an awkward laugh.

‘Well, I’m certainly surprised,’ she says coolly.

‘Where is everyone?’ Mark asks his mum.

‘Family room.’

‘OK, well let’s take this conversation through there. I’ll introduce everyone at the same time.’

Mark ushers me into the family room where I’m greeted by an audience of people who all look equally surprised to see me.

It’s a beautiful, cosy room, with a roaring fire and comfortable-looking corner sofas covered in cushions. Everyone was talking among themselves as we walked into the room, although I can’t help but notice there’s a football match on the TV. Now, all eyes are on me.

‘Everyone, this so Roxie,’ Mark announces. Everyone greets me at once before Mark gets on with the introductions.

‘So you’ve met Valerie, my mum, already,’ he begins, starting to his left before working his way clockwise around the room. ‘Next up is my big sister, Millie, and her husband, Alex. And those two cheeky faces are their twins, Lisa and Louise.’

Alex is wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and he has his jumper tied around his waist for some reason. Sitting there, lounging on the sofa, you’d never guess he was a doctor. Millie, on the other hand, looks very prim and proper, and is dressed much older than I’d imagine she is. She has her shoulder-length, dark-brown hair in a ponytail, and if she’s wearing make-up, I can’t see it.

She's either nailing the natural look or she's just not wearing any. I'd guess the latter, as she has spectacular dark circles under her eyes.

Sitting on the floor are the twins, dressed identically, with identical bows in their hair, playing with identical dolls. I give them both a wave but they just stare at me for a moment. It's weird, but I don't find twins cute, I find them creepy. Especially when their parents insist on making them a mirror image of one another. They're strange-looking girls; I don't quite know how to describe them. They have very miserable faces, like they take no joy from the world. They're almost frowning, although I don't know if that's just because they don't think much of me.

'Nice to meet you all,' I say.

'Then we've got my little sis, Melody. And her boyfriend du jour, Ste.'

'Oi, be nice to your sister,' a man I'm going to guess is Mark's dad ticks him off.

'And my dad, Oscar, obviously,' Mark laughs, slightly embarrassed to have been told off, despite being thirty-two years old.

Mark's dad is an interesting character. Even though he's sitting down I can tell that he's tall and slim. He's surprisingly well-groomed for a sixty-something gentleman, with his dyed dark hair blown back, his beard neatly trimmed, and his outfit of chinos and a shirt looking great, so I'm going to assume his wife dresses him.

If I thought Millie looked like she hadn't been getting enough sleep, then Melody, Mark's little sister, is giving her a run for her money with the dark circles. She's wearing eyeliner and a smoky eye shadow, but I can still tell. She's a skinny girl, with long brown hair that has natural, beachy waves in it. Something my hair, too, does naturally, but ever since I had my lob cut, my hair isn't heavy enough to get away with it, and without the use of heat, I look ridiculous. Ste, her boyfriend, looks older than she does – probably about my age. He's scruffy, and I can tell why Mark didn't give him the warmest introduction. His shaggy brown hair could be described as neither long nor short, just messy and in desperate need of a wash, some dry shampoo or, preferably, some clippers. He's wearing what I'd guess is a band T-shirt, but it's a band I've never heard of, and jeans cut off below the knee.

His look is finished with a pair of Vans that look older than the twins, who I'd guess were about six-ish.

'So, all ten of us are staying here tonight?' Mark enquires excitedly. Even before I met them, I could tell he adored his family, and I think sometimes living so far away from them gets to him.

'Well, give or take a few surprise guests,' his mum jokes, but there's something strange about her that I just can't put my finger on. Despite the warm fire, the room feels positively frosty.

'Well, Roxie coming with me isn't the only surprise we have for you, Mark teases, placing a loving arm around me.

Mark's mum jumps up from her seat.

'Oh, my God, you're pregnant,' she shrieks. It's definitely not a happy shriek, it's a distressed one.

I instinctively place my hands on my stomach. I know I had a big dinner last night, but I didn't think I looked pregnant.

Melody drops her empty mug to the floor and the twins both stare at me, suddenly interested in the grown-up conversation.

'What? No!' Mark laughs. 'We're engaged.'

'What?' his mum snaps.

OK, this is neither the reaction I hoped for nor expected. Not one person seems happy about this news. Mark doesn't really take their disappointment on board, but I can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices.

'Congratulations,' his dad chirps up. 'Is there a ring we can all gush over?'

I offer my hand to his dad to examine.

'Good God, son,' he gasps. 'Spending your inheritance so soon? It's a beauty, though.'

Mark ushers me towards a space on the sofa so we can sit down. It's weird, to have the entire room's attention, but for no one to be saying a word.

'Well, thank you for having me,' I tell them, to try and hit home just how

well-mannered I am.

‘Well, we didn’t know we were having you, but you’re here now so we’ll make the best of it,’ Valerie tells me.

‘The best of it’? Surely she means ‘the most of it’? ‘The most of it’ sounds like taking the opportunity to get to know their future daughter-in-law, but ‘the best of it’ sounds like she’s just going to try and make the best of a bad situation.

‘Are you both staying for Christmas then?’ Val asks.

I feel my eyebrows shoot up a mile above my forehead.

‘No, mum, I told you I was spending it in London, and that this was just going to be a flying visit.’

‘I just thought with your bringing Roxie here, maybe you were both spending it here.’

‘No, we’re going to travel back home tomorrow. Is my bedroom ready?’ Mark asks, oblivious to any weirdness. ‘We might go dump our stuff in there.’

‘Erm, actually, your bedroom is taken,’ his mum informs him. ‘So we put you in the study.’

‘Oh, OK,’ Mark replies, sounding a little disappointed. ‘Well, I might pop up and show Roxie my old room quickly.’

‘OK, Marcus,’ his mum replies.

As Mark leads me out of the room by the hand, everyone else stays relatively silent. Am I being oversensitive here, or is Mark just completely missing how cold and odd this reception is?

‘Your family seem... quiet,’ I say honestly as we walk up the stairs.

‘Yeah, a little perhaps, but I did just drop quite the surprise on them.’

‘Hmm, if only you’d had someone warn you about what a terrible idea that was, Marcus,’ I tease sarcastically.

‘OK, you were right,’ he laughs as we reach the landing. ‘But I don’t think

it's just that. They're a little wary of outsiders.'

'Your sister's boyfriend is an outsider; it doesn't sound like he's been on the scene for long,' I argue.

'Ste is a lot of things, but he's not an outsider. I don't mean in the family, I mean in the village. We're a very small community – there are, like, three families – everyone knows everyone. We don't like people from Skipton, let alone fancy London folk.'

Mark says the last part of the sentence in a weird, old-timey accent, which I don't really get. I also don't have a clue where Skipton is, but unless it's another planet, I don't see why people should find it so weird when outsiders visit. I mean, the Dales is a tourist attraction, for crying out loud. They should be encouraging outsiders, not chasing them away with torches and pitchforks.

'Give them time; they'll come around,' he says with a smile. Yep, that smile. I'm powerless to do anything but believe him.

'OK,' I reply, hopefully convincing him but barely convincing myself.

'OK, let's show you my bedroom,' he says, as he reaches for the door.

'Does everyone stay here at Christmas?' I ask curiously.

'Yeah, my parents take it really seriously. The village is small, but we're all quite spread out. It's quite a trek between houses, so at Christmas, everyone just stays here. That way no one needs to worry about drinking too much and having to drive or hike home,' he laughs.

'How many bedrooms are there?' I ask nosily. 'To sleep ten people...'

Mark pauses in his room to answer my question.

'Four. My parents in their room, Mel and Ste in her old room, Alex and Millie in her old room, and I'm guessing the twins will be taking my old room, which is why we're in dad's study. It's cool, though; I think you'll like it. Dad fancies himself as a writer and he's a big reader, so you'll love it.'

'Cool,' I reply. 'Let's see your room then.'

Mark opens the door and wanders inside with me following closely behind him.

Mark's room looks exactly as he left it, like some kind of shrine to the one and only son in the family. It's exactly as I imagined it to be, weirdly enough. It's decorated in dark blue and white, with Leeds UTD memorabilia scattered everywhere. You can tell he was sporty and cool growing up, and there are photos of his family and his obviously massive circle of friends everywhere you look – unlike me, with my tiny number of living relatives and small number of friends from school because everyone thought I was a theatre nerd with wacky parents. You can tell from all the photos that Mark adores all of his people, and that just makes me love him all the more.

'So this is what a cool kid's room looks like?' I tease.

'Yeah, take it all in, nerd,' he teases, wrapping his arms around me as he pulls me down onto his bed. He's joking, of course, but the sad fact is that there's no way Mark would have looked twice at me when we were at school.

'Erm, *you're* calling *me* a nerd?' I squeak in disbelief. 'The shoe is on the other foot these days, isn't it?'

'Maybe,' he laughs, hugging me tightly. 'I think we're both a bit nerdy; that's why we get on so well.'

I smile sweetly at him before jokily taking him down a peg or two.

'No way, buddy. You're the one who spends double-digits' worth of hours on video games every week.'

'Fine, fine,' he admits. 'Just let me tell you a story about when I was cool to try and redeem myself.'

'Go for it,' I reply, just happy to be in his arms and out of the awkwardness of the living room.

'You see that window over there?' he asks. I nod my head. 'Well, when I wanted to sneak out at night to hang out with my friends, that's how I'd get out. We'd take it in turns at making trips to the nearest town to buy cheap vodka drinks – Kapops they were called; I don't even know if you can still buy them. Anyway, I'd climb out of that window and land on the roof of the study, and then jump off there, trying to land in the bushes in the back garden.'

I can't help but laugh.

'And you see my wardrobe over there? Well, when my parents moved in here and had work done on the house, they had these wardrobes fitted into the walls. It might look like it's only as big as the two doors, but it's actually double the length. Whoever built it must have realised the left half would be inaccessible, so they just boarded half of it off. I realised this long before my parents did, so it was like a secret room where I could hide myself, or... things, when I was a teenager.'

'Oh, you rebel! But I'll bet you weren't that bad. Your mum clearly adores you. I'd better be careful, or she won't let you go back to London,' I joke. 'She'll keep you here and I'll be the first person she gets rid of.'

Mark laughs before leaning forward to give me a kiss on the lips.

'We need to move,' he warns me. 'This is dangerous.'

'What do you mean?' I ask innocently.

'You know what I mean,' he laughs. 'I mean you are incapable of giving anyone a peck on the lips; you go nought to Frenching in about two seconds. Don't think I didn't feel that tongue.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'OK, come on then, show me the study.'

We both hop to our feet and Mark leads me down the big staircase, in the opposite direction to the family room, to the back of the house where the study is. He's right – this room does appeal to me. Very much, in fact.

The walls that face out into the back garden are entirely made of glass, which makes the beautiful view really easy to take in, but I notice that it has thick, black blinds for blocking out the sun or creating some privacy. The other three walls are covered with that wallpaper that looks like books on endless shelves, which I love. I do love to read and, thankfully, there are several shelves full of different and interesting-looking books. When Mark falls asleep tonight, I can't wait to sit up late and have a flick through them all, see if I can find some inspiration for this article I'm supposed to write before the week is out. I still don't have a clue what I'm going to write about, but it

needs to be something good. When I first started writing my lifestyle column, I went to the actual library for inspiration, looking in the lifestyle section to see if anything stood out to me as especially interesting. What I found was a book of manners and etiquette for young ladies, written in the 1920s. It was so strange reading about the importance of not wearing an overcoat indoors, or asking how much things cost, or how you must always eat soup from the side of the spoon or you'll never get a husband. Hopefully I'll find something here that will inspire something.

There's a large desk over by the door with a fairly dated-looking PC on top.

'Is there Wi-Fi here?' I ask.

'It's an old cottage in the Dales, not the Hilton,' he laughs. 'But we do have a wired internet connection, so, if you really need it, you can whip the cable out of my dad's PC and plug it into your Mac.'

'That would be great, thank you.'

The only other thing of any significance in the room is the pop-up double bed in the centre. It's a good job it's a double, because with the twins sleeping in Mark's room and his family having no idea I was coming, there wouldn't have been anywhere for me to sleep otherwise.

I sit down on the bed, only for it to creak under me.

'This doesn't sound too healthy,' I giggle.

'Oh, it's fine. It's been our trusty spare bed for a long time and it hasn't let us down yet.'

'I like how you say "yet",' I laugh.

'Hey, you brought PJs, right?' Mark asks.

'Buddy, you've known me for a year now. Have you ever once seen me wear PJs?'

'I'll grab you an old T-shirt from my room that you can sleep in,' he concludes. 'Just because we're down here, if you need to go to the loo or whatever, you don't want to be dashing around the house naked.'

'Sure,' I reply. I don't usually like to sleep in anything, but it's just one night,

so it's not really a big deal.

'OK, let's go find out what's for dinner,' Mark says excitedly. 'The stuff you make is awesome, but you can't beat your mum's cooking, can you?'

'I imaging you mean mums generally, because a primary school kid could beat my mum's cooking,' I joke.

'She gets points for creativity, though,' Mark insists.

'Oh, yeah,' I reply. 'It's definitely creative, putting baked beans in spaghetti Bolognese.'

Back in the living room, things are still a little quiet so I decide to make the first move.

'You guys have a lovely house,' I tell Valerie and Oscar.

'Thank you, we're very proud of it,' Oscar replies. He's beaming with pride and I can tell he means it.

'I love the rug,' I say, directing my praise at Valerie, but it's Mark's dad who takes the credit for it.

'Thank you, I picked it up on holiday in Iran. Val wasn't sure, but I told her it was exactly what this room needed. We're going for a sort of rural-meets-Middle Eastern look.'

'He has all these big ideas,' Val adds with an annoyed shake of her head. 'The rest of us have to put up with his phases.'

'Well, I really like it,' I say with a smile. Oscar seems delighted with my compliment so at least I have one person warming to me – only seven to go.

'You're looking really brown,' Mel observes, staring at Mark. 'You been on holiday since I saw you last?'

'We haven't seen him in a while – he might have,' Val chimes in, glancing over at me. Does she think it's my fault?

'It's only been a couple of months,' Mark laughs.

When I first got together with Mark, in the early days, when he would visit his family it was too soon to introduce me to them; but then everything

happened so quickly, and the last couple of times he's visited, I couldn't go with him because I had work, and trying to get time off from Kath is about as difficult as trying to get a smile out of my future mother-in-law.

'Maybe he's been using fake tan,' Millie laughs.

'Oh, obviously,' Mark replies sarcastically. 'You got me.'

'Remember when we used to dress him up in girls' clothing and call him Mary?' Mel reminisces.

'Yes! That was almost as funny as the time we caught him using one of my lipsticks,' she cackles.

'OK, ha-ha, we get it, now shut up,' Mark whinges. It's strange, seeing him in this context, surrounded by his family, with his mum fussing over him and sisters winding him up. My smart, sexy fiancé suddenly seems like a kid again.

As I shuffle in my seat, I adjust my skirt as subtly as possible. Despite being my longest skirt, it still rides up a little when I sit down.

'You can't be comfortable in all that gear,' Val says, her face scrunched up at my taste in fashion – or lack thereof.

'Oh, I'm fine, thank you. I work for a website; they encourage us to be quite cool and fashion-forwards,' I explain.

'The boots are hot,' Mel compliments me.

'They're a death trap, is what they are,' Val chimes in. 'I hate to see young ladies in shoes they can't walk in.'

'Me, too,' I agree, although I think she was talking about me. We've been over this, though: if there's only one thing I can do, it's remain upright in heels.

'Did you bring other clothes?' Val asks.

'Erm, no,' I reply, awkwardly. I didn't think this outfit would be a problem.

'It's just not exactly appropriate to the area,' she explains. Well, sort of explains – I'm not really sure what she's getting at.

‘Because of the weather? Oh, I’ll be fine,’ I assure her. ‘It’s so nice and warm in here, and Mark’s car is always toasty and warm with the heated seats. I’ll make it back home alive.’

Mark’s mum gives me a nod of acknowledgement.

‘Well, I’m going to make dinner. Melody, Mildred, if you wouldn’t mind helping me,’ she asks as she heads for the door.

‘Is there anything I can do to help?’ I call after her.

‘No, but thank you. You’re the guest of honour; you just stay here and enjoy the football.’

As the three women shuffle off to the kitchen, leaving me here with the men and the kids, I couldn’t feel more uncomfortable. If I know women, and I think I do having been one for my entire life, I’ll bet they’re going to the kitchen to talk about me, and I can’t imagine it will be favourably. God, I wish Mark had warned them he was bringing me. Everyone is looking at me like I don’t belong here, and with the engagement announcement going down like a lead balloon, I don’t think I could feel any more awkward.

It’s just one night, that’s all I need to remember. Tomorrow morning I can get up, dressed, hit the road and make it home in time to spend Christmas in my own home. It will all be over soon, and anyway, it’s not like things could get any worse now, is it?

Chapter Eight

Just as I imagined, the Wright family dining room is quaint, cute and very country. With the exposed oak beams that are commonplace throughout the house, the cute plaid curtains that hang around the Georgian windows and a second beautiful stone fireplace with another warm, roaring fire on the go, the room is picture-perfect – like every inch of this house.

As someone who is often too cold, the heat from the fireplaces is very welcome. With exposed stone walls and floors, my only criticism of this place would be the fact that it is so cold in here when you aren't in a room with a fire. The radiators do help a little, but in the corridors where they have merged the houses into one big one, they haven't installed a radiator, and those parts of the house seem very chilly indeed.

The family all start pouring into the room, seating themselves at the table ready for dinner to be served. The smell of cooking has filled the house and caused the windows to steam up – not that it matters; now that it is dark outside, you can't see a thing. Not so much as a wall at the end of the garden, a street light or a glimmer of civilisation.

It's a large, round, wooden table, sort of like the kind I'd imagine a séance taking place at. Someone dig out an Ouija board and let's all join hands and see if we can bring some life to this party.

With everyone seated at the table, with the exception of Mark's mum, who is dashing back and forth between this room and the kitchen, carrying through serving dishes, and the twins, who are sitting together at a small, kids' table, Mark notices something.

‘Mum’s set nine places,’ he observes, puzzled.

‘So what?’ Mel asks.

Millie is busying herself pouring lemonade for everyone, in full-blown, mumsy mode, taking care of the adults as she would the kids. Ste is playing some game on his phone, occasionally calling out ‘yes!’ like a teenage boy, and the rest of the menfolk are debriefing the football match they’ve just finished watching, like real manly men do – no one else seems concerned by the extra place set at the table.

‘So, there are only eight of us, Einstein,’ he replies mockingly, in that harsh tone everyone seems to speak to their siblings in. I sometimes wish I’d had a brother or sister when I was growing up, but then I realise that being an only child meant I got one hundred per cent of the attention and one hundred per cent of the present money at Christmas, and I appreciated all of that – typical, selfish only child thing to say, though, right?

My writer’s mind races, wondering about why on earth there is another place set. I hope it’s not some kind of weird gesture where they set a place for a relative that has passed away – or maybe my educated guess has been ushered in a very dark direction by my musings about this table.

‘That’s because we’ve got *another* guest,’ Val informs him, placing a casserole dish on the table. ‘An old friend who’s in town to visit their parents, but whose parents missed their flight back... You know I like to help out in a crisis.’

I can’t help but notice that Val is very, very careful not to use any words that might give away the gender of the mystery guest in question and this worries me greatly.

‘Who?’ Mark asks. I can tell by the look on his face that he really doesn’t have a clue who it could be.

‘Me, silly,’ a voice squeaks from the doorway. Mark and I immediately jolt our heads to the left to see who it is.

‘Bea,’ Mark blurts, his voice wavering a little.

Hovering in the doorway is a tall, skinny brunette. Probably about my age,

but that is about all we have in common. She's enviably tall – about 5' 9" in the flat Timberlands she's wearing (so basically the same height as I am in these 4" heels) – slim, yet toned (like an Amazonian), and her long, straight-brown hair makes me instantly regret chopping mine so short. She's wearing a long, floral skirt and a peach blouse with a bow tied perfectly around her perfectly formed neck. Maybe it's a northern thing, but Bea is yet another female wearing minimal make-up. I, on the other hand, am essentially a walking kohl eyeliner covered in glitter at this stage.

As Mark looks over to his mum for an explanation, I see a side of him I haven't seen before: he looks scared. Mark is my superhero, unafraid, the ultimate mugging deterrent and a master squasher of moths (although I know he'd much prefer to set them free out of the window if I'd let him, but I won't – don't look at me like that, they'll just fly back in). Right now, he looks like a scared little boy, not my big, hulking hero of a man.

'Aren't you going to say hello?' she asks him with a smile. 'It's been a long time, hasn't it?'

'It has.'

Mark's replies are notably subdued. He's usually so warm and friendly with everyone, but he's looking at Bea like she's the last ghost he wanted summoning this evening.

'Well, give me a hug then,' she demands, a flirtatious little giggle rounding off her sentence.

Mark does as requested, breaking quickly to offer his mum a hand.

'Mum, let me give you a hand with the plates.'

'They're all here, my love.'

'No, you missed some,' he insists, practically dragging her off to the kitchen.

As Bea takes a seat at the table next to me, I get the feeling that this is bad – really bad.

'You must be Roxie,' she says, offering me her hand.

'Hi,' I reply.

‘I have actually heard a lot about you,’ she tells me, pouring herself a glass of lemonade from the jug on the table.

How nice for her. I haven’t heard a thing about her.

Apart from the chatter coming from the twins, the room is pretty much silent, everyone’s eyes on us, waiting to see how this plays out. I feel like everyone knows something I don’t...

‘We can get to know each other properly tonight, seeing as how I’m staying here. Mum and Dad are in the south of France but their flight back has been cancelled. That’s cool, though – it means we can swap notes.’

‘Yeah,’ I reply with a polite smile. Wait, what? ‘Sorry, notes on what? Are you a writer, too?’ I ask.

‘Oh, God, no,’ she replies quickly, with an offensive cackle. ‘I’m a doctor. I work with Alex, as a matter of fact.’

Of course she’s a doctor, and of course she’s big buddies with everyone here. This girl is perfect in every way – of course she has the ultimate, selfless, smart, perfect human job. She’s probably curing cancer while I’m writing step-by-step guides on how to take dick pics (FYI: step one is ‘don’t do it’ and step two is ‘I’m not kidding, don’t do it’. Step three is ‘OK, if you insist, these are the best angles...’ – the jury is still out on whether I’m changing the world or not).

‘Swap notes on Mark, silly,’ she corrects me. ‘I’m his ex.’

As all of the pieces of the puzzle smash into me, full force, before falling neatly into place, I mentally kick myself for not seeing this one coming. Of course this perfect thing is his ex. Of course she’s everything I’m not. And – of course – she’s staying the night.

Mark and his mum walk back into the room, a fraught silence between them as they take their seats at the table.

‘Let’s serve this before things get cold,’ Val insists, taking the lids off all of the dishes.

As I take stock of what is on the table, I feel my stomach twist into knots, as though to tell me: ‘I ain’t letting you put any of this stuff in me, doll. No

way!’

Mark and I exchange a glance. Sometimes, he says more with his eyes than he does with his mouth – in typical male form. The look he’s giving me right now is both apologetic and reassuring. As he squeezes my hand under the table, I watch as he softens.

‘Mmm, this smells good,’ he announces, sounding like he’s trying to build a bridge with his mum. I don’t know how their conversation played out in the kitchen, but I imagine he was furious with her for inviting his ex to stay while he was here – especially with me being here, too.

‘Thank you,’ Val replies. ‘The sausages are from the farm up the hill. The field with these pigs in is the one our garden backs on to, so this isn’t the first time we’ve seen them,’ she laughs. ‘We’ve got black pudding, mashed turnip and lots and lots of gravy.’

Pig neighbours, blood and turnips, all swilled in gravy. I can’t think of anything worse. And I don’t suppose there’s a McDonald’s around here...

‘Mmm, sounds great,’ Bea gushes. Ergh, fine, if that’s how I’m supposed to play it.

‘Erm...’

‘Oh, my God, Roxie, I totally spaced – mum, Roxie is a vegetarian.’

‘Oh,’ Val says, obviously not approving of my lifestyle choices.

‘It’s fine, really,’ I tell her. ‘The veg looks amazing.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Mark says again. ‘It just completely slipped my mind.’

‘I suppose I could go and make you an omelette,’ Val starts, although I’m not entirely convinced she means it.

‘Honestly, it’s fine.’

‘Do you want some ketchup?’ Mark asks me, before turning to his mum. ‘Do we have ketchup, Mum? Roxie has it with pretty much everything.’

My caring, considerate boyfriend is doing his best to make me feel at home, but in the process, a few sniggers are tittered in my direction. Probably because I seem like a fussy child.

‘There’s some at the kids’ table,’ she replies, blatantly unimpressed. Thank God I didn’t ask about McDonald’s.

I can feel Bea’s eyes on me as I sip my drink. Instinctively I turn my head to meet her gaze and she smiles at me.

‘So you’re a writer,’ Bea says as she cuts her food.

‘I am,’ I reply, staring down at my own plate, wondering how I’m going to eat even one mouthful of this. ‘A journalist.’

‘Ooh, that’s cool,’ she replies. ‘So you do, like, investigative pieces? Uncovering the truth? Exposing corrupt politicians?’

This chick has watched too many movies.

I swallow a mouthful of turnip.

‘Well, I’m a lifestyle journalist,’ I explain. ‘So I mostly just tell people how to live their lives.’

I laugh. So does Mark. No one else does.

‘Roxie is a brilliant writer,’ Mark gushes. ‘So funny and so smart. She writes for one of the biggest alternative news sites in the world.’

‘What is an alternative news site?’ Ste chimes in curiously. With most of the party chatting among themselves, I didn’t realise anyone other than Bea, Mark and Val were listening. Val, I’ve noticed, listens very carefully to every word I say, chewing over every syllable like it’s the next-door neighbour’s pig.

‘We cater to a younger demographic, so we present the news in a way that they’re more likely to respond to. Often, if we make it funny, people will absorb heavy news they otherwise wouldn’t be interested in. It’s also easier to get them to take advice in that way, but mostly, I just like making people smile when they read what I’ve written.’

‘Well, I think that’s great,’ Bea chimes in. ‘I sometimes wish I’d taken on a more carefree job, like writing, one where nothing really mattered and I had no stress. If you’re making people smile, good for you. Sometimes I will literally save someone’s life and I won’t get a smile, but look at you – that’s great.’

I smile, even though it seems like she's putting my job down to my face.

'What does everyone else do?' I ask the room, shifting the focus from myself.

'My job has always been raising my family,' Valerie explains. 'And that's what Millie is doing. It's important to be there for your kids.'

'Definitely,' Millie echoes.

'I agree,' Bea agrees. 'When I start my family, I'll give up work.'

I gulp down another mouthful of my dinner, although I seem no closer to clearing my plate.

'Really?' I ask. 'After all that time and hard work studying to become a doctor, you'd give it up?'

'You're not going to give up your job to raise your family?' Bea asks me with surprise in her voice, seeing my question and raising me another.

All eyes are on me again.

'I'm just focusing on the wedding at the moment,' I reply tactfully.

Valerie rests her cutlery down for a second.

'I'll help you with wedding planning,' she tells me.

'Oh, that's OK,' I insist.

'No, no, I insist. Then you have more time to worry about more important things.'

'Well, I mean, we haven't even set a date yet,' I babble. Well, we haven't, we haven't had time, but it's probably best to play it safe and make it seem like we're going to have such a long engagement, there's no need to start planning just yet.

I smile, safe in the knowledge I'll wiggle out of that one somehow. It's not that I don't appreciate her offering; it's just that, not only do I think our tastes clash a little, but I don't really feel like she cares too much about what I'd want. Planning a wedding with her sounds like it would be hard work, and there's also a strong possibility I would get pushed into making choices I absolutely did not want to make.

I notice Val and Bea exchange a glance across the table. I don't know what it means, but it makes me uncomfortable.

'I think it's pretty cool, what you do, Roxie,' Ste says, jumping to my defence.

'Thank you,' I reply. 'What do you do?'

'I'm an actor,' he tells me. As he does, I see Mark's dad roll his eyes. Ste ignores this. 'Mostly theatre.'

'Oh, cool,' I reply. 'My parents have always worked in and around theatres, so I've been brought up around it.'

'I love the theatre,' Mark's dad chimes in. 'I'd be interested to know more about what your parents do.'

'Sure...'

'I've just finished a run in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,' Ste says excitedly, cutting me off.

'That's awesome,' I reply. 'What part did you play?'

'Ha,' Oscar butts in.

'Well, I played a tree,' he explains. 'But I was on stage for, like, the entire play. And I got a laugh at one point.'

'He fell,' Oscar laughs. 'Everyone laughed their heads off.'

'I was great,' Ste protests.

'You were wooden,' Oscar replies. 'And not even in the way you were supposed to be. When you fell, you crumpled like a tissue.'

'Well, it beats shoving my hand up cows all day,' Ste snaps.

I feel my eyes widen.

'No talk of such things at the dinner table, Stephen,' Valerie insists, before turning to me. 'Oscar was a vet, until he retired.'

'Oh, cool,' I reply.

'Melody is a student; she's studying to be a nursery nurse, and Alex is a

doctor, as you know. It's interesting how all three of my kids have gravitated towards helping children, isn't it?

I nod in agreement.

I push down a few more mouthfuls of dinner, finally making a dent in my plate, but there's no way I can clear it. I'll just have to insist I'm not a big eater, and hope that Mark doesn't correct me.

I glance at my watch.

'Are we boring you?' Bea chuckles.

I don't know what I take issue with more: that she's drawing attention to me like this, or that she's talking like she's one of the family and I'm not. I mean, I'm not, not yet, but neither is she.

'I was just thinking about how dark it is for quarter to seven,' I tell her.

I was actually thinking 'holy fuck, it's only quarter to seven – this is going to be the longest night of my life'.

'I'll be putting the kids to bed soon,' Millie chimes. 'Let's play a game. I brought that one with me that you asked me to, Valerie. Oh, but it's only for couples,' she says disappointedly, 'and we have an odd number now.'

For a moment, I replay her words in my head. We do have an odd number since Bea turned up, but then it occurs to me that no one knew I was coming. If neither of us had 'unexpectedly' turned up, there would still be an odd number, which leads me to the conclusion that Val knew Bea would be here, making an even number for the game she insisted Millie bring with her.

'What game?' Mark asks.

'Mr & Mrs,' Millie says excitedly.

Of course it is.

'I'll just watch,' Bea insists. 'I'm used to being the single girl. And watching will be interesting.'

Val smiles at her.

'That's very sweet of you, Bea. What a good sport. And I can't imagine

you'll be single for long, a catch like you.'

As much as I want to run off to the study and opt out of playing games, my absence would be filled by Bea, who would be teaming up with *my* fiancé, and I can't let that happen. How weird would that be, being on a Mr & Mrs team with your ex?!

'OK,' Val says excitedly with a rub of her hands. 'Let's get this table cleared, get the kettle on and then get this game started.'

Everyone jumps into action, moving plates and making space, while Millie takes the kids off to bed. A seven o'clock bedtime – is that a normal bedtime for a pair of six-year-olds? My parents never imposed a bedtime on me, and I turned out just fine, right?

'This is going to be interesting,' Bea whispers to me. 'Good luck.'

'Thanks, but I won't need it,' I reply. 'Mark is my specialist subject.'

'You never know how well you know a person until you compete in a game with them – and you know how competitive our Mark can be.'

He's 'our' Mark, is he? I'm not sure if that's a statement made to make me feel uncomfortable, or just a Yorkshire thing, to claim ownership of a person if you know them. But one thing I am certain of: she doesn't know how competitive I can be, too.

Chapter Nine

‘What was Valerie wearing the day you met her?’ Bea quizzes Oscar.

‘Easy,’ he replies confidently. ‘A cream dress with a beige mohair coat and black ankle boots.’

I feel my eyes widen at the level of detail he remembers. I’m not sure Mark could remember such a detail about me, were it not a fancy dress party we met at. Lucky for me, my outfit was very memorable and it’s an easy point – it’s a shame it’s not our question.

Valerie turns around the board she has written her answer on, proving that Oscar is correct.

‘Nice!’ Bea beams, the bright, brilliant hostess that she is. ‘Next question is for Melody. What is Ste’s favourite part of your body?’

‘This one is easy,’ Ste replies as he writes the correct answer on his board.

We’re all gathered in the family room, playing Mr & Mrs. It’s me and Mark vs Valerie and Oscar vs Melody and Ste vs Alex and Millie – four teams, and only one thing to play for: the smugness of being the couple that knows each other the best. There are two sofas in the room that both wrap around corners, so each couple has their own side of the sofa to occupy. Bea, who has taken on the role of quizmaster, is sitting on the floor by the fire.

‘OK, Mel, your answer please,’ Bea insists.

‘My big, brown eyes,’ she says with confidence.

‘Seriously?’ Ste asks, disappointed. ‘It’s not your eyes, it’s your soul.’

He turns around his card to reveal that this is what he's written, and while I'm sure his intentions were good, I cringe.

'Right,' Bea laughs. 'OK, Alex, your question about Millie: people and pets aside, what makes your partner the happiest?'

Alex thinks this over as Millie writes the correct answer on her board.

As they go through the motions of the game, I wonder about how I would answer these questions about Mark, and how he would answer them about me. What we were wearing on the day we met is easy: my Harley Quinn outfit and his Joker costume were not only memorable, but we have the pictures from *Bacci* magazine on our wall at home to serve as a constant reminder. My favourite part of Mark's body is also an easy question to answer – it's his smile. He's got a face that was just made to be happy. When Mark is happy, his smile lights up the whole room and it's seriously contagious. What is Mark's favourite part of my body? Easy. When I'm standing in front of the mirror, fretting about my short legs, squishy tummy and chubby cheeks, he'll walk up behind me, slip his arms around my body and tell me to stop finding fault with myself. He'll tell me that he loves the curve of my waist, how smooth my skin feels, and that his favourite things of all are my eyes. He says he gets lost in the blue of them, and he reckons that when I'm happy, they get brighter, shifting from teal to sapphire in colour. I'm not sure I believe him, but he says it like he means it. And finally, what makes Mark the happiest? As you'd expect, it's a toss-up between football and video games and, given his answer during our game of 'Would You Rather', I can safely say that football makes him happiest. What makes me happiest? Probably Mark, as sad as that sounds. I'm just so unbelievably happy with him.

'Come on then, Alex,' Bea prompts. 'What makes Millie happy?'

'Rainbows,' Alex answers.

We all look to Millie, to see what she's written on her board. Surely no one in their thirties could be so impossibly sickly sweet...

As she flips her board around, we can all see that she's written the word 'rainbows' in the most elaborate, swirly, almost illegible handwriting. I would probably double-check with her that this was in fact what she had

written, were it not for the huge rainbow she's drawn above it, complete with what I'd imagine is a pot of gold at the end (but it looks more like a bowl of cereal – or maybe I'm just super starving because I didn't eat my dinner).

'Correct,' Bea chimes, marking them a point on the scoreboard. 'You are all so good at this!'

'It was that or unicorns,' Alex adds, smiling wide after this little victory.

'Well, I do love unicorns,' she replies, 'but it's definitely rainbows because...'

They exist?

'...they're just way more colourful than unicorns.'

'Lame,' Mark heckles his sister.

Finally, it's time for me to answer a question about Mark.

'OK, Roxie. Your first question about Mark: what was the name of his high-school form teacher?'

'Oh, come on,' Mark interjects. 'There's no way Roxie could know that.'

'I know that,' Bea giggles.

'You know that because you went to school with me,' he replies. 'Come on, ask another one.'

'Don't be a sore loser, Marcus,' his mum chimes in. 'Bea is pulling the questions out at random; you'll answer what you're asked.'

'It's fine,' I tell him. 'I'll just pass on this one – we'll pick up the points on other questions.'

'No, Valerie, she's right. Let me pull out a different one – games are supposed to be fun, after all. What was Mark's favourite TV show growing up?' she asks.

'She's not going to know that one either, is she?' he complains.

'I do,' she says again. '*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. You loved them. He still has so much Turtles stuff in his bedroom, you know,' she tells me.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I assure Mark, squeezing his hand. ‘Honestly.’

As Mark backs down, he wraps an arm around me and holds me close.

I can tell when he’s in protective mode; it’s nice to have him looking out for me.

As we fire through rounds of questions, each of our competitors gains point after point for correct answers. I learn that Oscar’s favourite film is *Pretty Woman*. Ste didn’t learn the alphabet until he was seven. Alex is inexplicably scared of ducks. Valerie’s first crush was Donny Osmond, who, coincidentally, Oscar wanted to be when he grew up. Mel’s nickname at school was Melody Pop, because she was always whistling when she was a kid and, most surprisingly of all, Alex and Millie actually met in a nightclub – and she was there with her boyfriend. I’m all for true love conquering all, but if Mark had been with someone else when I met him, and I had stolen him from her, I would never rest, because I’d know that he was stealable. If you take in a stray dog that has run away from home, you’d be naturally cautious about getting too close to it, because the second you leave your front door open, that dog is going to bolt the first time it sees something it wants. Not that I’m comparing Millie to a dog.

Unsurprisingly, Valerie and Oscar are in the lead – but they’ve got thirty-five years of marriage on their side, so obviously they know each other very well – and both Mel and Millie are pretty much neck and neck with each other, along with their significant others. Mark and I, however, are absolutely bombing. We’ve only got a couple of questions right about each other because, so far, we’ve had way too many questions about each other’s lives before we met. We’ve hardly had any about our relationship, or what kind of things we like/don’t like *now*. Annoyingly, Bea has known the answer to every single question about Mark.

‘OK, Mark. Here’s a question for you about Roxie,’ Bea starts. ‘What annoys you the most about Roxie?’

Even though this isn’t yet another question about each other’s childhoods that we couldn’t possibly know the answer to, it’s one that’s impossible to get right. Sure, we might both give the same answer, but surely any kind of critique from your partner is going to be impossible to hear without taking it

to heart. Is finding out exactly what I do to annoy Mark really worth a point?

‘Got it,’ he answers, a little too quickly for my liking.

‘Oh, OK,’ I babble, writing something down.

If there is one thing Mark is always telling me, it’s that I should worry less about things, and trust him more when he tells me that everything is going to be OK, so I write that down. Like when I was worrying about meeting his family, all day every day, from the second I found out I was going to have to meet them, to date. Mark was constantly assuring me that everything was going to be OK, and that I shouldn’t worry so much. I imagine when you have Mark’s easy faith in people that it must be really annoying to deal with a glass-half-empty kind of girl like me. Well, I say that, but it’s not so much that my glass is half empty, more like I dropped it, smashed it into a million pieces and tried to glue it all back together, but, hard as I’ve tried to mend it, it’s full of cracks and holes where water leaks out constantly, meaning I have to keep refilling it just to keep water in it at all – oh God, listen to me, I’ve definitely hit upon the right answer here.

‘So, what’s your answer?’ Bea asks.

‘It’s the fact that...’ Mark pauses a moment, obviously trying to refine his wording in the most tactful way possible. ‘Sometimes, I wish you wouldn’t say the first thing that pops into your head.’

‘Huh?’ I reply, blindsided a little by his surprise answer.

‘Sometimes, you say the first thing that pops into you head,’ he repeats, making his answer no clearer. ‘You don’t have the best filter.’

‘Example?’ I demand, cool and calm, but like a dog with a bone now.

‘The first time I introduced you to one of my colleagues, as you were shaking his hand you said: “Wow, you are the most ginger person I’ve ever met”.’

I cock my head as I think that day over.

‘So what? I told him it looked awesome.’

‘You told him that you found a ginger... hair on my body once, and that you named him Tony.’

I laugh. Fond memories of that night. I like how he paused mid sentence to try and make sure he worded it in a way that meant it could be anywhere on his body, but only making it even more obvious that I found it somewhere intimate.

‘Now who’s blurting out the first thing that pops into their head?’ I ask, proving that we all do it sometimes.

‘Now, now,’ Bea mediates. ‘Let’s not fall out over a silly game. The fact that you’re in last place is no reflection on your relationship at all.’

For a supposedly reassuring statement, it feels an awful lot like she is implying the opposite.

‘We all find things annoying about our partners. Like, do you remember, Mark, when we were together and you used to find it so annoying when I would buy you presents all the time? Like “oh my gosh, woman, stop spoiling me rotten, it’s so annoying”.’

‘Yeah, that sounds awful,’ I reply, deadpan.

‘I know that was supposed to be the last question, but come on, give them one more,’ Oscar reasons. ‘They have had bad luck with the questions.’

Awesome – Oscar is petitioning to get us a pity point. I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t think one point is going to turn the outcome of this quiz around for us, somehow.

‘OK,’ Bea replies, mercifully. ‘One more question.’

As she lifts a card from the deck and turns to face me, I can just about make out the corners of her mouth twitching, a flicker of something in her eyes – like she’s pulled out the best worst question and she can hardly hide her satisfaction.

‘Roxie. Who was Mark’s first kiss?’

She holds eye contact with me, smiling as she waits for me to answer the question.

As has been the case with all of the other questions about Mark’s childhood that I’ve failed to answer (all of which she delighted in telling me she knew the answer to), I’m pretty sure, judging from her reaction, that I can make an

educated guess that will be spot on. Is it really worth a point to have to say it to her face? No. But is it worth my saying it to her, rather than her trying to stab me through the heart with it? Yes.

‘It was you,’ I tell her, my face and voice both void of any kind of reaction.

‘Correct,’ she beams. ‘You guys got a point – good for you. But Valerie and Oscar, you are our winners. Congratulations.’

‘Thank you,’ Valerie replies. ‘I mean, we do have an advantage over all of you. We met when we were teenagers and we’ve been together ever since. When you know someone from a young age, and grow up around them, you have a bond you’ll never find with anyone else.’

A dig at me, or just an ugly truth? Either way, it doesn’t matter.

‘Mark, I’m not feeling so good, probably just tired. I might get an early night,’ I tell him.

‘OK, sure. I’ll be right behind you.’

As I leave the room, leaving the door open a crack behind me, I overhear Bea talking about me.

‘Some people take games way too seriously,’ she laughs.

Chapter Ten

I close the blinds on the windows in the study – not because I need the privacy, but because it's pitch black and deserted out there. I should be so lucky that there's some creep outside in the bushes spying on me – because he might actually like me.

It's safe to say that this evening has been a disaster, and I'm not even smug I predicted it would be dreadful. I was worried it was going to be awkward, or that Mark's family wouldn't warm to me, but it's been worse than that. So much worse. As much as I want to adore his family, I share no common ground with them, which makes them see me as an outsider who doesn't fit in around here, and it makes it hard to find things to talk to them about. I don't want to sound like a moody, black-lipstick-wearing teenage girl, but I feel like everyone hates me. And, of course, the worst thing about all of this is the ex-girlfriend backdrop that this entire shit-shower soap opera is set around. At the centre of all of this is Bea. His family might not like me, but they love her. As hard as I tried, I couldn't eat food I didn't like, but she just loved it. And not only did I struggle to score a point when it came to answering questions about my fiancé, but she knew the answers to every single question. With her selfless job, cemented place in the family and unlimited knowledge of all things Mark, she has me beat on all counts.

As I slip off my clothes and put on the old Leeds United T-shirt Mark has given me to sleep in, I catch the reflection of my body in the mirror on the back of the door. I am smart enough to know that looks are not everything, and have very little bearing on who we are as people, but goddammit, it's just so typical that Bea would be perfect in that department, too.

I take my phone from my handbag, only to see that I still have no signal. I don't know why I keep checking, like maybe Vodafone have erected a mast at some point during the past two hours.

I skim my laptop with my hand, considering whether or not to try and write something, but I can't think about anything but the past few hours. I don't know what I could've done differently to make this play out better, other than not coming on this trip at all. Instead, I get in the pop-up bed and pull the covers right up to my chin, to try and keep out the cold. It must be freezing outside now. Still very cold, and even more pissed off, I kick off the covers defiantly and grab the faux fur coat I wore on the journey up here, slipping it on before getting back into bed, pulling the covers up high over my face.

'Who is in there with you?' I hear Mark laugh.

'Piss off,' I reply, moving the covers from my face so I can shoot him a filthy look. 'It's so cold in here.'

'Well, give me a minute,' he replies, whipping off his clothes before flicking off the light and getting in bed with me. 'Right, cuddle up to me, steal my body heat.'

I do as instructed, feeling instantly warmed by his body. It never ceases to amaze me how warm Mark can feel, even when he's down to just his boxers. He's like a human radiator.

I sigh deeply.

'You OK?' he asks.

'Is that a serious question?' I reply.

'Roxie, listen to me, there is no way I would've brought you here if I'd known Bea was going to be staying here, too. And, to be honest, there's no way I would've come here myself if I'd known my ex was going to be staying here – she's the last person I'd *ever* want to see. There was this kid, Leroy, at the caravan park we used to stay in when I was younger, who used to call me Mark the Shark because I had the tiniest snaggletooth for about three weeks one summer. This kid couldn't even tie his own shoelaces and yet, year upon year, he would remember this nickname and tell all the other kids to call me it.'

‘Kids suck,’ I tell him, no stranger to hurtful remarks growing up. Well, with a surname like Pratt and a genetic tendency to be on the short, chubby side, you don’t need to be Edgar Allen Poe to work out the most obvious insult to rhyme with Pratt, do you?

‘Well, I would rather sit and have dinner with that numpty every day, for the rest of my life, than have to sit and watch you endure Bea one more time.’

Lying with my head on Mark’s chest, my arm draped across his body, I give him a tight, meaningful squeeze.

‘I know what Bea can be like, and sometimes she doesn’t even mean to upset people; it’s just the way she says things. I’m sure she wasn’t trying to rub our history in your face, and if she was, it’s because she’s as insecure as Leroy was. Bea and Leroy would actually make a pretty good couple; I mean, I’m sure he can tie his laces now.’

I can’t help but laugh, and when I do it makes Mark smile. The second I see his smile, I find it hard to feel sad about anything.

‘Listen, I had to put up with that guy once a year for at least a decade. Come tomorrow, Bea will have to stay here and you can forget she exists. I, however, will probably have to make peace with the fact you’ll be calling me Mark the Shark, to my face, just to tease me, for many decades to come.’

I can’t help but laugh wildly. My future husband knows my sense of humour so well.

‘You think this is funny?’ he laughs, and I nod. ‘Argh, I thought I’d successfully repressed that memory. I can’t believe bloody Leroy is still haunting me with his eagle-eyed, shark-based teasing. Thanks a lot, Leroy. Seriously, though, I feel truly awful about this.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ I tell him, sincerely. ‘It’s not her fault I couldn’t answer any of those questions about you. It just doubly sucked that she could.’

Mark wiggles free from my squeeze, sitting up in bed.

‘Sit up for a second,’ he demands. I do as he says and he places both hands lightly on my cheeks, looking me straight in the eye as he talks to me. ‘Bea knows all that stuff about my past because she *is* my past. You’re my present

and you know everything about me that there is to know now, and that's all that matters. What do I yell at the screen when I nail a headshot?

'Boo-yah, bitch,' I say with enthusiasm, my rubbish attempt at a Yorkshire accent not exactly hitting the mark.

'How many sugars do I have in my coffee?'

'Trick question,' I laugh. 'You hate coffee – weirdo.'

'You hate tea, super weirdo. You'll never be a northern lass.'

'Can I get that in writing?' I tease.

'One last thing: do you think Bea knows what my most memorable date ever was?'

'Oh, I imagine she assumes it's one you went on with her.'

I roll my eyes theatrically.

'Well, it isn't. Remember that time, not long after we started dating, when we rode on the Emirates cable car across the Thames?'

'Of course I remember,' I laugh. 'I was petrified being so high up. And you were laughing at me.'

'You were so cute,' he recalls. 'When we got to the highest point, it was like we were on top of the world. *I* was on top of the world,' he tells me. 'Because at that moment, up there with you, where nothing else mattered, I knew for sure that I loved you, and that I was never going to let you go.'

'*That's* what was going through your head while you were sitting there eating Haribo, laughing menacingly as you purposefully rocked the car, while I just sat there freaking out, clinging on to my seat for dear life?'

'Yep,' he replies victoriously. 'Right around the time you put your hoodie hood up, as though that would do anything to save you if we were to break loose and plunge into the river, I thought: I am going to marry this cutie.'

'That's weird,' I tell him.

'You're weird,' he corrects me. 'But I love you.'

Mark pushes me back onto the bed, climbing on top of me to kiss me. Our

lips part a few seconds later and Mark glances over his shoulder in surprise.

‘Did... did you just take off my boxers with your toes?’ he laughs.

‘I’m sorry,’ I reply innocently. ‘It’s like a reflex – muscle memory,’ I insist.

Mark slips a hand under my T-shirt, squeezing my hip tightly before slowly running his hand up my body.

‘I thought we said we weren’t going to get up to any funny business here?’ he reminds me breathlessly.

‘You’re the one on top of me with your hand on my boob,’ I remind him. ‘You want to stop, then stop.’

‘You devil,’ he whispers into my ear. ‘I can’t resist you.’

‘So don’t,’ I reply. ‘Get on your back.’

Mark does exactly as I ask, so I take off my coat, whip off my T-shirt and slip off my underwear before climbing on top of him; but as I grind my body down on his with enthusiasm, the trusty pop-up bed that has been in his family for so long finally decides to call it a day and, as the legs buckle, the metal frame below the thin mattress hits the stone floor with a bang.

Lying on top of Mark on the floor, my body pinning his down, I can’t help but cackle with laughter. Mark is laughing so hard, his body is shaking mine.

‘So, we broke a bed,’ he laughs.

‘We did,’ I reply. ‘It was bound to happen sooner or later.’

‘I do not know how I’m going to explain this one to my mum,’ he says, running a hand through his hair.

‘I don’t know how we’re going to sleep on it,’ I reply. Having rolled off Mark and onto my side of the bed, with nothing but stone floor underneath the thin mattress, this bed is ridiculously hard.

‘It’s like I said before,’ Mark reminds me. ‘It’s just one night.’

‘It’s just one night,’ I repeat back to him.

Anyone can put up with anything for just one night, right?

Chapter Eleven

Waking up and being momentarily confused as to whose ceiling I am looking at is something I thought was a thing of the past now that I'm settled with Mark. When I was much younger and living with Gil, we would go out to wild parties and often we'd end up staying the night, waking up in one of the spare rooms, on a random sofa, or even on the bathroom floor on one particularly messy occasion. And if it wasn't random parties, it was different boyfriends' places, or the occasional (and, each time, entirely regrettable) one-night stand – I realise this makes me sound like I was some sort of wild child, but I wasn't that bad. I just lived my twenties in a way that makes me feel comfortably delighted to settle down now. Mark, on the other hand, despite being in his early thirties, spent a large chunk of his twenties in a relationship (with the lovely Bea. So glad I can put a face to the name now – *not*), and ever since he moved to London he's been so focused on his work that he hasn't had much time for fun. I'm a strong believer in each to their own, but it does sometimes worry me that one day he might wake up to our bedroom ceiling – for the millionth time – and wish he'd checked out a few more ceilings before he settled down.

Yes, I could've happily never woken up under a stranger's roof again. Today I feel quite passionate about getting back to my own.

Realising that I'm in the pop-up bed (that no longer pops up after last night's almost-antics) alone, I sit up quickly, and my back pain hits me like a ton of bricks being dropped onto my spine all at once. It turns out that sleeping on a thin mattress on a freezing-cold stone floor does not suit me at all, and I'm feeling the after-effects this morning.

Climbing up from the floor slowly, I grab my fur coat and throw it on while I sort myself out. It's just so unbelievably cold, I can't stand it. Keeping the blinds closed, and my coat on, while I sort out my stuff seems like a good plan of action for keeping as warm as possible, but it's not doing much to help. The areas of this house that are away from the fireplaces – or the cold, windowless, radiator-less corridors that connect the rooms – are just unbearable to remain in for more than a few seconds.

I grab my toothbrush, clothes, shoes and make-up bag and make a quick dash from the study to the bathroom next door. It's not a proper bathroom, just a tiny WC, but there's a mirror and that's all I need to make myself presentable enough to say goodbye and endure a five-hour journey home.

Normally the prospect of a long car journey would bum me out – especially with an aching back – but I just cannot wait to go home. This trip has been a bit of a wash-out, but at least it's over, and maybe we can try it again soon under different circumstances – like with less of Mark's family all at once, or even just without his ex, to be honest. I just need to face her one more time – about as long as it takes me to drink a cup of coffee and say goodbye to everyone – and then it's all over.

I hear the sound of someone trying the bathroom door.

'Won't be a sec,' I call back.

I slip on my outfit from yesterday, climb into my tall boots and put on a brave face (read: lots of make-up) before grabbing my coat and leaving the bathroom, ready to face everyone.

Outside the door, a tall, broad girl with a messy brown bob is standing, waiting to use the bathroom. Her hair is all over the place, like she's just woken up, and she's wearing a Leeds United T-shirt not dissimilar to the one I slept in – or maybe it *is* different, I don't know, because they all look the fucking same, and yet, for some reason, Mark has to buy a new one every year. Entirely different to when I go to Zara and buy the same dress in several colours – *honestly*.

'Hello,' I say politely.

'Hey, you must be Roxie,' she says with a big smile.

‘Yeah, nice to meet you...’

‘Kerry,’ she replies, grabbing me for a hug. ‘Kez to my friends. I’m Marky-Mark’s little cousin.’

Kerry is probably around my age and significantly taller than I am, so I imagine she’s using the term ‘little’ ironically. She confirms this by sniggering as she says it.

‘It’s so nice to meet you,’ I reply, and I really mean it, because she is so warm and friendly. ‘That’s a strong hug.’

‘I know, right?’ she says as she releases me. ‘Us Wrights are built like brick shithouses.’

I laugh. It’s just so nice to hear someone swear.

‘So your parents own the pub?’ I ask.

‘Yeah, they’re the ones, unfortunately,’ she replies. ‘We don’t exactly get along so I tend not to spend too much time with them. Or any time with them, really. I live in Manchester now but I was visiting old mates last night. Didn’t want to stay with the ‘rents, obv, and figured my Auntie Val would have a room for me. Didn’t realise she had a house full, so I had to sleep on the sofa. Usually I get the pop-up bed, at least.’

I daren’t tell her that the pop-up bed is no more. RIP, pop-up bed.

Kerry seems exactly like my kind of person. Living in the city has obviously snapped her out of bumpkin mode and made her cool and cosmopolitan. She seems like the kind of girl I could really get on with – it’s such a shame she wasn’t here last night; we could’ve got to know each other, and I probably wouldn’t have had to play that stupid game either.

‘Yeah, it’s like everyone is here at the moment,’ I reply.

‘Pretty fucking rough that Mark’s ex is here,’ she sympathises. ‘Not just for you – for all of us. Never liked her, me. I call her Be-atch, because she’s a first-class bitch. She tells me off for shit, like smoking, drinking and eating crap – she tells me I need to lose weight – like it’s her medical opinion. In my medical opinion, best thing Mark ever did was move on from her.’

Oh, my God, I officially have a girl crush.

‘Yeah, I didn’t exactly warm to her myself,’ I reply. As much as I’d love to launch into a full-blown onslaught against Bea, I keep my feelings to myself.

‘You going somewhere?’ she laughs, nodding towards my coat.

‘We’re leaving soon,’ I tell her. ‘So I’m just gathering my things together.’

Kerry laughs at me wildly.

‘Oh shit, you’re serious,’ she says, her face falling. ‘Come with me,’ she insists.

Kerry ushers me towards the front door, placing me in front of her as she opens it up. The cold air hits me first, chilling me to the bone. Then I notice the ten inches of snow that have piled up in front of the door.

‘When did this happen?’ I squeak, in complete shock.

‘During the night,’ she replies. ‘That’s why I didn’t make it home. Apparently there were weather warnings, but no one expected *this* much.’

I clap my hand over my mouth in horror as one big fat realisation sinks in: I am stuck here. I am stuck in this deathly cold house, with Mark’s freezing-cold family and his ice queen of an ex-girlfriend, Be-atch. And, worse of all, I’m not going to be able to make it home in time for Christmas. The fact that Kerry has shown up, despite her seeming like an ally, affords little relief because I am trapped, without so much as a phone signal to call my parents and try to convince them to remortgage their house and hire a helicopter to come here and save me. Even if I meant that seriously, I don’t think my dad would go for it. The man spent two weeks living on the streets to get in character for a role in a play. Such extreme method acting probably isn’t completely necessary for a low-budget production of *Oliver Twist*, is it?

‘So, you’re not going anywhere,’ Kerry laughs. ‘You’re not happy about this, are you?’

‘I... I can’t breathe,’ I splutter.

‘OK, just chill for a sec,’ Kerry insists, closing the front door before sitting me down on the stairs. ‘You’re just having a panic attack; it’s all going to be OK. I know this must be difficult for you, but I’m here now so at least we’ll have some fun.’

I smile at Kerry between deep breaths. It's so sweet of her to be looking out for me, but not even having a friend can make being stuck here any more bearable. This is like my own personal hell.

'You're looking really pale, love. Let's get you a drink and a proper chair.'

'Thank you,' I reply quietly.

Kerry places my coat around my shoulders and leads me into the kitchen where Mark is sitting at the breakfast table with his mum, his dad and Bea. His dad is at one end, his nose deep inside a book, with a bowl of porridge in front of him that he doesn't appear to be at all interested in. Mark is sitting at the other side, spreading butter and then jam on slices of toast. In the middle, on one side of the table, Val and Bea are sitting having a chat, drinking tea together, looking thick as thieves.

It's an uncomfortable and suffocating environment, but at the very least it is warm in here thanks to the Aga. I'm not going to pretend I'm some kind of Aga expert because most of my hot food comes from the microwave, but posh country folk always have them in the rom-coms I watch and the novels I read. It's not even like they're even about the cooking; they're more like a lifestyle thing. Something country folk can talk to each other about, because they're all in the secret rich Aga club, like 'ooh, look at us, we keep our ovens on twenty-four hours a day'. The same goes for Land Rovers. You'd think living out in the country would give these people a greater sense of what is at stake if we don't protect our environment, and yet here they are, wrecking the planet left, right and centre with their gargantuan carbon footprint.

'Morning,' Mark says cautiously as I take a seat next to him. 'When I woke up and saw all the snow I figured I'd let you have a sleep in.'

'Thank you,' I reply, purely out of manners. I want to know what they've all been talking about without me.

'Here, have some toast,' he insists. As Mark hands his breakfast over to me, I see Val and Bea both shoot me a look.

'I see you've met Kez,' Mark says, nodding at his cousin as he places more bread in the toaster.

‘Best mates, us,’ she replies. ‘And I’m going to tell her all about you when you were younger.’

‘Someone needs to,’ Val titters over her teacup.

Mark shoots her a glance, but his mum just laughs it off.

‘Well,’ Valerie starts, pausing to sip her drink, ‘now that you’ll be staying with us for the foreseeable future, we can all get to know each other a lot better, can’t we?’

I take a seat at the kitchen table, not really knowing what to say.

‘Can I get you a coffee?’ Mark asks me.

Before I have chance to open my mouth, Valerie chimes in.

‘No coffee, unfortunately. No one really drinks it, so we stopped buying it. We have plenty of tea, though.’

‘Roxie doesn’t like tea,’ Mark tells them.

‘Doesn’t like tea?’ Oscar chimes in, momentarily looking up from his book to express his disgust.

‘Wow, it’s not a great day to be you, is it?’ Bea laughs.

‘Yeah, it’s up there with my grandparents dying,’ I joke wryly, without really thinking about it. Hmm, maybe Mark made a very valid point about me saying the first thing that pops into my head. ‘Just kidding,’ I insist, my joke bombing with my audience.

‘Roxie, I’m going to lend Kerry some clothes, and I think it’s probably best if you let me give you some things to wear, too. Mark tells me you don’t have any other clothes with you, and you must be freezing.’

‘Thank you, but I’ll be fine in what I’m wearing,’ I insist.

‘Rox, you’ll freeze,’ Mark tells me. ‘I’d put on some warmer clothes if I were you.’

‘OK,’ I reply meekly. What’s the point in even trying to fight it?

‘Drink this,’ Mark insists, placing a glass of orange juice down in front of me.

‘Aww, doesn’t he take good care of you?’ Bea coos. ‘I never had him running around after me like that.’

My five-minute pity party is officially over. I can’t bite my tongue for a second longer – the real Roxie Pratt is coming out to play.

‘Yeah, it’s amazing how people change when they meet the one they love,’ I reply.

Kerry sucks air into her cheeks, quickly changing the subject.

‘So, what were you guys talking about before we got here?’ she asks nosily.

‘Mark’s sporting achievements,’ his mum beams.

‘Erm, I wouldn’t call them sporting achievements,’ he laughs. ‘Mum was just talking about my old football trophies, from when I played as a kid.’

‘Ooh, you must have been good then,’ I reply.

‘I’m sure he still is,’ Bea replies. ‘He was a natural; it was amazing. I’d go and watch all his games, cheering him on from the sidelines.’

Of course she did.

‘Those were good times,’ his mum says with a sigh. ‘Going to your games, watching you win, all your friends coming back here for a gathering afterwards. It used to make me so happy, having everyone over. I miss those times.’

‘Well, at least you have grandkids now. They’ll keep the place buzzing with activity.’

‘And more to come soon, hopefully,’ Val replies.

As I feel my eyes widen, Kerry catches sight of my reaction, grabbing me by the hand and leading me towards the door.

‘Did you say you’d left clothes on your bed, Auntie Val?’ she calls back.

‘Yes,’ Val calls after us. ‘Don’t make a mess.’

Kerry bounds up the stairs with enthusiasm, dragging me along behind her.

‘I wonder what relics Auntie Val has dragged out of the back of her wardrobe

for us to wear,' she laughs. 'Still, I was wearing less than you when I got in last night, so probably for the best.'

I have never felt cold like I'm feeling it here. In my lovely, city-centre flat with my big, strong radiator of a boyfriend I am always toasty and warm. If the weather ever took an especially cold turn, I'd know that I could crank up the heating and snuggle up in bed with Mark, clutching his body like a koala bear holding on to a branch. Here, that's not really an option. I feel like everyone is scrutinising every aspect of our relationship. I'm noticing them noticing things, wondering things... like, does Mark run around after me too much? Am I too clingy? Do I know him well enough? Do we have enough in common? Am I good enough for him? For the past year I have been so sure of the answers to all those questions, but here, now, in his natural habitat, I feel like a different species.

Valerie and Oscar are your typical couple on the surface. She raised the kids while he made the money, but if you look closely, it's so obvious that she wears the trousers. He clearly loves her so much, and he'd do anything to make her happy – just like Mark is with me. That must be where he gets it from – his dad – but then, with Mark being so willing to let me call the shots, it makes me wonder if I'm anything like Valerie. They do say that men go for women who remind them of their mothers, right? Please, God, tell me I'm nothing like Val.

On Valerie and Oscar's bed two suitcases are laid out, opened up, full of neatly folded clothes and pairs of shoes.

'So my auntie said we could riffle through her old shit and wear whatever we wanted,' Kerry tells me as she begins to do exactly that.

'Is that exactly what she said, though?' I laugh.

'Well, words to that effect,' Kerry laughs. 'So, here, try this on.'

Kerry hands me a pair of mauve women's tailored trousers, with a cheeky smirk on her face. As she digs deeper she finds a peach chiffon blouse. The front is covered with ruffles, like something Meatloaf might wear.

I scrunch up my nose.

'For fun,' she insists. 'Try it on.'

I do as my new best friend requests, comfortably slipping my clothes off in her presence before checking myself out in the mirror.

‘Oh, my God,’ I exclaim. ‘I look like I’m cosplaying as an old lady’s grandma.’

Kerry cracks up.

‘Your accent is proper funny,’ she tells me.

I smile, suddenly conscious of how I speak.

‘You sound so posh, it’s mint.’

It’s funny how people perceive accents from outside of the area they live in. To Kerry, I sound posh, but in London I’m more Adele than Emily Blunt.

‘Thanks,’ I laugh.

As Kerry wrestles on an old Christmas jumper with a slight hole in one of the sleeves she laughs her head off.

‘This is brilliant,’ she cackles. ‘You got your phone there?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, taking it from my coat pocket. ‘But it doesn’t work here.’

‘I don’t want to make a call,’ she laughs. ‘We should take selfies of ourselves in these outfits.’

‘OK, sure,’ I laugh.

Between us, we try on and pose for photos in some of the ugliest clothing I have ever seen. It’s all old, faded, damaged or a combination of all of the above. I don’t know why none of the ladies thought it might be nice to lend us clothes that they weren’t about to throw in the bin, but here we are.

‘So, what are you going for?’ she asks curiously, sitting on the floor in a pile of discarded garments, Val’s words, ‘don’t make a mess’, echoing in my head as I look at her.

‘Hmm, so many choices,’ I say sarcastically. ‘Close your eyes, I’ll give you a big reveal.’

‘Ooh, OK,’ Kerry replies, blindfolding herself with an old sports sock.

I wriggle into a pair of Leeds United trackies and matching jumper that looks older than I do. Both parts are far too big, but I have to admit they feel so cosy. I pull on the drawstring, making the bottoms as tight as possible, before slipping on a big pair of socks and someone's old walking boots that were obviously replaced for looking like someone threw them into a wood chipper.

'Ta-da,' I announce, striking a pose.

'Oh, nice,' Kerry laughs. 'Next on the runway we have the lovely Roxie, rocking a Leeds United tracksuit from the 1980s! Isn't she beautiful?'

I stroll across the bedroom, popping my hip as I pause, flicking my hair and then strutting off in the opposite direction.

Kerry snaps a picture before tossing me my phone back.

'OK, my turn,' she says excitedly. 'Ready.'

'Wow!'

Kerry has opted for a floral purple blouse and a pair of cammo combat pants. They clash entirely, not only with each other, but with everything in the world.

'Nice, right?' she laughs. 'I figured: go hard, or go home.'

Kerry is also wearing a pair of boots, not dissimilar to mine, but nowhere near as tatty. Luckily for her, her feet being on the bigger side, she can wear some of the less worn ones, whereas this is the only pair that fits me.

'Better head back downstairs then,' Kerry chirps.

'Shouldn't we tidy up first?' I ask.

Kerry laughs at me and I feel like a square. She bundles clothing in her arms and crams it all back into the suitcases.

'There,' she replies. 'Let's go.'

As I head down the stairs after Kerry, I can't help but feel incredibly short now that I don't have my heels on. As we reach the bottom of the stairs where everyone is waiting for us, all ready to head out of the door, my drastic change in high circumstances seems even more apparent.

‘Are we going somewhere?’ I ask.

‘To the pub,’ Valerie tells me. ‘For lunch.’

‘We can get out?’ I ask, hopefully. Maybe we’ll be able to head home this evening.

‘It’s a short walk to the pub, so I’m sure we’ll all survive,’ she laughs. ‘I don’t think you’ll get further than that, though, Roxie. I know I said you two could wear whatever you liked, but you both look ridiculous.’

‘We’re ridiculous? You bought this shirt, auntie,’ Kerry laughs.

‘That was actually one of mine,’ Oscar replies. ‘Your auntie made me throw it out.’

‘Because it’s ridiculous,’ she snaps.

I adjust my tracksuit self-consciously as Mark walks over to me. He wraps an arm around me and whispers into my ear.

‘Is it weird that seeing you in Leeds gear turns me on?’

I smile.

‘What’s Roxie short for?’ Val asks curiously.

‘Because she’s taking those high-heeled boots off,’ Ste jokes.

Everyone laughs so I join in, not wanting to seem like a bad sport, but I want to rugby tackle him into the snow.

‘It’s not short for anything,’ I reply. ‘My name is just Roxie.’

‘That’s a strange name to give a child,’ Valerie observes.

‘Mum,’ Mark interrupts, sounding surprised. ‘It’s a beautiful name.’

‘My parents are both theatre lovers. I’m named after Roxie Hart...’

‘From *Chicago*.’ Oscar finishes my sentence for me. ‘I could imagine you playing her, actually.’

‘That’s what my dad always says,’ I smile.

‘Although, she does kill her boyfriend in the play,’ he laughs. ‘So let’s hope the similarities start and end with how you look.’

‘What vulgar talk,’ Val snaps. ‘Come on everyone – outside.’

I slip my fur coat on over my tracksuit, but I don’t feel like myself.

‘It’s not a long walk,’ Mark assures me as we begin treading through the thick snow that has piled high on the long driveway. Each step is a struggle that I’m not used to. Still, I suppose it will be worth it when we reach the pub. A little alcohol and a lot of coffee is just what I need.

Chapter Twelve

The Duck Inn (yes, that really is what it's called) is exactly what I imagined a country pub to look like. The mismatched cushions on all the furniture, the roaring fire, the exposed stone walls covered in a variety of framed pictures and mounted objects (everything from weapons to medals to ores) – the large, wooden bar. As typical as it all is, it's beautiful – except for all the ducks. I suppose the name of the place should've implied as much, but there is a duck everywhere you look. In fact, there are so many that, as I've been eating my lunch, I've weirdly enjoyed spotting new ones in places I hadn't previously noticed them. No, I'm not bored, it's just like a weird twist on a Where's Wally puzzle. In fact, I'm the opposite of bored because I've been talking to everyone. Until now, I haven't really spoken at length to anyone apart from Valerie, Bea and Kerry, so it's interesting hearing from other people.

We're all sitting at a long table, so we're chatting among ourselves at this end. I'm sandwiched between Kerry and Mel, with Mark opposite me, Ste opposite Mel. We're all talking together, and all getting on pretty well. Mel is kind of quiet, but nothing like her mum, so that's fine. Ste seems a bit full of himself, but he's not a bad person. I know that Mark thinks he's a bit of a dick, but if Mel loves him, then they have my blessing – not that my blessing counts for anything in this family. It's just nice to have a few people who I get on with. I feel much less alone.

'I'm not into football either,' Ste tells me, while it's just the two of us talking. Mark is chatting with his sister and Kerry has gone to get yet another round of drinks. You can tell she grew up here, and that she used to work here, by the easy way she just falls back into being here. She's happily playing barmaid/waitress, grabbing drinks for the table whenever we need them so

that her mum and dad can join in the party, too. They're right down at the other end of the table and, even though they're being polite with one another, you can tell there's an atmosphere between them. I asked Kerry about it while we were eating, expecting a story of scandal or some big drama that drove a wedge between them, but it's nothing like that. People around here want you to grow up into a person who is 'from around here', so if you grow up in a way that doesn't fit the mould, you're as bad as an outsider. Kerry has not only moved from this idyllic little village to a big city, but, even worse, she's moved to Lancashire – something impossible for any Yorkshire father to understand. One thing that does confuse me, though, is why Mark isn't in trouble for moving away – surely moving down south is even worse than crossing the border to Lancashire, in Yorkshire folks' eyes? Perhaps it's because he moved for his dream job, whereas Kerry just moved for a bit of much-needed nightlife. I don't blame her, to be honest. I'd go crazy living in a place like this where there's nothing to do. Sure, there's this pub, but they're severely lacking a cocktail list of some description and it doubly sucks for Kerry, because this is her parents' place. Even with my parents being the super-cool liberals they are, I wouldn't want them around on my nights out.

'I think I actually hate football,' I tell Ste, honestly. 'I was indifferent about it – like I'm indifferent about Dungeons and Dragons and rock climbing – but football is such a big part of my life now, and because I don't enjoy it, I've actually started to hate it.'

Ste laughs.

'I know what you mean – but it's worse for me.'

'How so?' I ask curiously.

'Because I'm a man. Men are supposed to like football and women are supposed to complain about it, and yet with me and Mel, it's the opposite.'

I pull a face.

'That's an argument born of sexism,' I remind him.

'It's emasculating either way,' he replies, and I suppose he's right. 'At least we'll have each other, though. At all the family events when the football

inevitably gets switched on and they're all dressed like 'full kit wankers', screaming at the TV like every word the ref says is a matter of life or death...'

'Oh God, that sounds awful,' I admit. 'We should definitely stick together.'

I give Ste a smile. He seems like a nice guy.

I glance down the table, watching Kerry as she hands out the drinks to the 'adults' – and, yes, I'm grouping Bea in with the adults because she is sitting with Valerie and, as always, they're big buddies. They all seem like they're having a blast. I can't help but notice that they're getting louder and louder as the minutes are ticking by.

Oscar and his brother, Malcolm, are in a debate about football strategy, and it seems like a heated one at that. I love that about football fans, how they all think they could do better managing the team, like you could count on a footballer to follow any instructions other than 'disgrace yourself in a hotel room'.

'He's too slow,' Malcolm insists. 'I've seen milk turn quicker.'

'Do you dislike him because he's gay?' Oscar replies.

'What? What are you talking about? Nowhere on the internet does it say he's gay.'

'Oh, so gay footballers don't exist then, obviously,' Oscar replies sarcastically. 'Trust me, he's gay. And he's an asset.'

Val, Auntie Gail and Bea are either laughing loudly together, or chatting in hushed tones, all occasionally glancing down this end of the table. Every now and then I think they're staring at me, but I'm probably just paranoid.

Kerry plonks herself back down next to me, placing a drink in front of me.

'A glass of white for the lady,' she says in what I imagine is supposed to be my accent. 'And a pint for me.'

'Thank you,' I laugh, sipping my drink. Reluctant to get even a little tipsy in front of people, this is my first alcoholic drink of the day. And probably my last, to be honest, because these people do not need to meet Drunk Roxie. Drunk Roxie doesn't put in as many appearances as she used to, now that

I've grown up a lot and settled down. If these people don't like sober me, they'll hate the easy confidence and questionable sense of humour of drunk me.

As Kerry tells me a tale about when she used to steal booze from behind the bar as a teenager, my attention is jolted from her by the feeling of a foot, seductively stroking my leg under the table. I look across at Mark, who is still chatting to Mel about college stuff. His poker face is perfection, even as his foot makes his way to my inner thigh.

Growing increasingly turned on, and still a little frustrated after yesterday's sexual shenanigans not exactly going to plan, I wiggle my right foot free from my boot and go straight for between his legs, massaging him with the ball of my foot while still leaving him room to keep doing what he's doing inside my left leg. I watch Mark's reaction change suddenly, his eyes darting in my direction. I wiggle my eyebrows at him as I pick up the pace a little, but as he gives me a look as though to ask 'what are you thinking, woman?', I stop suddenly. Did it occur to me to try and get him off with my feet under the table until he did it first? Of course it didn't; I was only reciprocating.

I retreat, slowly sliding my foot down between his legs until it's resting firmly between his feet, giving him ample opportunity to change his mind, but he doesn't.

At the other side of the table, Oscar and Malcolm's argument grows increasingly more heated until Malcolm gets up and storms off.

Kerry breaks off from her story, chuckling to herself.

'Oops. Guess what?' she asks me.

'What?'

'I've been spiking their drinks,' she laughs.

'What?' I repeat, shocked. I glance down at my own glass of wine.

'Don't worry, I haven't done anything to this end of the table – or the kids. I just thought the parents and Be-atch would be more tolerable and much nicer if they were pissed. I just wanted them to get a buzz on but I guess a double here, a triple there – they've gotten drunker than I expected.'

I can't believe what she's done! And I can't believe that Mark is still toying with my leg after giving me such a discouraging glance. Wait a minute, though; if my foot is between both of Mark's feet, how is he still teasing my thigh with his toes? That's when I glance up at Ste and, as he gives me a cheeky wink, I realise that it's him who is stroking my leg.

I jump up, immediately, accidentally pulling on the tablecloth a little, causing a few glasses to topple over as I do.

'Shit,' I blurt, forgetting my manners.

'Oh, there we go,' Valerie slurs. 'Look at her, making a scene. You're not in London now,' she reminds me.

'Mum, are you OK?' Mark asks her, noticing how out of character she's acting.

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' she babbles. 'Are you OK, though, Marcus? Marrying this girl? Are you sure she's right for you?'

'You tell him, Valerie,' Bea chimes in. Her eyes are closed but she's waving her fist in the air in solidarity. Auntie Gail is fast asleep with her head on the table.

'Mum, what is the matter with you?' Mark asks her, before asking Millie in a hushed tone: 'Is she OK?'

'Of course I'm OK,' she snaps. 'You're the one that needs your head checking. Marrying her.'

As Valerie jumps from her seat to point at me, she stumbles, landing on the table, but not without smacking Bea in the face with her forearm on her way down.

As Bea bursts into tears and Val struggles to get back on her feet, Mark rushes over to help as the rest of us look on in shock. He helps his mum back into her chair before leaning in to Bea to see if her eye is OK. As both women cry like toddlers having a tantrum, Mark sniffs the air between them.

'They're wasted,' he announces, shocked. Then he looks over at his snoozing auntie, and his dad and uncle who are giving each other evils across the room. 'Everyone is wasted!'

Kerry sniggers under her breath, hiding her amused face in her pint glass. She leans closer to me and says softly.

‘Family gatherings are they best, aren’t they?’

Chapter Thirteen

Bea flinches as I hold a bag of frozen peas on her eye.

‘Ouch, you’re not doing it right,’ she snaps.

‘Just hold still, please,’ I insist.

God, I hate dealing with drunk people – especially when I’m sober. I just have no patience with them.

Getting Oscar, Val and Bea home in their drunken state, up the steep hill, in the thick snow, was no easy task. Now that we’re finally back, it’s fallen upon me to help Bea into bed. Alex and Millie have taken the twins up to bed and, similarly, Mark and Mel are helping their parents to bed. So here I am, icing Bea’s black eye (incorrectly, apparently) as I help her into Mark’s bed. Still quite drunk, she’s flitting back and forth between ‘lads on tour’ behaviour and the temperament of a toddler who hasn’t had her nap. Ste did offer to help me, but naturally I refused that as fast as my vocal cords would let me.

‘Why are you taking my clothes off me?’ Bea shrieks.

I stop attempting to remove her walking boots for a moment and massage my temples.

‘I’m not taking your clothes off you, I’m taking your boots off you. They’re covered in snow and you need to get in bed.’

‘Ergh, fine,’ she snaps, playing dead while I take off her boots and lift her legs into bed along with the rest of her body.

‘Thank you so much,’ I say sarcastically.

‘Mark can do so much better than you,’ she informs me in a whiney voice.

‘What, like you?’ I laugh, heading for the door and flicking off the light. I have no intention of rising to the bait, especially when she’s pissed.

‘That’s why we’re going to steal him back,’ she sighs sleepily, stopping me dead in my tracks.

‘What?’ I quickly turn to face her.

‘We’re going to take him back from you,’ she giggles dopily before her smile drops. ‘You weren’t supposed to be here.’

I dash to her side.

‘What are you talking about? Who is “we”?’ I ask, but it’s too late.

Bea’s head rolls back, her jaw drops open a little and she lets out an almighty snore.

‘Oi, wake up,’ I insist, giving her a shake. It’s no use, though: Bea is fast asleep.

I head back down to the study, swapping my tracksuit for my T-shirt before climbing into bed. It isn’t long before Mark joins me.

‘Well, that was interesting,’ he says, whipping his clothes off before climbing into bed. ‘Never thought I’d have to put my sixty-something hammered parents to bed.’

‘I never thought I’d have to put your ex-girlfriend to bed, but here we are,’ I reply.

‘Thank you so much for that,’ he tells me, squeezing me tightly.

‘She said something odd,’ I start, unsure if I should tell him or not.

‘Tell me about it,’ he laughs. ‘My dad told me that my T-shirt was disgusting.’

I half smile. His dad does come out with some weird things, even when he’s sober.

‘OK, what did she say?’ he asks seriously.

‘She said that I wasn’t supposed to be here, and that “we” were going to take you away from me.’

Mark laughs, shaking his head.

‘I think she’s trying to steal you back,’ I tell him, but this just makes him laugh harder.

‘Roxie, she is so wasted, she has no idea what she’s talking about.’

‘OK,’ I reply, but I’m not convinced. ‘Maybe it’s just my lack of filter, causing me to blurt out the first thing that pops into my head.’

‘Did that upset you?’ he asks with a nervous laugh. ‘Have you been stewing over this for twenty-four hours? It was just a stupid game.’

‘I just didn’t expect you to give such a fast and thorough answer,’ I reply.

‘I was just giving an answer – you know I love that you say what you think.’

‘OK,’ I reply.

‘Hey, come on, you know that. You’re the funniest person I know. You keep me in stitches. I was just trying to play the game. Are you telling me that nothing annoys you about me?’

‘I mean, I’m pretty annoyed with you right now... but not really,’ I tell him.

I roll over onto my side, facing away from Mark. This bed wasn’t especially comfortable to begin with, but now that it’s on the floor, broken, it’s even less comfortable.

‘Don’t think I’m asking this because it annoyed me, but what was all that about earlier?’ he asks as he spoons me, his arm creeping around my waist.

‘What was what?’ I ask.

‘You, trying to give me a footjob in the pub,’ he laughs. ‘That was interesting.’

‘Oh, yeah, sorry,’ I reply. ‘I don’t know what I was thinking.’

Probably best I don’t tell him about Ste trying to touch me up under the table. We’ve got enough problems right now, and after the way I reacted, I’m sure he won’t try anything with me again.

‘We’re alone now, though,’ I tell him, wiggling my butt in his direction. Mark barely has time to grab me by the hips and nibble on my ear before we hear a loud bang coming from upstairs.

‘Shit,’ he blurts, jumping up. ‘I’d better go and check on them.’

‘No worries,’ I reply. ‘It’s only been seventy-two hours since either of us had an orgasm, but whatever.’

I sigh theatrically.

‘Not that you’re counting,’ he laughs as he dashes from the room.

I sigh again, this time for real. This is probably the longest we’ve been around each other without having sex and it’s strange. It has reinforced what an awesome sex life we have, though, so that’s good news, I guess. I just can’t stop thinking about what Bea said. She’s a grown woman; she’s not seriously going to try and steal Mark back, is she? You know what? Let her try, because I love Mark, and he loves me, and we trust each other and no one can get in the way of that. Not even Queen Bea.

Some Christmas Day tomorrow is going to be. At least if I’m not having a great time, I know I can just have Kerry spike everyone’s drinks again.

Chapter Fourteen

Today is a milestone for Mark and me: it's our first Christmas together. We did know each other last year, but it wasn't long after we got together so obviously we didn't spend Christmas together. What a difference a year makes, though, because this year things are so different. How we'd spend Christmas Day is something we'd talked about a lot. The plan was for Mark to pop up and see his family at some point (maybe between Christmas and New Year), and for us to spend Boxing Day with my parents, but 25th December was supposed to be just the two of us. We'd bought the food, decorated our flat to perfection; all of my presents for Mark are wrapped beautifully and sitting underneath the tree, ready to be ripped open. We were supposed to sleep in, relax, eat too much and then sleep some more – throw sex and presents into the mix and you've got my ideal day, right there.

Instead I'm waking up here, in cold, miserable Yorkshire, in this cold, miserable, broken bed, all alone again.

Sitting up on my floor-bed, I sigh deeply and remind myself that I can handle whatever is thrown at me today, because I love Mark. I love his gorgeous smile, and the way it makes me feel when I know that I'm the reason behind it. I love how much he cares about his job and how passionate he is about making a difference. I love the fact that he goes out of his way to make me happy all the time, whether it's taking me places he knows I love or watching movies he knows are my favourites, even if he doesn't like them. I love that, even though we have our own interests, it still feels like we have everything in common. We spend so much time together, but it never feels like too much.

‘Merry Christmas,’ Mark says as he enters the room. ‘Here’s your present.’

He places a plate with a warm pain au chocolat down on the bed in front of me.

‘Thank you,’ I reply.

‘Your ring was your real present, obviously,’ he laughs.

‘I know, thank you. Both are amazing.’

‘You OK?’ he asks.

‘I guess. Just... this isn’t exactly the Christmas we had planned, is it?’

‘Put some clothes on,’ Mark demands excitedly. ‘Then follow me.’

I do as I’m told, wrestling on my beloved borrowed tracksuit in my half-asleep state before running my hands through my hair to try and neaten it up a little.

‘I could do with washing my hair today,’ I tell him. ‘It’s all gross from getting snow in it yesterday.’

‘Well, you can wash your hair and put on your nice clothes before dinner if you like? My parents have put everyone else to work. They go hard at Christmas,’ he informs me.

‘I couldn’t help but notice they didn’t have any decorations up,’ I reply, puzzled.

‘Well, they promised to wait for the kids to decorate the house. The plan was to do it yesterday, but then we had all the drama... So we’re doing everything now.’

Mark takes me by the hand and leads me out into the hallway where the sound of Shakin’ Stevens’ ‘Merry Christmas Everyone’ is filling the air. I can smell food cooking and, as we get closer to the family room, I notice the place is abuzz with people all doing different jobs. Oscar is lugging a tree through the house, dragging it like a dead body, so Mark rushes over to help him. I can hear the women all cackling in the kitchen and then I notice the twins draping tinsel along the bannister.

‘Oh, I’m not sure about that, darlings,’ Oscar tells them. ‘Not really a big fan

of tinsel.’

Their faces fall simultaneously. Once again, the girls are dressed in matching Christmas jumpers, making them look like a mirror image of each other. Their expressions even change in sync with one another – it’s very creepy. It doesn’t help that they’re so quiet either, like they can communicate between themselves without saying a word.

‘It’s fine, keep going, kids,’ Mark tells them with a big, warm smile. ‘Come on Dad, let them help,’ he insists to Oscar under his breath.

‘Fine,’ Oscar gives in.

‘As you can tell, my dad takes his Christmas decorations very seriously,’ Mark tells me.

‘Some people just go so tacky,’ Oscar explains. ‘I like to keep a classy theme.’

I pull an impressed face.

‘It’s refreshing to see a man with taste,’ I tell him.

‘In that case, you’re allowed to help me,’ he replies happily.

‘My mum is so sorry about what happened yesterday,’ Mark explains to me, apologising on his mum’s behalf. ‘She was mortified when I told her what she’d said about you in front of everyone and she wants to build some bridges today. She’s putting so much effort into making you feel welcome for Christmas Day. So we’re putting the decorations up, Mum is cooking the dinner, they’re going to lay the table all festive – and you just love Christmas stuff anyway, so it’s going to be awesome.’

‘Sounds good,’ I reply, mustering up a little enthusiasm to make the effort.

‘We’re just waiting for the hungover Grinch to wake up on the sofa, then we’ll go in there and get started.’

That will be Kerry he’s referring to. I did notice her drinking almost as much as she was spiking, so I’m not surprised she’s hungover.

‘Can I get washed and dressed up before I help out?’ I ask them both.

‘Of course,’ Oscar replies. ‘I’ll go make a start shifting Kerry.’

‘Do you think any of the ladies has a hairdryer and some straighteners I can borrow?’ I ask Mark. ‘Even just a hairdryer will do, to be honest.’

‘I’m sure they will,’ he replies. ‘Come on, let’s go ask them.’

Mark takes me by the hand and leads me into the kitchen where Bea, Millie and Mel are sitting at the table as Valerie buzzes around bothering with different pans and chopping vegetables. Millie and Mel are folding napkins, while Bea watches over everything, through the eye she isn’t holding a bag of frozen peas over.

‘I’m going to need those peas soon,’ Val tells her. ‘We might have to switch you to an ice pop. Sorry again,’ she adds.

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Bea replies. ‘It was – oh, speak of the devil,’ she says as she spies me walking into the kitchen.

‘You think this was my fault?’ I ask.

‘Of course not,’ Bea replies. ‘We all made a scene.’

Mark quickly stops me saying the first thing that pops into my head by placing his calming hands on my shoulders, massaging them firmly.

‘Ladies,’ he says quickly changing the subject. ‘Roxie is going to wash her hair. Does anyone have a hairdryer and maybe some straighteners she can use?’

‘I have two kids,’ Millie replies. ‘Do I look like I have time for stuff like that any more?’

Well, that’s depressing. I didn’t realise that when you had kids you had to forego doing your hair. As Millie’s mobile starts ringing she snatches it up and leaves the room to answer it.

‘How does she have signal?’ I ask. ‘I don’t have signal anywhere.’

‘What network are you on?’ Val asks.

‘Vodafone,’ I reply.

‘Yeah, you won’t get a signal. Only one network you can get signal on around here – we’re all on that one.’

‘It’s the same as mine,’ Mark tells me. ‘So if you need to make any calls, you know you can use my phone, right?’

‘Thank you.’ Now if I could just get the number of a helicopter pilot who doesn’t mind helping out a woman in need on Christmas Day...

‘Left my hairdryer at home,’ Mel says, getting back on topic. ‘Sorry.’

‘And I don’t use them,’ Bea chimes in superiorly. ‘They’re so bad for your hair. Go without,’ she insists.

‘I can’t really go without since I had my hair cut,’ I explain. ‘My hair air-dries with a curl, and now that my hair is shorter, it isn’t heavy enough to weigh it down, so without a hairdryer my hair goes nought to Mick Hucknall in the time it takes to dry.’

The women snigger.

‘Mum, you’ve got to have a hairdryer in this house somewhere, right?’

‘I don’t, I’m afraid, my love,’ she replies, sounding oh-so-sorry to be the bearer of bad news. ‘It broke a while ago and I never bothered to replace it.’

I raise my eyebrows.

‘No worries,’ I reply – although I am worried. Since getting my hair cut shorter I have suffered with biweekly regret, mostly just because I miss having long, pretty hair; but one of the legitimate reasons I miss it is because, even though it is short, it is still thick, so unless I heat it within an inch of its life, it will curl up like I’ve had a perm in an uncool, eighties sort of way.

‘You sure that’s OK?’ he asks me softly.

‘What is she going to do, trek out in the snow to get one?’ Val laughs.

‘I’m fine, really,’ I repeat. Still not fine, though.

‘Use the bathroom at the top of the stairs,’ he tells me. ‘There are towels and stuff in there.’

‘Thanks,’ I reply. Mark kisses me on the cheek before I head off upstairs.

I feel so awkward and uncomfortable in this house, like I don’t belong here, and like no one wants me here. Mark is wonderful, but he looks at his family

with so much adoration, I don't think he notices how weird they make me feel. His mum and Bea are like this tight little team who think I've taken their boy from them. Oscar is OK, friendly enough, just a bit bizarre. Alex and Millie are just in their own little world, as are their kids. Mel is quiet, Ste is a pervert, and then there's Kerry who, despite being so lovely and friendly, is an absolute fucking nightmare. I mean, she spiked her own family's drinks – how reckless is that? That's not only such a deceitful thing to do, but pretty dangerous, too. Luckily, other than my feelings and Bea's face, no one really got hurt.

After a quick shower I begin towel-drying my hair, squeezing the water out of it to get it as dry as possible, but I can see it curling already. Still, I apply my make-up and slip on the only outfit I have with me – complete with my high boots, because I hate feeling so short – and then I'm ready to make the most of Christmas.

As I leave the bathroom, I bump into Ste.

'Merry Christmas, Roxie,' he says.

'Yeah, you too,' I reply awkwardly.

'So, yesterday...'

'Yeah.' I pause, wracking my brains for a subtle way to tell him not to do that again. 'Don't do that again. Or anything like that.'

OK, so that wasn't subtle, but I couldn't be clearer.

'Are you sure?' he asks. 'Because you seemed into it.'

'I thought it was Mark,' I snap. 'Obviously I'd be into that.'

'Whatever,' he laughs. 'To be continued.'

Ergh, he's so disgusting. Mel could do so much better.

'What did he want?' Kerry asks me, making me jump.

'He was just being weird,' I tell her – lest she poison him while he sleeps for his crimes. 'You coming to help with the decorations?'

'Go on then,' she replies.

Downstairs, the festivities are in full swing. The Christmas playlist is still going strong, filling the house with festive cheer, instantly lifting my mood. I love Christmas, and everything about it, but it's the music I love most of all – closely followed by the food, obviously. It really is the most wonderful time of the year, and it's definitely making me feel better, even in these circumstances.

I don't know how long it took me to get ready, but Oscar has already done so much of the decorating, and the place looks amazing. He's got a real eye for things like this – it's impressive.

'So, what can we do?' I ask Oscar.

He thinks for a moment.

'Well, I think Kerry deserves the job of untangling lights,' he laughs.

'Go on then,' she gives in, sitting on the floor in the most unladylike way given how short her dress is.

'Roxie, I do have a job for you, but I could do with you fetching Alex for me first, if you don't mind? I need some muscle, and I think Mark is busy.'

'Sure, I'll go find him,' I reply.

The sound of joy and laughter is pouring out of the kitchen; however, as I walk in there, the room falls silent. It's just Val and Bea now.

'Anyone know where Alex is?' I ask.

'Try asking Millie,' Bea tells me. 'She popped outside to take a phone call.'

'OK, thanks,' I reply.

They wait until I have left the room before carrying on with their conversation. The sound of laughter immediately after I close the door reminds me of the mean girls at school, but I'm not going to let it get to me.

Out in the back garden, without a coat on, I am positively freezing. There isn't any snow falling right now, but the sky looks thick with it, like it's about to burst with more any second, topping up the places where snow has been cleared. I glance around for Millie, but she's nowhere to be seen. I can just imagine this being some kind of prank where they tell me to go outside and

then lock me out here in the snow to freeze to death. As I go to try the handle to get back inside, to see whether or not I'm right, I hear a noise. I cock my head to the side as I try to make sense of it; it's a familiar noise for sure. It's not crying or laughing; it's... sex noises. I can hear sex noises in the garden! If I were a better person, I'd probably rush back inside (slightly jealous, if I'm honest) and leave them to it, but I'm not a better person. I'm nosy, and I want to know who it is. With my ear turned slightly towards the sky, I follow the squeaky moans of pleasure to see who is up to no good. As I approach the maze-like hedges that run around the large garden, I realise that whoever I can hear is just on the other side. I don't want to see anyone at it; I'm just hoping someone says someone's name at some point in the next three seconds, because I'm far too cold to hang around a moment longer.

Through the bushes I can see the silhouette of someone pacing up and down, which is weird, considering the noises I can hear.

'You like that, don't you, you bad boy,' I overhear Millie say in an entirely put-on sexy tone so unlike her usual mousey voice. She's still on the phone. 'Yeah... yeah...' she continues. It's so annoying to only be getting half of a conversation. I have no idea what's going on, but there's no way she's talking to Alex – why would you have phone sex with someone in the same house as you? Maybe it's some weird attempt at spicing up their marriage; they don't seem to have much fun.

'What about your very hard, very long...'

I slip on a patch of ice hiding under the snow. I grab the bushes, saving myself from going down, but making a noise in the process. Millie pokes her head around the corner and spots me, before diverting this sentence down an entirely different path. '...Division. It's way too much homework for the girls. Hang on one second, please.'

Millie covers the phone microphone with her hand and begins to explain to me.

'I'm just on the phone to the twins' teacher,' she blurts quickly. 'He's given them way too much homework to do over Christmas. Did you need something?'

'I'm just looking for Alex,' I say sheepishly.

‘He’s having a nap,’ she tells me, refusing to finish her phone call until I’ve gone.

‘Oh, OK. Thanks.’

I head back to the house, replaying the words that I eavesdropped over and over in my head. Those were definitely sex noises, and I seriously doubt the very hard, very long thing she was talking about was division.

Upstairs, outside Millie and Alex’s bedroom, I am about to knock on the partly open bedroom door when I realise he’s in there with someone.

Listening carefully, I realise it’s Mel.

‘Can we just keep things between us a bit longer?’ she begs him.

‘I hate lying to Millie,’ he replies. ‘She’s going to be so hurt.’

‘I know. The whole family are going to be upset, but it’s Christmas day.’

Ooh, it sounds like Mel and Alex have a big secret, too. Curiosity getting the better of me, I linger outside the bedroom door and continue listening.

‘OK, you’re right, now is not the right time to tell them. But in the New Year maybe?’

‘OK,’ she replies. ‘Look, I’d better go before someone catches us. I need the loo anyway.’

I quickly dash away from the door, ducking into Mark’s room for a second. I watch as Mel leaves, sheepishly checking for people before she dashes downstairs.

I wait a few seconds before knocking on Alex’s door, not wanting him to know I was outside listening – like I’m the person with something to hide.

‘Come in,’ he replies.

‘Hey, Alex, Oscar is looking for you. He needs your help.’

‘OK, I’ll be right down,’ he tells me. ‘Everything OK?’

‘All fine,’ I lie. Well, it’s that or tell him that I overheard his conversation just now, and I overheard his wife talking dirty to someone in the garden. I mean, other than that, everything is fine.

I walk out of his room, only to find myself face to face with the twins.

I jump out of my skin.

‘Bloody hell, you scared me,’ I tell them. ‘You girls OK?’

Lisa and Louise stare at me blankly.

‘Girls?’ I prompt.

‘Don’t take it personally,’ Alex tells me, joining us on the landing. ‘They don’t talk to strangers.’

‘I’m not a stranger,’ I say with a smile.

‘They don’t know that,’ he reminds me. ‘To them, you’re just some girl Mark has brought home with him.’

‘Are you going to correct them or...? No?’

He laughs it off.

I walk down the steps, as carefully as possible in my super-high heels, successfully reaching the bottom, remaining upright the entire time. I linger at the bottom of the stairs for a moment, pausing to yank up one of my stockings while no one is looking – ever the lady.

With all parts of my outfit exactly where they’re supposed to be, I’m about to head back towards the family room when I hear a strange noise. Yes, more weird noises, this time coming from the bathroom. It sounds like someone is being sick in there.

‘Everything OK?’ I call through the door.

‘Fine,’ I hear Mel call back.

She emerges from the bathroom, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

‘Just a bit sick,’ she tells me. ‘Maybe I had too much to drink yesterday.’

I thought she was sticking to the soft stuff, but I guess Kerry must have spiked her drink, too.

‘Do you want me to get someone?’ I ask.

‘No,’ she replies quickly. ‘I’m fine.’

‘OK,’ I smile, leaving her to it.

I finally make it back to the family room, scratching my head with confusion. What is it with this bloody family? Everyone is so weird, from the adults right down to the kids. Everyone is treating me like I’m the odd one, when it’s them who are the weirdos, and me who is the sane one.

I am jolted from my thoughts by the bang of a gong.

‘Dinner is served,’ Valerie bellows for the entire house to hear.

See what I mean? Everyone here is so odd.

Chapter Fifteen

The Wright family dining room is a thing of festive beauty right now. As Wizzard's 'I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday' plays on the stereo, the family all work together to make everything perfect.

The room is decked out with blue and silver decorations, not doing much to make the room feel any warmer, but definitely adding to the festivities.

'Anything I can do to help?' I ask Valerie.

'My goodness, look at your hair,' she replies, ignoring my question.

I touch it self-consciously.

'Anything I can do to help?' I repeat, not really knowing what I'm supposed to say about my hair other than 'yeah, I told you this would happen if I didn't have a hairdryer'.

Other than the twins, I am the only person who isn't doing anything to help, and I feel like I'm being lazy – or that I might be perceived as being lazy.

'Come on, Mum, let her do something helpful,' Mark insists, dashing into the room with glasses before heading back out to get more.

'OK, fine, I suppose you can carry the gravy through.'

Oh, can I, Valerie? Thank you! How kind of you! So big of you to let me carry the gravy from one room to the other.

I walk into the kitchen where the gravy is sitting on the worktop, in a beautiful china gravy boat. I pick it up by the handle with my right hand, using my left to support the spout, so that I carry it steady. I won't have

anyone critiquing my gravy-carrying methods.

I make the short journey from the kitchen to the dining room without a hitch, and as I enter the dining room and see the table in sight, I know that I'm home and dry. But as I step into the room one of the twins, both of whom are sitting on the floor playing, throws her stuffed Remy the rat toy out in front of me. It's too late for me to dodge it, and I go flying, the gravy boat flying out in front of me, swilling the table with its contents before smashing on the floor. Everyone in the room looks towards me, lying on the floor, miraculously without a drop of gravy on myself (although sadly the same can't be said for much else in the room). Valerie runs back into the room and screams when she sees what has happened to her gravy. It's the kind of scream usually reserved for attractive, blonde eighteen-year-olds to let out before they get hacked to pieces in horror movies.

'You did that on purpose,' I say accusingly at the twin who committed the crime, only for her to shake her head ferociously in denial.

'Louise, did you trip Roxie?' her mum asks her. Again, she shakes her head, so Millie turns her attention to her other daughter.

'Lisa, did Louise trip Roxie on purpose? It's OK to tell the truth.'

'Nope,' Lisa tells her mum. 'She just fell.'

'It's those stupid shoes,' Val says angrily. 'No one could walk in those heels.'

'I can walk in these heels just fine,' I insist. 'I'm telling you, she threw her doll in front of me.'

'Really, Roxie, blaming a child,' Valerie says, shaking her head.

I look over at Louise who is hugging her toy tightly. I'll say this for them – they're loyal to each other.

'You've ruined Christmas,' Val concludes solemnly.

'Mum, come on, don't be so hard on Roxie,' Mark says, jumping to my defence. 'No one has accidents on purpose.'

'Mark, it wasn't an accident,' I insist.

‘I’m sure the kids didn’t do it on purpose,’ Bea says, throwing her thoughts into the mix. ‘You know what kids are like, with their toys everywhere. It’s no one’s fault.’

‘I’m telling you, she did it on purpose,’ I reply.

Val gasps.

‘Look, let’s just have dinner,’ Mark insists. ‘I’ll clean this up after. It’s not going anywhere, is it?’

‘Well, it might be a little dry, but fine’, Valerie says, giving in.

I resist the urge to say that if she’d cooked it to perfection, it wouldn’t need gravy to make it moist, but then again, just because I know that to be true, it doesn’t mean I could do a better job.

Everyone takes a seat at the table, the room an equal mix of spilled gravy and awkward silence.

Everyone loads up their plates with a look of sadness, like something is missing from the table. Not unlike the solemn looks I’d imagine if this was the first Christmas since Granddad passed, his empty chair just sitting there, so obviously and distractingly empty, like the gap from a missing tooth you can’t stop sticking your tongue inside.

Gravy isn’t that much of a big deal, even in Yorkshire, right? I consider saying this out loud, so that everyone can get a grip, but it is universally known that gravy is the glue that holds the Yorkshire man together.

Ste takes a potato from his plate and dips it in a gravy pool on the tablecloth before popping it into his mouth.

I just can’t believe how much a stupid brown liquid means to them and what an impact it’s going to have on their entire day. Everyone looks so miserable and I feel begrudgingly guilty for being the cause of it. I’m sorry it happened, but it’s just gravy. Is the silent treatment really necessary? Maybe their mouths are just too dry to speak without it, or maybe they’re just worried about finally learning what carrots taste like without it? Or, worse, maybe it’s Val’s awful cooking they’re worried about because, maybe, everything she makes tastes horrible in the ancient pots and pans she uses, resulting in dryer-

than-a-desert food with a horrible taste that only a swamp of gravy can counteract... That's a lot of maybes, though. Maybe I just can't do anything right.

I guess it doesn't matter how or why – all that matters is that I have ruined dinner. I push my food around on my plate, my appetite long gone.

A squeaky voice breaks the awkward silence, snapping me from my thoughts.

'Let's play a game,' Millie suggests. 'Lift everyone's spirits.'

'What a lovely idea,' Val says, smiling widely.

Oh, yeah, fab idea, because this worked out so well for me the last time. If there's one thing I'm learning about the extended Wright family, it's that they just love playing games, and not only do you not always realise you're playing one, but they will bend the rules to their will.

'Well, I was thinking, because it's Christmas and we have unexpected guests who we don't have gifts for, we should take it in turns to say what we'd give each other today, if we could.'

Oh, my God, that sounds so lame.

'That's a great idea,' Oscar replies. 'I'll pour the wine while we get started.'

If anyone is wondering what they can get me, a bigger glass would be a great place to start.

'I'll start,' Millie chirps excitedly. 'I'd get the girls new tents for their school trip next year.'

'That's a boring present,' Lisa/Louise call out from the kids' table.

'It's a useful present,' she corrects them. 'Do you want to be the only kids there without a cool tent?'

Neither of them replies, obviously not seeing the importance. I imagine they'd rather have an iPad or an axe, or whatever the evil little duo are into.

'I'd get you a rainbow diamond,' Alex tells her, and I wish I had my phone to google whether or not that's a real thing. She smiles widely at the thought.

'Maybe you could finally give her another child,' Val adds. 'She's not getting

any younger.'

'Yeah, OK, don't go on about it,' Millie insists moodily. 'We're working out the practicalities. Obviously, I'd love lots more kids.'

'You can't leave it too long, or nature will make your plans for you,' Val reminds them.

'We don't want to leave it too long, but we'll definitely be getting married before we have kids, so you'll have your extra grandkids eventually,' Mark assures his mum with a laugh.

I feel my body stiffen as he speaks for both of us about something so huge that we've never discussed before. He says it as though it's an unspoken fact. As much as I want to say something, to stop him thinking this immediately, now isn't the time.

'I'd get Ste some clothes,' Oscar chimes in, as he fills Ste's glass.

'Random,' Ste laughs.

'Is it?' Oscar says under his breath. I can only imagine this is a dig at Steve's sense of style – or lack thereof.

As Oscar goes to fill up his daughter's glass, she stops him.

'None for me, thanks,' she replies.

'What? Why?' her dad asks. 'White wine is your favourite.'

'It's full of calories,' Mel insists.

'Oh, so that's why you're not eating much dinner,' her mum replies. 'Not just because there's no gravy.'

'Exactly,' Mel says.

It's so annoying, to see a girl so skinny, complaining about needing to lose weight when my chubby arse is sitting opposite her. I could happily stay the size I am forever, but it's people saying things like this that cause my insecurities to rear their ugly head. I think I'll be giving dessert a miss this evening – not least because I'll probably spill the custard.

'I'd give Mel liposuction, so she could eat whatever she wanted,' Ste tells her

sweetly, squeezing her hand.

I see Mel roll her eyes at her boyfriend, but he's oblivious. And a complete asshole, I can now safely conclude.

'I'd give you something pretty to match your ring,' Mark tells me, adding: 'I still might.'

'A pearl necklace,' Ste laughs, his joke thankfully going over the heads of anyone over forty and below ten.

'That's very materialistic,' Mel ticks him off.

'Because liposuction was so romantic,' Mark replies.

'OK, children, settle down,' Oscar reminds them.

I think to myself for a moment. What would I give Mark right now? Nothing I can say out loud, over dinner, in front of his parents, that's for sure.

'I'd give Roxie a hat,' Bea laughs. 'You weren't wrong about needing a hairdryer.'

Now that my hair is fully dry, I look like I've had a perm. It might not be my preferred style, but I didn't think it looked awful – until now, especially after the sniggers from other members of the family that follow her remark.

'Bea, don't be like that,' Mark says. 'You look cute, Rox. She's just messing.'

'Roxie knows I'm teasing,' Bea says in her defence. 'She said herself that her hair looked awful if she air-dried it.'

That's not what I said, but I don't have the strength or the confidence to argue right now.

'Said the ironing board,' Kerry mutters, jumping to my defence like the sweet, friendly wildcard she is.

'Nice,' Bea says sarcastically. 'Really mature. I suppose I'm an ironing board because I'm wearing a long, floral dress? Or is it because my chest is flat?'

'It's both, Be-atch. So why don't you leave Roxie alone?'

'Kerry, control yourself,' Val snaps at her. 'Do you want me to send you

home to your parents?’

Val’s threat is aggressive, and not unlike the kind you’d make to a naughty child.

Kerry backs down. She doesn’t say anything, but her silence is evidence of her retreat.

‘Let’s not play this any more,’ Oscar says. ‘If we can’t place nice.’

Everyone nods or mutters in agreement. Millie strops slightly because we’ve ruined her game.

Another awkward silence follows, everyone taking it in turns to glance around the room, looking for someone to fill the quiet. Not even the twins are making a peep.

As everyone finishes up with their dinner, Bea pipes up again.

‘I have something fun we can do,’ she says, all smiles. ‘Roxie, when you said you were a writer, it made me curious. So I did a little Facebook snooping...’

What is it with women, thinking Facebook is like their own private MI5 database that they can hit up whenever they need a little intel on anyone. I keep my profile as locked down as possible, but there’s only so much you can keep from people. I guess, if she’s friends with Mark, she already knows way more about my life than I’m happy with.

‘So, I happened to happen upon a certain Roxie Pratt,’ she continues, but before she has chance to say anything else, Val interrupts.

‘Your surname is Pratt?’ she laughs. ‘No wonder you can’t wait to marry Mr Wright. Roxie Wright sounds much better.’

It doesn’t, actually – it sounds like a cleaning product.

‘Actually, I’m keeping my own name,’ I inform her, proudly.

‘Are you?’ a chorus of voices reply in surprise. Val, obviously, and Millie. But one of the voices belongs to Mark. I guess we’ve never discussed this either.

‘Yeah,’ I reply. ‘Well, I’m an only child, and the surname Pratt is actually one of the ones heading for extinction in this country. Plus, I’ve worked so

hard to make a name for myself – under my own name – so it would be detrimental to my career to change it now.’

‘I think it’s quite clear that you’re one of those women who put their career before anything,’ Val says, shaking her head.

‘Well, funny you should say that, because I happened upon a few articles by a certain Roxie Pratt, and I thought it might be nice to share one with everyone,’ Bea says, grinning like a maniac as she pulls a piece of paper from her pocket. ‘I hope you don’t mind, Oscar – I printed it in the study.’

‘Not at all,’ he replies. ‘It will be nice to hear more about Roxie’s work.’

‘While I was in there, I noticed the pair of you had broken your bed,’ she adds.

‘What?’ Val gasps. ‘How do you break a bed?’

Bea smiles.

‘This article will probably clear that up,’ she says, holding eye contact with me before turning her attention to the piece of paper and reading aloud: “‘I tried out all the famous sex scenes from movies and this is what happened””.

The grin on her face is one of victory. She knows she’s got me. She’s read all my articles and found one of the most damning. One written recently, so it’s obvious that it’s Mark I tested these out with.

‘Bea, come on, leave it,’ Mark insists. He usually has the patience of a saint, but I can tell she’s getting to him. He is so easygoing and so hard to piss off, but I think everything that has happened over the past few days has piled up high, and it’s starting to bother him.

‘No, I want to hear,’ Val insists. ‘Read.’

‘Aw, Mark, are you embarrassed? It says Roxie is trying this out with her willing partner, so I’m going to assume that’s you. Don’t be shy,’ Bea giggles. ‘It’s actually so so funny, I really like it.’

Considering my articles are supposed to be funny, light-hearted and pure entertainment, the atmosphere at this table is intense.

‘Come on, girls,’ Millie says, rushing to her feet. ‘Time to wash our hands.’

With Millie, Lisa and Louise out of the room, Bea continues.

‘So, the first one is *Titanic*,’ she starts, as Mark drops his head into his hands.

I know that I’m a talented writer, and I’ve always been so proud of my work, but right now, I feel terrible about every word I’ve ever written.

‘OK, here we go. “Ah, the famous steamy scene in *Titanic* where young love birds Jack and Rose finally consummate their union in the back of a car. Booking a cruise seemed like an extreme measure for one paragraph of an article, so I had to make do with the back of my boyfriend’s BMW, parked in a secluded spot on a cold night so that we could perfectly replicate the steamed-up windows. How was it?” Roxie asks. “4/5 – Perfectly sexy and suitably steamy, but you’re seriously limited, position-wise, stuck in the back of a car, and it felt a little bit like dogging.”’

Bea purses her lips, pausing to glance around the room for reactions.

‘Roxie, you’re so funny,’ Kerry compliments me, but no one else says a word.

‘More?’ Bea asks.

‘No,’ Mark replies.

‘Yeah, more,’ Ste requests, a little keener than I’d like.

‘Yes, read on,’ Val insists.

I feel my cheeks growing warmer with embarrassment. I can’t believe one simple dinner has resulted in my feeling so bad about my body, my job and my life generally.

‘Next,’ Bea giggles, clearing her throat. ‘*Risky Business*. “Let me start by saying that sex in a public place is illegal, and no one reading this should try it. I did what I did in the name of journalism. 2/5 – Having sex on a train is risky business indeed. It’s hard enough finding a private spot, but even then you’re constantly on edge that someone is going to walk in. Plus, it took a few journeys before we found a train old enough to not have CCTV in all carriages.”’

‘Marcus, you had sex on a train?’ his mum snaps. ‘What the hell were you thinking?’

‘Mum, leave it,’ he replies, his face still in his hands. ‘And Bea, I’m not kidding, stop it right now.’

‘Come on, Mark, don’t be a spoilsport. The Mark I’m reading about in this article certainly sounds like a good laugh,’ Bea reasons. ‘Just a couple more. The next one is from *Twilight: Breaking Dawn* – that’s cute, Roxie, appealing to the kids, too. “At the time of writing, I have never broken a bed” – there you go, you’ve fulfilled that dream now – “and I didn’t see any sense in doing so for the sake of an article. Now, I haven’t read the books, and I only watched the sex scene for the purpose of this article. All I know is that one person is a sparkly vampire, and someone rips a pillow to pieces, so I covered my boyfriend in body glitter before insisting he not be gentle with me. With me not having the strength, and my boyfriend not having the inclination, to destroy a pillow mid-sex, I ripped the stuffing out a pillow and scattered it around the bed like Twi-hard rose petals. I also insisted my boyfriend give me a love bite during. 5/5 – we may not have followed the scene to the letter, but it was pretty hot.” Ooh, steamy,’ Bea laughs.

Kerry cackles again. She’s loving this, and taking it exactly as intended – as a joke – but Mark’s mum is glaring at me furiously, like she’s angry at me for leading her son astray.

‘One more,’ Bea says.

‘I’m not feeling well,’ Mel interrupts. ‘I need to go to the bathroom.’

‘There, look, you’ve made Mel feel uncomfortable, and you’re making us feel uncomfortable,’ Mark tells Bea.

‘Mark, this is Roxie’s job,’ Bea reminds him. ‘I don’t feel ashamed when I cure a child, so why should Roxie feel bad about this. You’re proud of this, aren’t you, Roxie?’

When I published it, and I received thousands of likes, shares and positive comments, I felt so proud. Some people found it funny, others said it inspired them to try and replicate a few scenes with their partner, and others even suggested I write a follow-up article where I tried out even more sex scenes, like the girl-on-girl sex scene between Nina and Lily in *Black Swan*, or the famous *Brokeback Mountain* sex scene – I’m not sure if they were suggesting

we do it in a tent, or in the butt, but either way I was so happy with this article, I didn't feel like it needed a sequel.

'Yes,' I tell her. 'I'm very proud of it.'

'Then I'll read one more,' she replies, 'because I found the *Ghost* one especially amusing. Although I did like the *Team America World Police* one where you tried out as many positions as possible in a short space of time.'

It's at this point that I realise hardly anyone in the room is speaking, and that even Millie is hanging around in the doorway, listening. Bea's audience is captivated – I guess that's good journalism.

“A potter's wheel is surprisingly hard to come by – well, not literally, if *Ghost* is anything to go by”,’ Bea reads. “I must admit, I had to half-arse this one a little, because I didn't have the right tools for the job, and it was the day before my article was due. I knew I couldn't write a list like this without mentioning *Ghost*, so I had to improvise. One of the girls at work brought me in some Play-Doh to take home with me. I cut the sleeves off one of my boyfriend's shirts and sat in it, playing with my Play-Doh as 'Unchained Melody' played in the background. 4/5 – the sex part was pretty much just our usual standard of awesome, but the fact I couldn't make a vase out of Play-Doh frustrated me to the point where I just made a dick instead. Photo below.” Does anyone want to see the photo?’

'Enough,' Mark yells, jumping to his feet before storming out of the room.

'I thought it was great,' Kerry tells me quietly. 'Really funny.'

'Yeah,' Bea echoes sweetly. 'That hit the spot.'

Chapter Sixteen

I leave the dining room about five minutes after Mark, but by the time I catch up with him in the study, he's already in bed, despite it being so early. I slip off my outfit and hop in with him.

'Your ex is a bitch,' I tell him with a slight laugh.

'She shouldn't have done that,' he agrees. 'You did write those words, though. All she did was read it out.'

'Yeah, to your parents,' I reply. 'That's out of order'

He sighs deeply.

'Well, I guess they were going to find out what your writing was like sooner or later. And they'd be crazy to think we weren't having sex already.'

'With that body, of course they would,' I jokily reply. Under the covers I place two fingertips on his thigh and walk them seductively up his leg.

'Roxie, don't,' he replies, pushing my hand away.

'Whoa, OK, what is happening to us?' I ask, sitting up suddenly.

'Nothing, I'm just not in the mood,' he replies.

'You're always in the mood,' I remind him. 'You only have one mood: really fucking horny.'

Mark sits up next to me, a serious look on his face.

'Look, after what just happened – notably my parents getting a detailed description of sex positions we've tried – I just don't feel like it right now.'

‘But we keep striking out,’ I tell him.

‘So what?’ he replies. ‘It’s not a big deal.’

‘It is.’

‘No, it’s not. It’s not as much of a big deal as you suddenly saying you’re not going to take my surname,’ he hits back. I should’ve known that was still on his mind. Well, two can play at that game.

‘I never said I’d take your name,’ I point out.

‘That’s just what people do,’ he replies. ‘That’s just normal.’

‘Oh, so I’m not normal?’ I ask. ‘Because I thought what was not normal was to tell everyone about your plans for someone else’s uterus without asking them first – that’s not normal.’

Mark looks thoroughly confused now.

‘What are you talking about now?’ he asks.

‘You, telling people how many kids you’re going to get out of me, like I’m some kind of baby vending machine.’

‘What’s the problem with me talking about us having kids?’

‘I don’t want them.’

For a moment, Mark is rendered dumbstruck.

‘Everyone wants kids,’ he replies.

‘Not me.’

‘Why would you not want kids?’ he asks, a look of genuine confusion on his face.

‘I just don’t. Some people do, some people don’t – both choices are fine.’

‘Well, I want kids,’ he tells me. ‘I want to get married, travel the world for a few years with the charity, helping kids that need it, then come back, settle down and have my own.’

‘There’s only one problem with that plan,’ I point out. ‘It doesn’t involve me. I’ve worked so hard to get where I am at work, there’s no way I’m giving it

up to travel and then come back and pop out kids at your command. No way.'

'I think you'd be embarrassed if you could hear how selfish you sound right now,' he tells me sadly.

That's always the response from people who don't understand an individual who doesn't want children – that they're selfish. Like how dare you live on this planet and not reproduce. People always demand a reason, but I believe that, simply, 'because I don't want to' is a good enough reason.

'What if you don't give up work completely?' he bargains, but it's not just that.

'Do you know what my mum tells me every time she stands up to go to the bathroom?' I ask him. 'She says "I could hold my bladder until I had you".'

'She's joking,' he laughs.

'She might be,' I reply. 'But it will have such a huge, detrimental effect on my body, and that's a sacrifice you won't ever need to consider. My body will change for you, too, you know. My "downstairs" won't be the same. You know how much you love that I go off like a firework the second you touch me? That will probably change.'

'I don't mind,' he replies.

'Oh, yippee for you,' I snap.

I know that Mark thinks I'm being selfish, not wanting to ruin my body to bring kids into the world, but he's being selfish, too, by just expecting me to. I remember watching an interview with Robbie Williams, where he was talking about what it was like to be a dad. He was asked what it was like watching his wife giving birth and he described it as being like watching his favourite pub burning down. As funny as that is, it's very telling of the situation. Men don't bat an eyelid at women forever changing their "downstairs", because men will make the sacrifice for a baby. Nothing changes for them, sex-wise. They don't have to go through pregnancy, or childbirth.

'You'll change your mind,' Mark assures me.

'Erm, I'm nearly thirty,' I remind him. 'If I haven't come around to the idea

by now, I don't think I ever will.'

'Look, why are we talking about this now?' he asks.

'Because it's important,' I reply.

'I can't do this now, and I can't do it here. Can we just go to sleep?'

'Fine.'

'Fine,' he echoes, matching my frosty tone.

I roll over on to my side, facing away from Mark. He doesn't say anything, and neither do I. I don't think either of us knows what to say exactly because we've never really had a proper argument. Sure, we've bickered, but about stupid things like the thermostat or who should win *The Great British Bake Off*.

This is that 'going to bed angry' thing I've heard so much about, but never experienced with Mark. I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

Chapter Seventeen

After whipping the internet cable from Oscar's PC and plugging it into my laptop, I open up the dashboard and I'm ready to write. Not only is this my second day waking up here, but my deadline is looming, too, and Kath is expecting something good about 'meeting the in-laws'. I've realised that now, more than ever, I absolutely cannot write that article, because not only do I not have anything positive to say at all, but there's nothing at all relatable about this situation.

My most successful articles are my more personal ones – it makes sense to write about what you know, right? As I wrack my brain for a topic to write about, I play with a lock of my curly hair, twirling it around my finger.

My conversation with Mark last night has left me feeling anxious. It isn't just that one conversation that has concerned me, but our argument about our future was definitely the straw that broke the camel's back. Since the moment we arrived here, everything that has happened has made me worry that maybe Mark and I are not right for each other. We love each other – I know that without a doubt – but maybe we don't know each other as well as we thought we did. As soon as we get home, we're going to have to talk – a lot – to catch up on all the things it turns out we don't know. Everything from his love affair with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to where he sees himself in ten years – all bases need covering.

For now, I think it might be a good idea to write something positive, something that will remind me exactly why I'm marrying Mark: '10 signs you've met the man you're going to marry'.

I stretch out my fingers and begin typing. We use a really useful program at

work, which means I can work from home, then, as soon as I'm done writing, I simply hit save, my editor reviews it and then it's published. The hardest part is going to be getting it written, but I'm feeling inspired.

Reason 1: he looks at you like a Minion looks at a Banana. I think that's a great point to start with. I've considered making the same point in a few different ways, like: he looks at you like he looks at a waiter carrying pizza towards him, or: he loves you as much as Kanye West loves Kanye West. The point I'm trying to make is that, if you meet someone who cannot hide how much he adores you, you've found yourself a keeper. There is nothing worse than dating someone – or, worse, being in a relationship with them – and finding yourself wondering some days: does he even like me? You want someone whose face turns into the emoji with hearts for eyes the second he sees you.

Reason 2: the sex is fire. Having sex with someone is easy (9/10 times anyway) but being sexually compatible with someone is truly a gift. You can meet the most handsome, charming, funny, sexy, rich, wonderful man who ticks all your boxes, but if your sex life is rubbish, there's no way you're going to be as happy as you should be. Don't ever let anyone make you feel like you're wrong for thinking that sex is important, because it is so important. It isn't down to one person to make sex work, it's the responsibility of both of you, so you both should be putting in equal effort. If you've found a man you adore who can make you scream as often as he makes you laugh, you're a very lucky lady.

Writing this reminds me just how important sex is, and it gets me thinking about my spell of striking out with Mark over the last few days. I know three days doesn't seem like a long time to go without it, but that's a long time for Mark and me. It's not like we're not getting the opportunity, but when we do, it just isn't working for whatever reason. Maybe it's just bad luck – I can't stand the thought of it being something more than that. It's not even like it's the actual sex part I miss. If this were just a case of me being super horny, I have something hidden in my handbag that could take care of that in a second – it's being intimate with Mark that I miss. Sex is a way for us to be close to each other in a way that no one else gets to experience with either of us.

Reason 3: when you think about your future, you see an *Up*-style montage of

how happy you're going to be – only with much less tragedy, and more trips to the zoo. And you stop imagining this life before you get to the part where one of you dies and the other has to live a miserable life alone.

As I write, I can't help but think about how things are with Mark. I feel like this article is turning into a literary representation of the problems we're having right now. I know I do my best work when I'm writing about real life, but I'm not sure if this is healthy expression or just making me obsess over things even more than I already was.

I attempt to run my hand through my hair, only for it to get stuck in my tangled curls. As I sigh deeply there is only one thing I know for sure: this article is crap. No matter what your opinion of the article Bea read last night, you can't say it was boring, and you can't say the writing wasn't good. This piece that I'm writing today is just pure rubbish, but I can't get my head off my own problems enough to write anything good. When your head is in a bad place, your creativity will follow a similar pathway. When I'm in a bad mood, my writing gets much darker, my humour gets more cynical, and my pessimism thrives. There's no way I'm going to write anything of any worth today, so I open Skype and call up Gil.

'You caught me on my way out for coffee,' he answers – no 'hello' necessary. 'Come with. Get changed though, you're not coming in that jumper.'

I am wearing a pretty ugly jumper right now, borrowed from Val's box that should be labelled 'Misc 80s/90s clothing that needs burning ASAP'.

For a fortysomething, Gil doesn't look a day over thirty-five. I say fortysomething because I have no idea how old Gil actually is. Along with his real name, Gil keeps his date of birth under wraps. I only know that he's in his forties based on how long he's known my parents. He looks good and he's in peak physical shape, so who cares? Certainly not the swarms of men who fall at his feet. It isn't just his looks that make him irresistible to both sexes (he's had a few female stalkers in his time), it's his cool confidence and ability to see the humour in all situations, no matter how bad things get. He's so irresponsible, but so charming with it. He's the hare, and the tortoise, knowing how to take it easy when he feels like it, but always getting what he

wants, too.

‘Erm, I can’t,’ I tell him. ‘I’m stuck in the Dales.’

I fill Gil in on my situation, only for him to fall about laughing.

‘Babe, you’re living an absolute nightmare,’ he cackles. ‘And everyone sounds like they need therapy. Mark’s gay dad, most of all.’

‘Exactly,’ I reply, glad somebody else gets it. ‘Wait, what?’

‘Mark’s gay dad,’ Gil replies with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

‘Are you on something?’ I laugh. ‘Mark’s dad isn’t gay. He’s married – to a woman.’

Gil rolls his eyes at my naivety.

‘I’ve had sex with plenty of men who had wives,’ he reminds me. ‘Come on, Roxie, you grew up around theatre people. If anyone knows gay, it’s you. Everything you’ve told me about this dude screams gay.’

I think about it for a moment. Oscar does have a good knowledge of theatre – then again, so does my dad. He has great style and excellent taste, except for when he doesn’t, but that just reminds me of what Gil is like because if he thinks something is stylish, then he can’t be told otherwise, and believe me, I’ve tried. As I recall Oscar’s fashion advice and his finely tuned gaydar, I wonder whether Gil might be on to something.

‘You’re stereotyping,’ I tick him off. ‘And reaching.’

Mark pokes his head into the room and whispers to me, asking me if I’m ready to go.

‘Mark’s dad is reaching...’ Oscar replies. ‘*Around.*’

I snap the lid closed on my laptop quickly.

‘Was that Gil?’ Mark asks. I nod. ‘Hope you said “hi” for me.’

I exhale deeply, feeling relatively confident Mark didn’t hear a word of that.

‘You OK?’ Mark asks.

‘I’m fine,’ I reply. ‘Just stressed. My article is due and I haven’t written

anything yet.'

'You need to clear your head,' he tells me. 'A little time away from the screen will do that. Come on, let's go to the pub for lunch.'

I smile and nod in agreement, but that's not what I need at all. Even without my other problems, I've never understood the argument that if you're struggling to write you should just stop and try again later because, if I stopped every time I struggled, most of the time I'd never get any work done.

'Don't forget your walking boots, Shorty,' Mark teases. 'We've got those big hills to trek up and down.'

'Oh, goodie,' I reply sarcastically. 'Can't wait.'

Chapter Eighteen

Learning from our last family trip to the pub, today we've opted not to sit all at one table. Instead, we've broken off into groups based on who we get on with, so obviously I'm just propping up the bar with Kerry, me on the customer side, her behind it, serving, so she can keep us in drinks.

'I just can't get over how funny you are,' she persists. 'That article was amazing. Do you have more stuff like that I can read?'

'God, loads,' I tell her honestly. 'I'll send you a few that I think you might like.'

'Thanks,' she replies, placing another vodka and orange down in front of me. 'Maybe I can learn a trick or two to improve my sex life. Absolutely horrendous dry spell at the moment.'

'Tell me about it,' I reply under my breath, but not so quiet it can't be heard.

'Ooh, what's up?' Kerry asks nosily. 'The machine not getting oiled like it usually is?'

'I think it's just being here, around his family; he's either not in the mood, or we try and it goes wrong... I don't know what to do, but I know I desperately need some alone time with him, and we're not going to get any until we're back in London.'

A little depressed at the situation, I down my drink in one.

A mischievous smile spreads across Kerry's face. I don't know what she's thinking, but I can tell she's stirring up trouble in that head of hers.

'I think I can help,' she tells me, riffing around under the bar.

‘Oh, God, please don’t drug him for me – or anyone else for that matter.’

Kerry laughs.

Before she has chance to say anything else, Millie rushes past me, bumping into me on her way.

‘Sorry,’ she calls back, waving her phone at me, ‘but I’ve got to take this outside.’

‘Do you have signal, too?’ I ask, frustrated. Everyone has signal but me.

‘Yeah. And I’m not going to drug anyone, you stupid cow,’ she says, punching me playfully (although a little roughly) on the arm as she drops a book down on the bar in front of me. ‘This place is a B&B and according to the book it’s empty right now. How about I pass you a set of keys and you and Mark sneak off upstairs for a bit of alone time?’

Just in case I wasn’t sure what ‘alone time’ was, Kerry wiggles her eyebrows widely.

I’m about to politely decline her crazy offer when my own words echo around in my head: don’t ever let anyone make you feel like you’re wrong for thinking that sex is important, because it is so important.

‘Thank you,’ I say quietly, picking up the keys she’s left on top of the bar.

‘Room eight,’ she tells me. ‘And you’re welcome. You can just give me some decent pulling tips later and we’ll call it quits.’

‘Deal,’ I reply, pulling myself to my feet. I go to take a step, just as Mel rushes past me, not saying a word as she dashes for the loos.

‘She’s a weird one,’ Kerry informs me. ‘Bulimic, for sure.’

‘Is she?’ I ask.

‘It’s obvious,’ Kerry replies, sipping her pint thoughtfully. ‘She says she’s on this diet, she’s throwing up after she eats – she’s so skinny.’

‘That’s a shame,’ I reply.

‘It is,’ she agrees. ‘Now, go fuck my cousin.’

I laugh awkwardly as I walk off, spying Mark watching football on the big

screen. As I'm walking over there, Ste makes a beeline for me.

'Hey, Roxie,' he chirps.

'Hi,' I reply. 'Just on my way to talk to Mark about something important.'

'He's watching football,' Ste tells me, as though my woman brain is too tiny to come to that conclusion on my own. 'We could go out to the smoking area, chat, get to know each other better. They've got heaters and blankets out there, it's really nice.'

'Thanks,' I reply. 'But I really need to talk to Mark.'

'Roxie, come on,' Ste insists. 'We're both bored, we're both lonely...'

'Yeah, come on, Roxie,' Kerry interrupts. I don't know how long she's been listening, but she's down our end of the bar now. 'Go outside, Ste. I'll send her out in a minute with drinks for you both.'

Ste, wide-eyed with delight, rushes out through the side door, into the outdoor smoking area. I look at Kerry for an explanation.

'That pervert bothering you?' she asks me. 'You can tell me if he is, he's a dirty little bastard. Last time I saw him, he got drunk and tried to touch my tits.'

'He was touching my leg under the table last time we were here,' I admit, shaking my head at how disgusting he is.

'Well, never mind,' she says, locking the door he just walked out of. 'Off you pop – go find Mark.'

'Let him back in once I'm gone,' I laugh.

'Nah, he can die out there for all I care,' she says flippantly. 'Might even turn the heaters off.'

Certain this is just Kerry's weird sense of humour, I continue on my quest to get Mark's attention and drag him upstairs for a quickie.

He's in full-on football mode, eyes glued to the screen, gesturing wildly at the referee's decisions he doesn't agree with, gesturing even more wildly when something does go in his team's favour.

I place my hands on his shoulder and whisper into his ear.

‘Can I borrow you for a moment, please?’ I ask, my unmistakable sexy voice engaged.

‘Sure,’ he replies cautiously.

I lead him over to the bottom of the stairs, checking no one is watching us before dragging him up.

‘Rox, where are we going?’ he asks me, confused by my strange behaviour.

I continue to lead him down the corridor as I simultaneously explain to him and hunt for room eight.

‘Your wonderful cousin Kerry has given us some keys to an empty room,’ I tell him as I clap eyes on room eight. ‘That means we can have a bit of fun.’

‘Roxie, I don’t think this is a good idea,’ Mark insists, but I won’t be put off, because this *is* important.

‘Come on, it’ll be romantic,’ I insist as I unlock the door. ‘In this beautiful room... full of ducks.’

I finish my sentence as I clap eyes on the décor. I thought downstairs had a lot of duck-themed items, but room eight... room eight is something else. This room isn’t only full of ducks, but they’re all real. Not alive, obviously, although that might be preferable to the array of taxidermy birds surrounding us, dotted around at all angles, staring at us with their dead, beady eyes.

‘OK, if I wasn’t completely against the idea before, I am dead against it now,’ he tells me. ‘I can’t do it with these watching me.’

‘Only this week you told me you’d be able to have sex with me if you were on fire, or I were covered in mud... You’re telling me a few stuffed birds are going to put you off?’

Mark thinks for a moment.

‘How do you always manage to get your own way?’ he asks me.

‘You must really like me,’ I tease him. ‘Now take your clothes off, and get on that bed.’

Mark, always eager to make me happy, does as he is told, and I gladly slip off my own disgusting, borrowed outfit before joining him.

I know this was supposed to be a quickie, but I've missed this so much and I want to take my time as much as possible so I climb on top of him, pinning his wrists to the bed as I kiss him slowly on the lips.

'You make me crazy,' he says breathlessly. 'You finally have me, and you're going to tease me?'

'Only for a few seconds,' I whisper, grazing his lips with mine. 'Then I'm going to run my tongue all over your body, until you say...'

'Oh, my God,' cries a little old lady, standing in the bathroom doorway, wrapped in a towel. Mark and I jump to our feet. Unable to put our clothes on quickly enough, I grab the duvet to wrap around my body while Mark protects his modesty with this poor seventy-something lady's floral dressing gown, hastily wrapping it around his body.

'I'm so sorry, so so sorry,' I babble.

'Get out, get out,' the old lady screams.

As we snatch up our clothes, I don't think things could possibly get any worse. Until Mark's Auntie Gail comes rushing in.

'Mrs Wilson, are you OK?' she asks, before clapping eyes on the two of us, standing naked over by the bed. 'What... what is going on?'

'I thought this room was supposed to be empty. There wasn't anything in the book,' I reply, not really explaining what we're doing here.

'All of the rooms are occupied, but nothing is in the book,' she informs me. 'People are staying here who got stuck when the snow set in. I can't very well charge them for that, can I?'

'Auntie, I'm so sorry,' Mark says sincerely. 'And, madam, I am so sorry you had to see what you saw.'

As Mrs Wilson calms down a little, I can see she's coming round a little to the fit, nearly naked young man in her room. That doesn't make it OK, though.

‘I’m sorry, too,’ I tell them both. ‘Kerry told me the room would be empty; she gave us the keys so we could have some time alone. We’ve been struggling, you see,’ I tell the old lady.

‘No harm,’ she replies. ‘Just a shock, that’s all.’

‘Please don’t tell my mum,’ Mark begs his auntie. Before she has chance to say yes, Valerie appears in the doorway.

‘Tell me wh... oh, my God,’ Val says, changing sentence mid-course. She turns to me angrily: ‘You’ve made my son a deviant.’

‘Mum, it’s not her fault,’ he tells her, sounding like a naughty child who has just been caught doing something he shouldn’t.

‘He’s a grown man, Val. I don’t make him do anything.’

‘He feels pressured,’ she tells me. ‘He feels like he has to for your silly job writing about strange sexual practices.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Mark laughs, but his mum isn’t having any of it. She storms off, Gail following close behind her, but not before apologising to Mrs Wilson again. Now it’s just the three of us.

‘I really am sorry,’ I tell her again. I can’t apologise enough.

‘That’s OK, my love,’ Mrs Wilson replies. ‘I was young once. Do you want me to shut myself in the bathroom for fifteen minutes?’

‘No,’ Mark replies quickly. ‘We appreciate the offer, but no.’

‘Well, maybe I’ll pop in for five minutes so you can put your clothes on,’ she kindly offers. Once Mrs Wilson is out of the way, we hurriedly get dressed.

‘I am mortified,’ Mark tells me as we head back downstairs. ‘This trip has just been embarrassing situation after embarrassing situation.’

‘I know,’ I reply. ‘I don’t know how this has happened.’

‘Just... please stop trying so hard,’ he tells me, stopping halfway down the stairs. ‘I appreciate what you’re doing. We just need to be more careful.’

‘OK,’ I reply.

‘I’ll smooth things over with my mum, don’t worry.’

‘OK,’ I say again, but I’m not so sure. His mum has this image of an evil, child-hating, sexual predator of a militant feminist who is leading her son astray and throwing his life dangerously off course. I’m not sure what he can do to smooth things over, and I’m not sure what I can do to change her opinion of me. This just feels like such a messy, hopeless situation, and I’m not sure what we’re going to do.

Chapter Nineteen

‘Truth or dare, Millie?’

‘I’m not sure I want to play this,’ Millie tells Kerry, instead of answering.

‘Come on,’ Kerry whines. ‘You love to play games. And it’s not fair if you always get to pick them, is it?’

After everything that went on at the pub, it wasn’t long before we returned to the Wright house. Although there was an undeniable new awkwardness between Valerie and me, I’m grateful she didn’t tell anyone else what had happened.

Now we’re back at the house, Val and Oscar have gone to bed, the twins are tucked up and sound asleep, and Mel has just left us to go and lie down because she doesn’t feel well.

Millie wanted us to play Who Am I? – the game where you write the name of a famous person on a piece of paper and stick it on the forehead of the person next to you. That person has to ask questions with yes or no answers to try and work out who they are, and it’s usually so much fun, but when Millie told us the ‘really funny’ story about the last time she played, when she wrote Dora the Explorer on Alex, I realised that the game is only fun when played with other like-minded adults. That’s why, when Kerry suggested Truth or Dare, I was delighted. We might finally be able to have some fun – it would just be more fun without Bea, obviously.

‘Fine. Truth,’ Millie gives in.

We’re all sitting in the family room, cuddled up on the sofas, drinking wine, being warmed by the roaring fire. It’s nice. Sitting here with Mark’s arm

around me, it reminds me just how much I love him, and makes me all the more determined to resolve our issues so that we can get back to being the perfect couple we were a few days ago.

‘OK,’ Kerry starts, thinking for a few seconds. ‘What’s the naughtiest thing you’ve ever done?’

Millie considers this carefully for a few seconds.

‘Oh, I know,’ she says, before leaning in and lowering her voice a little. ‘I forgot to pay for my carrier bags when I went shopping a few weeks ago. I had six bags!’

Millie drops her jaw for dramatic effect. Six bags! That’s, like, thirty pence worth of plastic bags she stole that day – naughty indeed.

Kerry laughs wildly.

‘You are a rebel,’ she tells her sarcastically. ‘But I meant naughty as in sexual.’

‘Oh,’ Millie replies, her jaw dropping for real this time. ‘Erm...’

I’d say having phone sex, outside in the snow, with someone who is not your husband is pretty naughty, but what do I know?

‘One time, we did it on the bedroom floor while the kids were asleep in our bed,’ she whispers, a look plastered across her face that suggests she can’t quite believe she’s telling us this.

Alex blushes.

‘Wow,’ Kerry replies. ‘OK, that answer I accept. Your turn to ask someone something.’

‘OK,’ Millie says excitedly, clearly into it now despite her original reservations. ‘Mark. Truth or Dare?’

‘Truth,’ he replies, giving me a squeeze with the arm he has wrapped around me.

‘Of all the moxie sex scenes you replicated with Roxie, which was your favourite?’

‘It was one that didn’t make the article, actually,’ Mark starts. ‘It was the scene from *Romeo + Juliet*, where they’re under the big, white sheets, and you can just tell that they’re so in love. They just don’t give a shit about their problems, all they’re thinking about is each other. I loved recreating that, because it felt right.’

‘You never told me that,’ I reply.

‘Well, you said it was boring,’ he replies with a smile.

I did say that, and now I feel terrible, but I mean that it seemed boring to include as part of the article. I enjoyed it just as much as he did.

I notice that Millie is welling up a little.

‘That’s just beautiful,’ she says.

Millie is a strange girl. She’s shy, with a voice so quiet and squeaky you could mistake her for a mouse. Were it not for her little stunt in the garden, I’d think she was a dull prude. She’s obviously got a trick or two up her sleeve.

‘I’m going to go check on Mel,’ Alex announces, heading for the door.

I bet he is.

‘You chicken,’ Mark calls after him. ‘OK... Ste. Truth or dare?’

‘Truth,’ he replies, cockily.

‘It’s no fun if everyone picks truth,’ Kerry whines, topping up her wine.

‘No, it’s fine,’ Mark insists. ‘What’s the most dishonest thing you’ve ever done?’

Mark asks his question eagerly, and I’m not sure whether he’s just really getting into the game, or trying to get an insight into his little sister’s boyfriend.

A smug grin spreads across Ste’s face.

‘I cheated on my girlfriend once,’ he starts.

‘That it?’ Kerry scoffs, unimpressed.

‘No,’ Ste tells her with a waggle of his finger. ‘So I cheat on her with some girl I met in a nightclub and...’

‘This had better not be my sister you’re talking about,’ Mark interrupts, angrily.

‘It’s not Mel, swear down,’ Ste assures him, his grin snapping straight back into place as he continues telling his tale. ‘So, I think I’ve got away with it but then I realise, holy shit, I’ve got chlamydia.’

‘I don’t want to play any more,’ Millie announces, jumping up and marching off before anyone has chance to change her mind. No one even tries; we’re all just completely captivated by this story.

‘But I’ve been sleeping with my girlfriend since I cheated, so I know she’s going to have it, too. So now I have this problem: if I tell her, she will leave me, and if I don’t tell her, when she realises she’s got chlamydia, she will leave me. So I’ve got to be smart, right? So the doctor has given me tablets to clear mine up, but only enough for one. So I go on the internet, find more of these tablets – same name, I checked, and buy some. Boom, my girlfriend takes them and she’s cured.’

‘That is so dangerous,’ Bea snaps, doctor mode: activated. ‘So, so dangerous.’

‘I couldn’t just leave her with chlamydia,’ he replies in his defence, like he’s a regular House M.D. ‘So, this is when my genius kicks in. I start texting myself, two different conversations. One from work, telling me I might have picked up a bug from a pond I had to clear out when I was doing a gardening job, telling me I need to see a doctor. Then I have another conversation with myself, pretending to be my doctor, telling me that I need to take these antibiotics, and that anyone who has been in close contact with me has to take them, too. I show these to my girlfriend, she doesn’t question it, takes the tablets and we’re both cured: hurrah. Genius, right?’

For a moment, we all just sit, staring at him, trying to absorb what we’ve just heard. It’s not that his story wasn’t clear; it’s just that it’s hard for us to wrap our heads around the fact that he stealth-treated his girlfriend for chlamydia. I’m not a doctor, but even I know that was fucking stupid.

‘You’re an idiot,’ Bea tells him.

Ste seems confused by the fact that no one is impressed by his story, but he isn’t going to let it ruin his fun.

‘OK, Miss Perfect,’ he says to her. ‘Truth or dare?’

‘Dare,’ she replies quickly, not prepared to get caught out by the truth trap.

‘I dare you... to get off with Roxie.’

‘Fuck off, Ste,’ I blurt.

‘Oh, charming,’ Bea laughs. ‘Don’t you want to kiss me?’

‘He’s just being a pervert,’ I reply.

‘Don’t be so hard on him,’ Bea replies. ‘He’s just having fun.’

I don’t care if he’s suggesting this because it’s ‘fun’ or because he’s a pervert, but I’m not going to kiss my fiancé’s ex-girlfriend while he watches. No effing way.

‘You’re a dirty little bastard, Ste,’ Kerry says angrily. ‘Piss off, you’re not playing any more.’

‘Fine,’ he snaps. ‘You’re all boring anyway.’

‘Oh, yeah, we’re all boring because we’re not indulging his dirty little fantasies,’ Kerry says once he’s gone. ‘Bea, you might as well take a turn.’

‘Roxie,’ she says quickly. ‘Truth or dare?’

‘You can’t ask to French her,’ Kerry chimes in. ‘You seemed really into it when Ste suggested it...’

‘I might pick truth just in case,’ I laugh awkwardly.

Bea pulls her legs up onto the sofa as she thinks about what to ask me.

‘Hmm...’ she says, as though deep in thought. ‘OK, Roxie Pratt, how many people have you slept with?’

‘I can’t answer that,’ I tell her.

‘Well, that’s not a good sign at all, is it?’ she replies with one raised eyebrow.

‘Not because I don’t know how many, but because Mark and I decided not to tell each other our number. I wrote an article, long before I met Mark, about things you should and shouldn’t do in a new relationship, and one of those things was discuss your number.’

‘Why not?’ she asks. ‘Because it’s too high?’

‘Because it’s always going to be both too high and too low,’ I tell her. ‘If you think your partner has slept with loads of people, you’re going to think: “wow, that is high!” Similarly, if it’s a really low number, that can be off-putting, too. It’s best not to talk about it.’

Bea thinks about this for a moment.

‘Well, you said that’s in the early stages of a relationship,’ Bea replies. ‘You guys are way past that now, so surely it’s OK to say it?’

‘I stand by my words,’ I reply firmly.

‘Why?’ Mark asks. ‘I don’t mind if you say it.’

‘I don’t want to say it. What would you say if I asked you?’

‘Two,’ he replies.

I pause for a second.

‘Wait, so, if you’ve only slept with two people...’ Kerry starts, before reaching the screamingly obvious conclusion. As she looks between Bea and me, it’s obvious to everyone that the only two people Mark has slept with are in this room. The fact that Mark was with Bea from being in school until moving to London, and then didn’t have much time for a love life before he met me, totally explains why. I don’t think it’s weird that he’s only slept with two people. But... having more failed relationships under my belt means more notches on my bedpost, so if I come out with a number higher than two (even if it’s only one more), it’s going to reflect badly on me.

‘Mine is two, too,’ Bea tells him, smiling.

‘Well, mine is two digits,’ Kerry laughs. ‘So don’t worry about yours being high, Roxie.’

‘It’s not high. I’m just not prepared to discuss it. I’m sticking to my guns.’

‘If you say so,’ Bea sings.

Mark takes his arm from around me and stands up.

‘I think I’ve had enough of this game,’ he says. ‘Goodnight.’

‘I think I’ll come with you,’ I tell him, but he doesn’t seem too bothered.

‘It’s OK, stay here. You can have a girly chat.’

As soon as it’s just the three of us, Kerry lets out a big, over-the-top yawn.

‘Actually, I’m pretty tired... so, if you two wouldn’t mind, I’m going to bed...’

I think Kerry is just being kind, giving me an excuse to go to Mark, and to get out of hanging out with Bea.

In a matter of minutes we have all said goodnight, but by the time I get to the study, Mark is already fast asleep.

Chapter Twenty

I am starting to feel like I'm in fucking Groundhog Day, and I don't like it. It just feels like I'm doomed to repeat every aspect of this living nightmare for ever. I have washed my hair, only for it to go insanely curly again – like an uncared-for Carrie Bradshaw circa season five.

It just feels like I'm incapable of doing anything right in front of these people, whether it's my hair or seeming like I'm worthy of Mark.

I do sometimes worry about whether or not I'm good enough for him, and I usually find myself feeling scared, because I know he can do better, and I'm terrified he's going to realise that one day. Since meeting Bea, I have realised that I'm not Mark's usual type, but he's the smartest person I know and, if he thinks I'm the right girl for him, I'm certainly not going to question that. I'm a caring, thoughtful, loving girl and any man would be lucky to have me, even Zac Efron.

All I wanted to do was come across as myself and for everyone to fall in love with me like Mark did. Instead, I have somehow managed to paint this picture of a deviant nymphomaniac, without the perk of successfully having sex even once.

Oh, and then there's the pressing matter of this article I'm supposed to be submitting any day now, that I can't write, but have no better ideas for, so here I am, sitting at the desk again, trying to write – *again*.

The blank document is almost as blinding as the blanket of snow outside. Big, open, empty white space, suffocating me.

I wrack my brains for an idea for my article, but with nothing springing to

mind I turn my procrastination level to: full blast. It's no use; I'm not going to come up with anything just sitting here. I need to do something to distract myself for a while.

The men went to the pub earlier, so I didn't really have chance to speak to Mark much this morning. I looked in on Kerry not too long ago, but she's fast asleep. Valerie is playing with the twins while Millie is making some calls in her bedroom. You know, I don't know what it is that's bothering me the most about Millie's sneaky phone calls: the fact she's getting more sexual activity than me, or the fact she's getting better signal. Mel isn't feeling well, so she's in bed, which only leaves Queen Bea for me to hang out with, and I'd rather have a dirty phone call with Millie, even with her squeaky voice, than endure any more Bea time.

If there's one thing guaranteed to distract me and clear my head of real-life nonsense, it's reading a book, and luckily for me, Oscar has loads in his study.

I skim my fingers across their spines before literally judging the books by their covers, taking a quick glance at the blurb before replacing them in the hope I'll find something I fancy. As I pull another one out, though, I realise there's something hidden behind them. Each book I remove is like laying down another piece of a jigsaw puzzle, until I finally move the book that has a nipple behind it. I quickly move all of the books from the shelf, pulling out the magazine hidden behind them. *Young 'n' Hung*, it's called, and just in case I wondered why, there's a big, strapping young man on the front, chopping wood, with the handle of the axe placed just so, so that you can't see *his* chopper. I take the magazine and sit down on the bed, thumbing through pages that look like they've been turned many times before. As I skim through page after page of naked men, some alone, some posing together, and then, finally, the XXX-rated, man-on-man stuff I'd expect to see in a magazine with such a title, I gasp.

Why does Oscar have this? Is it possible that Gil is right, and that my future father-in-law is gay? Is this magazine some sort of cry for help – does he feel trapped in his marriage? The thought of being trapped in a marriage is even more suffocating than this snow. It must be unbearable.

I flick through a few more pages. I've seen some things in my time (mostly on the internet) but this magazine is something else. I mean, what is he doing with that big log (not a euphemism)?... surely he's not going to... oh, my gosh! I'm just getting to the pages that make my eyes feel watery when I hear someone opening the door. I stuff the magazine inside the covers and try to look less suspicious – probably only making myself look even more suspicious than I do already.

'Hello, Valerie,' I say brightly.

'Roxie,' she replies. Amazing, that she can't even bring herself to be pleasant to me. 'I thought you might be busy, but now I see that you're not... I'm here to talk weddings with you.'

'Oh, well, I haven't even thought about that stuff yet. I figured I'd wait until the New Year,' I tell her.

'Nonsense,' she replies. 'You need to strike while the iron is hot. There's no telling what might happen: venues getting booked up, people changing their minds – you should get a move on.'

I can't help but pull a face.

'Weddings are a big deal in this family,' she explains. 'Everyone gets married in the local church – we'll have to show it to you when the snow clears up – and then, obviously, there's the Duck Inn for the reception. Oh, and then there's this.'

Valerie holds up a garment bag in front of me.

'We're not sure where we're getting married yet,' I tell her, but I'm wasting my breath.

'Everyone in this family gets married in the local church,' she informs me. 'Mark won't feel any different. It's tradition. It's also tradition to pass wedding dresses down. Millie wore Alex's mum's dress. Which means... I've brought mine for you to try on.'

Val unzips the bag, removes the dress and holds it up in the air for me to take it in.

Valerie's wedding dress is so seventies, it should be in a museum.

‘I’ll step out while you try it on,’ she says.

‘Val, I appreciate the offer, but I just have so much work to do and...’

‘Roxie, I am trying here,’ she reminds me. ‘Just try it on.’

Is this woman for real? She doesn’t think I’m good enough for her son, to the point where she has no problem vocalising it, and now here she is, planning my wedding and giving me dresses to try on.

If I just try the damn dress on, then it’s done. I can take it off and get on with writing my article.

I reluctantly wiggle off my clothes and step into Val’s dress.

I think this is the most body coverage I’ve ever had going on. From the high, tight neck to the big, poufy chiffon sleeves, to the floor-skimming ruffles of the skirt – this dress is awful, and, just like the snow, and just like my blank document, all of this white is suffocating me. I pop the veil on, just to really complete the look. Yep, I look ridiculous.

‘Decent?’ Val asks, walking in anyway. ‘Oh, Roxie, you look wonderful. Let me zip you up.’

I glance over at the mirror. No. No, I don’t look wonderful. I’d hoped at the very least I might be able to carry this off as a retro look, but it’s not happening. I am humouring her to spare her feelings, but there’s no way I’m wearing this.

‘Beautiful,’ she continues. ‘Like the loo roll cover we had when I was a girl.’

Am I being trolled here?

‘Anyway, I’m just going to check on the twins,’ she tells me, walking off.

‘Wait, I need a hand getting this off,’ I call after her.

‘I left Bea building a snowman with them; they need a hand, too. Just relax, get a feel for the dress.’

I’ll get a feel for the scissors if she doesn’t hurry back. I know I’ve been freezing the entire time I’ve been here, but the high neck, long sleeves and floor-length skirt are making me boiling. I don’t know if it’s having so much skin covered, feeling panicky or a combination of both that’s doing it. Either

way, I need to keep calm.

There's only one thing for it: I shuffle over to the desk and, with no sign of Val, I Skype Gil. Luckily he answers straight away.

'What the actual fuck?' he asks upon seeing me.

'Mark's mum's wedding dress – she says I can borrow it.'

'You look like Miss Havisham,' he replies.

'I feel like her.'

'Take it off – right now,' Gil insists.

I shrug my chiffon-clad shoulders.

'I can't,' I tell him. 'I need unzipping.'

'I'm going to hazard a guess things aren't getting any better there...'

I fill Gil in on everything that's gone on. He laughs wildly at me, like a true friend.

'And now she wants me to wear this ugly dress and get married in the village church,' I conclude. 'Maybe if I tell her I had a different style of dress in mind – what kind do you think?'

Gil winces.

'You know I don't know or give a shit about dresses,' he replies.

I sigh.

'You're the worst gay best friend ever,' I tease.

'Well, maybe Mark's dad can be your new gay BFF,' he laughs.

'Oi, stop it,' I reply. 'Although... I did find a gay porn mag in his study...'

'Which one?' Gil asks curiously.

'*Young 'n' Hung.*'

'Nice,' Gil says casually. 'He's got good taste at least.'

I shrug my shoulders.

‘It was a bit... overly butch for my taste,’ I reply. ‘Too outdoorsy.’

‘Yeah, you’d prefer some white-collar, *Fifty Shades* kind of sugar daddy who will spank you with wads of cash.’

‘Yeah, send me a link,’ I joke. ‘Right, I need to go write this stupid article, and possibly try to hang myself with this veil, so I’ll speak to you later?’

‘Yeah, keep in touch,’ he tells me. ‘And keep that chin up.’

I go back to staring at my blank screen, tapping my nails on the desk as I think. It’s just so hard to get my mind on anything other than this situation right now... so maybe I should find a way to write about it, just not in the way Kath has asked me to.

Sex is always a great topic to write about. I may not be having as much of it as I usually do, but maybe I can write about that. What to do when you’re not having sex as much as usual.

The first and most important thing you need to do – or rather, not do – is take it personally. It’s not you, it’s not him, it’s not anyone. Unless you’re having problems in your relationship that are much bigger than a lack of fireworks between the sheets, then it isn’t weird to have a dry patch. A change in circumstances of any description can have an affect on things: life can get too busy, schedules can disalign – wait, is disalign a word? What word do I mean? I massage my temples as I wrack my brains for the words to express what I’m trying to say. The point I’m trying to make is that shit happens, and sometimes it makes it hard to continue with business as usual. So what can we do about this? Don’t feel like you need to do anything; sometimes it’s better to just leave things be and hope they get back to normal when life has settled down, but if that’s not working then maybe a little sexual intervention is needed. Hmm, maybe that’s what Mark and I need; one of us needs to up the ante and get us out of this funk.

After my little peanut butter and jam faux pas before we left, I’m not about to suggest food as a solid solution to sexing up your man, but I’m not having much luck trying to seduce him the old-fashioned way either. What we need is something different, something fun – that’s it, something that will take the pressure off entirely and remind him that sex is supposed to be something fun that we enjoy together, and not just a duty we’re obliged to fulfil for one

another.

I hit save on my draft, ready to take action in real life instead. It's not a very good article, but maybe if I try and do something useful, it will enrich my words.

Stranded here up north, without my box of tricks or so much as a branch of Ann Summers to help me, I need to think outside the box.

'Oh, my God,' Mark blurts from the doorway. 'What are you wearing?'

'Your mum's wedding dress,' I reply. 'Ta-da.'

'You look hideous,' he replies.

I feel my face fall.

'Not you,' he corrects himself. 'Just that dress.'

Valerie comes back to free me from the dress.

'Oh no, Mark, you've seen Roxie in her wedding dress – don't you know how unlucky that is?'

Mark stifles a laugh. He's not at all superstitious.

'Oh no,' I agree. 'That means I can't get married in this dress now.'

I pull a pouty, disappointed face, hopefully picking up a little something from my theatre roots.

'I think the wedding is jinxed regardless,' she concludes.

I really don't understand Valerie Wright; she's as confusing as this dress, which is somehow simultaneously too big and too small for me. One minute she hates me, the next she's trying to help me. Is she trying to help me, though? Is forcing an old, ugly wedding dress on someone at all helpful?

Mark wraps an arm around me and laughs it off.

'God, you're hot,' he tells me.

'I thought I was hideous?' I reply.

Val pulls a face.

'No, I mean literally. You're boiling,' he replies.

‘I’ll help her out of it,’ Val replies. ‘You go keep an eye on my pans. I just started dinner.’

With Valerie returning the dress to the vault she keeps it in (or whatever), Bea outside playing doting ex-auntie-to-be (or whatever the hell title she’d have in relation to Mark’s nieces) and everyone else in bed or out, I decide to creep into Mark’s old bedroom and look for inspiration. I’m not sure what I’m looking for exactly, but I’m sure something will jump out at me.

I puff air out of my cheeks as I walk up the stairs, still absolutely roasting thanks to my wedding dress from hell. Hopefully my hot flush won’t last long in this icy house.

Finally, in Mark’s room, I start looking around for something to inspire me. I was hoping to find a poster of someone he had a crush on as a teenager so I could do my best to role play as her, or maybe an item of his clothing that I can give sexy new context to. A Leeds United shirt would be the obvious choice, had he not already seen me in one every night since we got here.

I open up his wardrobes and begin snooping around. It’s full of everything I’d expect to find, really: Leeds United branded clothing, band T-shirts from his teens, old school shirts signed by all of his friends. I grab the sleeve of one and read a few of the messages; Mark was very popular at school. I look at the next one, examining the large, red lettering written across the back in marker. ‘Bea’s property for ever’ it reads. Ha. It would certainly do it for me, seducing him in that, but perhaps I need to rethink that one.

I get down on my hands and knees, getting very much into the spirit of the occasion, and begin scouring the floor for inspiration. That’s when I find what I’m looking for, on the floor, stuffed at the back of the wardrobe – Mark has obviously been hanging on to this since he was a kid. It’s a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles costume consisting of a green jumpsuit, and a blue bandana with two eyeholes and a shell backpack to complete the look.

OK, hear me out on this one... Obviously, by no stretch of the imagination/spandex am I going to get into this jumpsuit, but what I can do is slip on a set of slinky underwear, before completing the look with the bandana and the shell, making me a sort of Twenty-Something Horny Turtle. Not only will it remind Mark that sex is supposed to be a laugh, but it’ll catch

him off guard – and it will remind him I was paying attention during the quiz.

I'm just about to leave the room when I hear Val and Bea chatting outside the door. Thinking on my feet, I remember what Mark said about how he used to climb out of his window when he wanted to sneak out: out of the window, onto the study roof, and then jump to the ground.

As I pull open his window, cold air surges in and hits me like a punch. There's no way I'm jumping out of there, no matter how much I don't want to get caught in here. One thing I definitely don't want is for Bea to know what I'm up to, so I toss the costume out, letting it land on the patio, right in front of the study doors. I can make my excuses, dash downstairs and then grab it. It might be a little cold and wet, but it will have chance to dry out and warm up again.

Bea walks into the room just as I'm closing the window.

'What are you doing?' she asks, eyeballing me cautiously.

'I was just so warm,' I half-lie. Well, I *was* really warm before. I'm certainly not warm now that I've felt the cold air from outside. 'I was just getting some air.'

'Why are you getting air in here *specifically*?' she asks, leaving me no room to wiggle my way out of this one.

'Well...' I pause, summoning my writer's brain to provide me with some kind of logical excuse. 'I thought I'd better come get checked out by you – our resident doctor.'

'What's the matter?' she asks, sounding entirely put out.

'Well, I'm so warm,' I tell her again.

'That it?'

'And I'm really tired,' I continue. 'My head is all over the place, too. I just can't concentrate.'

I've always found that, when telling a lie, it's more convincing if you stick to the truth as closely as possible; that way you're more likely to get away with it.

‘Sit down for a second – you’re making me nervous over by that window,’ Bea snaps. I decide not to comment on her shitty bedside manner, as I’m sure it’s only me who brings it out of her.

‘Would you say these hot flashes spread over your upper body?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ I reply, although I’m not even sure what she means.

‘Are you having sex less than usual?’ she continues. Wow, that question seems out of nowhere – and it’s not exactly pertinent to my entirely fictional medical condition, is it?

‘No,’ I reply, a little too quickly.

‘So that’s a yes,’ she replies. Ergh, she’s so smug. ‘What about dryness?’ she continues.

‘Do you know what?’ I start as I jump to my feet with energy. ‘I feel absolutely fine now. Must have just been a temporary thing – completely passed now. Thanks for the advice.’

‘I think you...’

‘Honestly, I’m fine,’ I insist as I head for the door. ‘If I feel anything, you’ll be the second to know.’

I close the door behind me quickly. That was a close one, but I think I got away with it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Meat Loaf said he'd do anything for love, apart from a handful of things that all seemed pretty admirable – for example, he'd never lie to his lady. He'd be up for doing almost anything in the name of love, from getting married to going to hell, but I can't help but think I'm going to one up him tonight. Tonight, for love, I am going to seduce my fiancé dressed as a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

I know what you're thinking: that this doesn't sound sexy at all. But trust me, Mark is going to take one look at me in this outfit and he's going to laugh, and then he's going to pounce on me, and then everything is going to be OK. I realise that sounds like I'm giving a lot of credit to a blue bandana and green plastic turtle shell, but teamed with this black lacy underwear, it's going to go down a treat. And if that fails, *I'll* go down a treat – either way, it's a guaranteed result.

Since nearly getting caught out by the good doctor, the day has been fairly uneventful. Everyone has been up to their usual tricks – which I feel qualified to say, having spent five days here – whether that's Millie creeping off with her phone or Ste telling me the borrowed MC Hammer chic harem pants I was wearing would look better on his bedroom floor. I've noticed Bea and Valerie having their little hush-hush tête-à-têtes, but other than a few little sniggers that could've possibly been aimed in my direction, it hasn't been so bad. It is very much business as usual in the Wright family house, but I did make it through dinner without anyone actively trying to make me cry, so maybe I'm making some progress.

Everyone has gone off to bed now. Mark went to get a drink of water, so I

dashed to the bedroom, slipped off my clothes, popped on my outfit and positioned myself as seductively as possible on the broken bed, something that is surprisingly hard with a shell on your back – for future reference, getting down on all fours is the best way to go about it. Actually, it's the only way to go about it.

Now I'm just waiting, hovering above the broken bed on my hands and knees, trying to remember the theme tune to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* because I can't seem to recall it for the life of me, and I remember it being so memorable...

'Oh, my God,' Mark says slowly as he walks back into the room. 'Roxie, what are you doing?'

With my mind deep in thought, for a split second I forget where I am and what I'm doing. As I remember, I snap into character.

'Cowabunga, dude,' I say in my sex voice.

'Roxie, put some clothes on,' he insists, quickly closing the door behind him.

'Come on, get in bed, relax. Maybe if you can get me to relax, you can bring me out of my shell.'

My puns are amazing, my outfit is amazing... but Mark's face isn't doing much to convince me that he agrees.

'What's wrong?' I ask.

'You,' he replies. 'You're being all...'

Mark's voice trails off as something catches his attention.

'What is this?' he asks, pulling a magazine out from under the duvet.

That's when I remember finding the copy of *Young 'n' Hung* among Mark's dad's things earlier, before hurriedly hiding it in the bed when Valerie walked in.

'You brought porn to my parents' house?' he asks angrily. 'Of course you did.'

'Wait, I didn't,' I protest honestly. 'I found that in here.'

‘You expect me to believe this belongs to one of my parents?’ he laughs, but it’s not an amused laugh, it’s an angry one.

‘It was behind your dad’s books.’

‘Roxie, stop lying. You’re sex-obsessed at the moment; I can’t figure out what you’re playing at,’ he replies, sounding annoyed at me.

‘I’m not sex mad,’ I protest. ‘I’m trying to fix us.’

‘We’re not broken,’ he says, his angry tone increasing in volume with each word.

‘We are,’ I tell him sadly. ‘Because that’s the first time you’ve ever raised your voice to me.’

Mark goes to open his mouth, as if he’s going to say something to me, when suddenly the room plunges into darkness. It’s pitch black; in fact, I can’t see a thing. Normally, I think I’d freak out, but anything is better than seeing that look that was all over his face before the lights went out.

‘Shit, must be a power cut,’ he replies. ‘Wait here, I’ll go help my mum sort torches.’

‘OK,’ I call after him – I imagine, because I can’t see him to see if he’s left the room or not.

All alone in the dark, I feel my other senses heighten. It’s going to sound crazy, but the silence is deafening. Living in the noisy city centre has left me not only able to tolerate quite a bit of noise – I actually expect it now. Being here, in the absolute silence, creeps me out. My ears are trying to find background noise that isn’t there. My body feels super-sensitive, too, like there’s a draft coming from somewhere that’s creeping around my body, which suddenly feels very naked. I wiggle free from my shell and untie my bandana, but with no light to see any clothing lying around, I’ll just have to stay in my underwear for now.

God, everything is such a mess. I was just trying to get us back to how we were before we arrived here, and I think I’ve pushed him further away. I know it sounds crazy, to think that there’s a problem with our sex life after five days, but it’s not the sex, it’s the bigger issue it represents. We arrived in

the Dales the perfect couple, two halves of the same whole (as cheesy as that sounds), but now I don't just feel like we're divided, I feel we're a thousand-piece jigsaw struggling to hold ourselves together.

I blink, checking my eyes. I'm sure I just saw a flash of light coming from the hallway. That's the thing about this weird Franken-cottage; where the two have been merged together there are lots of long hallways, making them seem almost corridor-like. I see the flash again. Either Mark's rejection hit me so hard I detached a retina, or someone is out there.

'Mark?' I call out, but I don't get a reply.

The light flickers for a third time.

I slowly make my way out of the study, feeling my way along the wall as I walk through the hallway. I feel like a sitting duck in that room, but I can't sit there alone for a second longer. The flicker of light happens again, illuminating the hallway long enough for me to catch a glimpse of something that freaks me out. The scream has only just left my lips when I realise it's nothing to be scared of really, but to go from pitch black to a glimmer of the twins standing there in the hallway, silently holding hands in their matching nightdresses as they stare at me... this is just way too much like *The Shining* for me to keep my cool.

Of course, it's only a matter of seconds before torchlight appears from all angles, everyone running to my aid, only to find me, in my not so classy underwear, alone with the twins.

'Oh, my God,' I hear Mark exclaim. 'I know I've just done handing them out, but everyone turn their torches off for a second while Roxie finds some clothes or goes somewhere more private.'

All the lights are shut off, apart from one.

'You, too, Ste, buddy,' I remind him. He reluctantly follows suit.

Mark feels for my arm in the dark, before finding my hand and placing a torch in it.

'I'll meet you in the study,' he says quietly.

Thankfully, everyone gives me enough time to make my way back to my

room, where I grab a T-shirt from the floor.

Not knowing what else to do, I take a seat at the desk and open my laptop. How have things gone so badly wrong so quickly? And why do I feel like a sex-mad pervert? I'm no more sex-obsessed than your average twenty-something, but Mark is treating me like I'm manic. The way he looked at me before, I almost expected him to chuck a bucket of cold water over me.

I start clicking around frantically as I realise the internet isn't working – of course it isn't, the power is out. Not only does this mean my only contact with the outside world has finally been cut off, too, but that I have a finite amount of battery left on my laptop – and an article still to write.

'Everyone is back in bed,' Mark tells me. 'Dad had a word with the power company. His mobile died as they were talking, but the blackout is courtesy of the snow, basically. They're hopefully going to have it fixed within twenty-four hours.'

'That's good,' I reply sheepishly. 'I still have an article to write.'

'Do you know what you're writing about yet?' he asks as he gets into bed. I don't think he cares, though. I think he's just making small talk.

'I'm not sure. I've been working on a few. That reminds me: I can cross Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles role-play off the list on one of them.'

I giggle softly, trying to build a bridge and dispel some of the awkwardness.

'This was for an article?' he asks, anger creeping back into his voice. We're using our torches to illuminate our faces as we're talking, but this only makes him look scarier than I've ever seen him look before. Mark so very rarely loses his cool, but he looks on the verge of it right now. 'You know I don't mind this stuff usually, but I swear, if you're writing a piece on how much weird sex stuff you can get away with in my parents' house...'

'I'm not,' I insist. Although that does sound like a great idea on paper, I wouldn't do that. 'The article inspired this misjudged advance but...'

'I asked my dad if he had any magazines of any kind in his office, but he said he didn't.'

'Mark, honestly...'

‘Roxie, listen to me, OK? You know how you think Kath is too focused on work, to the point where it has an effect on her real life?’

I nod.

‘And you know how you made me promise to tell you if you ever started turning into her...’ he continues.

‘You think I’m doing that now? That is *not* what is happening here,’ I reply defensively.

‘The line that you draw between what is work and what is real life is blurring.’ Mark fluffs up his pillows and lies back. ‘You don’t know what you’re doing for you and what you’re doing just so you can write about it.’

‘That’s not true,’ I insist, shutting off my torch and lying down next to him.

‘You’re always looking for articles in whatever you’re doing. You’re talking about how you don’t want to start a family because your job comes first...’

‘The second part is not unreasonable,’ I say, my voice suddenly gaining a little strength.

‘This, again,’ he says with a deep sigh. ‘Roxie, I can’t do this right now. Can we forget about it, please?’

‘OK,’ I reply. I don’t know if he means forget about having this argument or forget about getting married, but I know I’m too scared to ask, because I’m not sure I’ll like the answer.

All I know is that we’re going to bed angry again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A little Stockholm syndrome would be lovely right about now, because this would all feel so much less awkward if I actually liked the people I was stuck with. It's horrible, feeling so alone and isolated.

Having woken up here, in my own personal ice-cold version of hell, for the fifth morning in a row, I'm struggling to remember ever not being here. It feels like I've always been here, and like I'm always going to be here.

It's like life beyond Rippledale doesn't exist any more; like the world has stopped everywhere else. Sadly, though, it hasn't, which means I've still got an article to write – but God knows when I'll be able to send it, with the power still being off.

I open my laptop, ready to work because my battery life is ticking away before my eyes. As soon as I see that blank screen, writer's block hits me again. I have all of these ideas in my head that I think might work well, and I know what I want to say, but as soon as the words reach my fingertips, something stops them coming out. I hover my fingers above the keys, willing what is in my head to find its way to the screen, but I just can't write. I can't explain it, but I can't.

I'm scared to write about Mark, after everything he said, but writing about what I know is usually where my talents lie, so... I know, I'll write about Bea. Well, not Bea specifically, but an article on what to do if you find yourself dating someone who has a perfect ex.

Let me start by saying that no one is perfect. People might seem perfect, but they're probably not. There's probably something wrong with them. They

might seem like they have a flawless body, a ‘ten’ of a face, a wonderful job and their shit basically together, but they probably don’t... and even if they did, people are turned off by perfection. No one wants a partner they can’t measure up to. Hmm, not only am I waffling, but I’m implying that Mark isn’t perfect. Maybe I should take things a point at a time.

Comparing yourself to your partner’s ex can be a dangerous game, because you’ll fabricate this list of qualities that you think are important, that make one person better than the other. You might think, for example, that your boyfriend’s ex is much skinnier than you, but that you have a more attractive face. In the grander scheme of things, what counts for more: being slim or being pretty? And maybe she has a better job than you, but maybe you’re better in bed (not sure how you’d know this for a fact, but never mind) – which quality counts for more? You’re not only pitting yourself against this person, but you’ll start judging your boyfriend by these standards, too, and suddenly, you’re playing a game of ‘Would You Rather’ with yourself. Would you rather have a boyfriend who is rich or great in bed? Would you rather have a boyfriend who had a hot body or a handsome face? Would you rather be with someone who looked at all your bad points and your good points and decided you were worth it, or someone who just loves you, just because? The last question is the one you want to ask yourself, and not only hypothetically. Does your boyfriend love you because you beat his ex on a few points, or does he just love you? Does *my* boyfriend love me because *I* beat Bea on a few points, or does he just love *me*? Given how perfect his ex is, and how I beat her on no points at all (unless we’re considering having a higher number of sexual partners a victory), Mark still loves me. Of course he loves me, and I love him, and that’s all that matters.

I’m definitely not perfect, Mark might not be perfect, and our relationship probably isn’t as perfect as I thought it was, but that’s OK, because nothing and no one is perfect. That’s why I can’t let this silly awkwardness go on a second longer. Work can wait; I need to go find Mark and talk to him.

Just outside the study, I bump into Kerry on her way to the bathroom.

‘Hey, have you seen Mark?’ I ask her.

‘Yeah, he’s playing Sardines with Auntie Val, Millie, Bea and the kids,’ she

tells me. 'I know, right? Lame.'

'I really need to talk to him.'

'Well, he was hiding first, so you might as well join in and start looking,' she laughs, closing the bathroom door behind her.

I guess that would be the quickest way to speak to him, and if he's hiding first, I know exactly where he'll be – in the secret half of his wardrobe, where he used to hide when he was a kid.

As I walk into Mark's bedroom, I'm sure I can hear the sound of the twins outside. I glance out of the window into the back garden, where I see Lisa and Louise playing in the snow with Val and Millie. So I guess they decided not to play Sardines after all, which is good, because that means I can talk to Mark immediately.

I'm heading for his bedroom door when I realise I can hear muffled voices somewhere in the room. Curiously, I follow my ear, only to wind up next to Mark's wardrobe. I slowly open the door and the talking gets louder. It's Mark's voice. He's hiding in his wardrobe. He must not realise the game is over.

I'm just about to tap on the panel he's hiding behind when I overhear what he's saying.

'So, are you seeing anyone at the moment?' he asks.

I freeze, my hand just millimetres from the panel he's behind, waiting to hear the answer to his question before I let him know I'm here.

'No one serious,' Bea replies.

'When you said you'd only slept with two people...' Mark starts, but his sentence fades out, like perhaps he doesn't know how to finish it.

'That was true,' she replies. 'There was someone after you, but it didn't work out.'

'That's a shame,' Mark replies.

My heart is pounding so loudly I'm surprised they can't hear it. My breathing is a little on the noisy side, too, probably because I'm holding my breath

slightly so I can hear better without my short, sharp breaths echoing in my ears.

‘Well, it all worked out OK for you, didn’t it?’ she replies. ‘You have Roxie, you’re going to get married and have babies and live happily ever after.’

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ Mark replies.

Thwack! His words hit me like a punch to the stomach.

‘Oh?’ Bea replies softly, so obviously trying to coax more information out of him.

‘It’s seeming more and more like we want completely different things from life.’

‘Have you never spoken about it? We used to talk about it all the time,’ she reminisces.

Crouching to fit inside this wardrobe is beyond uncomfortable, but I have to keep listening – they’re talking about me, so of course I have to keep listening.

‘Our plan was to go and work abroad, wherever our help was needed the most at the time, and then come back, settle down and start a family of our own here. Remember how we talked about converting one of the old barns into a house?’ Bea asks. ‘Someone has done one not too far from here; it looks beautiful.’

‘I remember,’ he says, sighing deeply. ‘Had it all figured out, didn’t we?’

I’m not sure if I hear him laugh or not after he says this.

‘Look, tell me if it’s none of my business,’ Bea starts, and I so want to yell at her that of course it’s none of her fucking business, but I need to hear this. ‘Obviously there’s something between you and Roxie. She’s clearly very fun and carefree... but is that really the kind of girl you marry? One who won’t follow you wherever your dreams take you? Whether it’s all the way to Uganda or just home to Yorkshire to give you children...’

I listen to the silence closely, waiting for Mark to jump to my defence, to tell her how much he loves me...

‘We were lucky that we wanted the same things in life,’ Mark starts.

‘We were,’ Bea replies quickly. ‘Breaking up with you was the biggest mistake of my life.’

What? She broke up with him? I thought he broke up with her to move to London...

‘And, after you left, when your mum told me you were going to propose to me...’

I jump to my feet, forgetting I’m inside a wardrobe, banging my head on the top of it.

‘Fuck,’ I say to myself. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck.’

‘Roxie?’ Mark calls out. ‘Is that you?’

I don’t answer him, I just climb out of the wardrobe and head for the door.

‘Wait, Roxie. Hang on a sec,’ Mark insists as he clambers out of the wardrobe, hot on my heels.

‘Just leave it,’ I snap. I know that running away from the problem probably isn’t the best course of action, but I can’t have this conversation right now, because I don’t know what to say.

I head downstairs, with Mark a few feet behind me, pleading with me to talk to him.

‘What’s going on here?’ Valerie asks, rushing in from the kitchen, still in her coat.

‘Where were you?’ he asks her, annoyed. ‘You stopped playing and didn’t think to tell me? Bea was the only one who found me and we were just stuck in there together like...’

‘Sardines?’ Val laughs.

‘Mum, it’s not funny. Roxie is upset.’

‘I’m not upset because you were playing Sardines. I’m upset because of what I overheard,’ I tell him.

The sound of the downstairs toilet flushing is closely followed by Kerry,

finally emerging from the bathroom.

‘I really need to stop drinking stout,’ she muses, before detecting the awkward situation currently playing out in the hallway. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Ask your cousin,’ I tell her, my voice cracking a little. Please, God, don’t let me cry in front of these people.

‘I will,’ Kerry replies. ‘Mark, come with me.’

‘No,’ he says firmly. ‘I need to talk to Roxie.’

‘Do you want to be rugby-tackled by a girl in front of all these people?’ she replies. ‘Thought not. Come on.’

As Kerry frogmarches her cousin towards the family room, Valerie ushers me towards the study.

Once we’re inside the study, Val sits me down on the broken bed, taking a seat next to me.

‘Gosh, this is low down,’ she says as she lowers herself. ‘OK, tell me what happened.’

I don’t feel like Valerie is the kind of person I can confide in, but I have no one else to talk to right now.

‘I overheard Mark and Bea talking about when they were together, their break-up, and then they started talking about whether Mark and I were right for each other.’

‘And?’ Val prompts.

‘And neither of them seemed convinced,’ I say sadly.

Valerie wraps her arm around me and gives me a squeeze.

‘It’s not your fault, my love,’ she says sympathetically. ‘They have history together. Bea’s mum and I have been best friends for years; it was only natural our kids gravitated towards one another, and we always knew they’d get married some day. I knew that if they wound up alone together, they’d get talking about how perfect they are for each other – I’m just sorry you’re a casualty in all this.’

I wiggle free from her embrace.

‘What do you mean, you knew this would happen if they wound up alone together? Is that why no one was looking for them? You wanted them in a small space together?’

‘Roxie, calm down. You’re a nice girl and you’ll make someone a perfectly fine wife. But not Mark. Mark and Bea are meant to be together, they just needed a little push. As soon as he realises this, he’ll move back home and life can go back to how it was before London turned his head.’

‘Does Bea know you’re doing this?’ I ask her.

‘Yes,’ Bea replies from the doorway. ‘Sorry, I thought I should listen in.’

‘So your parents...’ I start.

‘Yeah, they’re not stuck at the airport, they’re still on holiday,’ she replies. ‘We didn’t know you were coming – we didn’t mean for you to get caught up in this. I’m not a bad person, Roxie. We just want Mark back. When I found out he was going to propose to me before he moved to London, I knew I had to win him back. He was trying to get me to go with him and I threatened to finish with him if he accepted the job. I had no intention of doing so, but he called my bluff, so I called his. I knew he’d be back, and that as soon as he was, he’d realise that we’re meant to be. It’s taken a while, but here we are.’

I feel my eyes welling up with tears. It’s taking all my strength not to let them fall, but I will not cry in front of these scheming bitches. Bea might think she’s a good person – and she might well be a better person than I am – but good people don’t do things like this.

‘We didn’t want you to get hurt,’ Val tells me, as though that’s going to be of some comfort. ‘We thought Mark was coming here alone.’

‘So, what, I’m supposed to just go back to London and leave Mark here to live happily ever after with you?’ I ask.

‘I know things aren’t that straightforward,’ Bea replies. ‘But he’ll come back to me eventually. It’s better for you if it’s sooner rather than later.’

I stare at a speck of something on the otherwise immaculate floor, tuning out from Bea and Val. Do they really think I’m just going to admit defeat and

hand my fiancé over to them? That I'll just give up life as I know it, move out of my flat, go back to being single, and write the past year off? Then again, if that's what Mark wants, what choice will I have?

I'm snapped from my thoughts by a knock on the door.

'Only me,' Kerry says cheerily. 'Can I have a word with Roxie, please?'

'Sure,' Val replies, pulling herself to her feet.

Once she and Bea have left the room, Kerry slams the door shut behind them and jumps on the bed next to me.

'OK, we're going to talk about this, but first you're going to get dressed up and come to the pub with me.'

'I don't really feel like going out,' I tell her weakly.

'Well, I don't really feel like carrying you there against your will, so one of us needs to back down,' she laughs.

'I can't believe this is happening,' I say as a tear escapes my left eye.

'Oi, nothing is happening,' she insists. 'I'm going to get you a banging outfit, and then we're going to go, and I'm going to tell you what Mark just told me, OK?'

'OK.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

It's starting to seem like the Wright family might be the wrong family for me. Growing up, just me and my parents, things weren't exactly sitcom-perfect. My parents weren't strict with me, and they're both so eccentric, I never knew what I'd be going home to after school each day. Sometimes they'd be in costume when I arrived with my friends; other times they'd be in their usual clothes, but bellowing out 'Magical Mister Mistoffelees' as they cooked dinner. Sometimes my mum would cook, sometimes my dad would, and sometimes I would, because neither of my parents were especially talented chefs.

I always felt like I faded into the background a little, which I liked. When I was seven, my parents pushed me into dance lessons, so I could star in the local pantomime with them, but I didn't like being in the spotlight.

Mark's family is a lot more traditional. His mum does the cooking, his dad made the money. He and his sisters are still considered the kids, and treated as such. There's a hierarchy, for sure. It's weird, to see Mark flit from being the strong man I know him as, to being just like a little boy around his parents.

It's funny, though, speaking of pantomime, because I'm starting to feel a little bit like I'm stuck in one. Well, it is Christmas, after all. Valerie is your typical wicked stepmother character, selfishly and cruelly doing whatever she needs to, just to get her own way – I feel like I should 'boo' whenever she enters the room. Oscar, on the other hand, is like the typical panto dame, with his camp, bubbly personality. Mark is like every embodiment of every Prince Charming I've ever seen, but I'm not sure I'm his princess... Bea is like the

perfect princess and the wicked witch rolled into one. I'm constantly being reminded 'she's behind you', because she's creeping up on me, trying to take my place. Millie and Alex are like two parts of the same cow, bumbling through their relationship, making loads of mistakes, but you can just tell that they're supposed to be together. I don't know what character Mel would play but we all know Ste would be a tree. As for Kerry, well, she's Buttons, because she's my comic relief, but she's also my fairy godmother because tonight she's going to magic me a dress so that I can go to the ball – well, the pub.

In the comfort of Kerry's old bedroom, I suddenly feel a lot like my old self again – not like the person I was before I arrived in Yorkshire, but the person I was fourteen years ago. Kerry's bedroom is basically a shrine to the mid noughties. Her walls are covered with posters of cheesy pop bands, everyone from the likes of Blue to not-so-smash hit makers like Phixx – remember them? I do. Although I wouldn't say I was a huge fan, not like Kerry clearly was. She's got a poster of the blond one (Mikey, I think his name was – the one who had a look of David Beckham) on the wall above her bed.

Everything in this room reminds me of my teenage years. It's nice, hanging out in here, and lovely that her parents have preserved her room like this. When I moved out, my parents couldn't wait to turn my bedroom into an office. As much as I wanted to move out, at the time I was horrified. I asked them what would happen if I ever needed to move back home and they said they were confident that would never happen. If I have to move out of the flat I share with Mark, home is exactly where I'll end up. What a terrifying thought, to be moving home at twenty-nine...

'Ooh, smell this,' Kerry commands, spraying me with something very sweet-smelling. 'This is from so long ago.'

'What is it?' I ask, my question broken up with coughs.

'It's Spice Girls Impulse. Remember that?'

'Oh, God, I do,' I laugh. 'It smells exactly how I remember it, too.'

'We'll be covering you in that,' she laughs. 'And here's some make-up to spice up your outfit.'

Kerry dumps out a bag of cosmetics in front of me. Most of the products no longer have labels on them because they've faded over time. If memory serves me right, it's a mixture of Barry M and Miss Sporty stuff – it all just looks so familiar.

'Should we be using make-up this old?' I ask with a chuckle.

'Yeah, definitely,' she replies. 'Barry M cosmetics are like fine wine – they get better with age.'

I pick up a small jar and open the lid. It's almost full to the top with loose, rainbow-coloured glitter.

'It's all very glitter-heavy,' I observe.

'Good,' Kerry replies. 'It matches your outfit.'

I glance down at the Leeds United tracksuit I've been wearing over the past few days, then back at Kerry. Trackies and glitter are not exactly a fashion match made in heaven.

'Not that outfit,' she laughs. 'This one.'

'Oh, my God,' I reply. 'I can't wear that.'

'You can't wear what you're wearing if we're going to drink in the pub.'

'I already have – twice.'

'Tonight is different, though; tonight we're having a girls' night out.'

Kerry is holding up a very small-looking pink and purple dress. It's patterned to look like a mermaid tail, with gold laced throughout it. It's very pretty, but definitely not for an adult, human female.

'Is that yours?' I ask.

'It was – when I was a teenager,' she laughs. 'It's the perfect sexy dress for you to wear tonight.'

I stare at it thoughtfully. There's something so familiar about the style.

'Is that from Tammy Girl?' I ask.

'You've got a good eye,' she replies, throwing it at me. 'Now put it on.'

‘This is for kids,’ I tell her.

‘Naaah.’

‘Kerry, the size is in centimetres. It’s definitely a child’s dress.’

‘Try it on,’ she insists.

I do as instructed, and she was kind of right. It does just look like a really slutty dress in this context.

‘Beautiful,’ she replies. ‘Next step: use these.’

Kerry plugs a pair of straighteners in and switches them on. They’re not a new pair of GHDs, they’re yet another thing she’s had knocking around here for the past fifteen years, but I’m so beyond grateful.

‘Thank you so much,’ I squeal. ‘You’re a life saver.’

‘Well, there is a reason I’m getting you all dolled up. I just had a word with Clare, who is working behind the bar, and she’s told me we’ve got an army of soldiers – literally – who are spending their evening here. They’ve been drafted in to help with the weather or something, but these lads are off duty. So we can play with them.’

I pull a face at her.

‘I know you’re engaged,’ she laughs. ‘Don’t give me that face. Do take your ring off, though.’

I protectively place my other hand over my engagement ring, holding it close to my chest.

‘It’s a cock-block,’ Kerry informs me. ‘If you take it off, they’ll pay for our drinks all night.’

‘You don’t need them to pay for your drinks; your parents own the bar,’ I remind her.

‘If they realise that, *I’ll* wind up paying for *their* drinks all night. Come on, off with it.’

I do as I’m told, placing my ring carefully inside my purse, making sure to tuck it deep inside so it can’t fall out.

‘OK, let’s go downstairs.’

This is my third visit to the pub, but it’s the first time I’ve actually seen people in it that weren’t part of the extended family. It’s nice, even though it’s just a bunch of soldiers in here. They’re all dressed the same, in green camouflage combat and tight green T-shirts – I think I saw a similar outfit hanging on Kerry’s wardrobe; I should have put that on instead of this microscopic dress. It probably would’ve matched my walking boots a lot better.

‘Fuck me, I’m in heaven,’ Kerry says under her breath, before calling out to everyone in the room: ‘Hello, boys, fancy some company?’

‘Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty,’ Curtis grunts as he does push-ups on the floor of the pub – with me sitting on his back.

To impress Kerry and me, our army boys have been having a push-up competition, taking it in turns to better the previous person’s efforts. Curtis has just managed to do fifty push-ups with me sitting on his back, which was easy for him, and like a cross between a Blackpool donkey and a really easy bucking bronco for me. Curtis is exactly how you’d imagine someone in the army to look; from his big, strapping body to his buzz cut, he ticks all the boxes.

Kerry currently has a small group of the boys captivated, because she’s playing Shag, Marry, Kill – *to their faces*. The guys are taking it in turns to line up in front of her in groups of three, and she’s just announcing her decision to them, like it’s no big deal.

‘What about you then?’ Curtis asks me. ‘Would you shag, marry or kill me?’

‘I couldn’t do any, sorry,’ I laugh.

‘I mean that’s good as far as you killing me goes,’ he laughs. ‘It would be a waste of my training if I could be bumped off by the first pretty face to bat her eyelashes at me.’

While Kerry has been working the room, giving equal attention to each of the gentlemen here, I have been chatting to Curtis all evening. He sounds way

more northern than Mark does; in fact, he makes Mark's accent seem almost non-existent. He's got that cheeky chappy charm about him, the kind that I'll bet makes him popular with the ladies. Single Roxie would probably go weak at the knees for a guy like Curtis.

'Is that how you got that scar?' I ask him, brushing my fingertips gently across the scar on his neck. I probably shouldn't be touching a perfect stranger, least of all on his scars, but with every drink Kerry places in my hands, my confidence grows and my common sense flies out the window. 'In the field?'

'Sort of,' he laughs. 'Wakefield. Some girl's boyfriend was getting a bit heavy-handed with her outside a nightclub. I stepped in, he smashed his beer bottle and tried to slit my throat with it.'

'Holy shit,' I reply, forgetting my manners. 'I think that's just as heroic.'

'I'm glad you do, because my mum said I was a fucking idiot,' he laughs.

'Is that where you're from?'

'Wakey? Yes. Stationed near York at the moment. We'll be finding a way back there over the next couple of days. There are clear roads, it's just trekking to them. So, come on then; we've established you can't kill me, but why are you so quick to rule out the other two?'

'I'm engaged,' I tell him honestly. 'I think.'

'Ah, so that's why you didn't throw yourself at me after the push-ups,' he jokes. 'Well, congratulations – I think,' he says, mirroring my wording.

'We had an argument,' I start. 'Sorry, you don't want to hear this, do you?'

'Well, I was told there was going to be some kind of disco, but it's not starting for another thirty minutes. Plus, I'm supposed to protect and serve, and I feel like you need looking after right now.'

I know he's kidding around but, my God, it's so nice to hear those words.

'I thought "protect and serve" was the LAPD, not the army,' I remind him.

'Hey, I'm trying to be the bigger person here,' he laughs. 'Come on, talk to me.'

Curtis and I move to a quieter corner of the room, away from the competitive exercise and Kerry making her 'to do' list. My plan wasn't to tell him everything that has happened over the past few days, but it's all just flowing out of me. Because he's nothing to do with the family, and because he is a handsome dude who is flirting with me, my confidence has come flooding back. And even if I'm wearing a Tammy Girl dress that was designed with a thirteen-year-old's body in mind, with my face covered in war paint (read: lots of glitter) and my hair sleek and straight, I feel like a million pounds.

'That's out of order,' Curtis says once I'm done telling my tale. 'It's bad enough that his ex is around, but he shouldn't be locking himself in cupboards, having heart to hearts with her. Thing is, even if he knows he'd never go there again, and that you can trust him one hundred per cent, he should be considering how these things make you feel.'

Before we left, Kerry sat down with Mark and had a word with him. She assured me that, once I'd spoken to him, I'd feel better about so many things, but that I needed to calm down and unwind first so I'd be willing to listen. That's why she's brought me out to have some fun, and why she's told Mark to swap beds with her for the night. So Kerry and I will be sharing the study, while Mark will be on the sofa – which, to be fair, is probably much more comfortable than a broken pop-up bed anyway.

'That's why I'm not much fun tonight – I'm sorry,' I tell him.

'Don't be daft,' he replies sounding sincere. 'You're loads of fun. Anyway, the disco is about to start. So why don't I get you another drink while you figure out if you can dance in those boots or not.'

'OK, sure,' I reply with a big smile.

I feel like I'm being unfaithful to Mark, just by being here, having fun with this man. It's not like I'm doing anything wrong, or leading him on in any way. And it's not like I have a history with him. I'm just having a drink with a nice guy. So long as I don't get into a wardrobe with him, Mark can't say anything, can he?

Chapter Twenty-Four

As drunk as I am, Kerry is drunker. Worse still, we forgot to take torches with us, so we've just had to make the journey back in the dark.

Luckily, as we have walked through the front door, we've realised that someone has left two torches for us.

'Wooo,' Kerry says, up-lighting her face as she makes ghostly noises.

'Shh,' I tell her, laughing uncontrollably. 'Don't wake anyone up.'

'I won't, I won't,' she replies as we make our way towards the study. 'Unless you want me to go fuck Bea-atch up?'

'Maybe in the morning,' I laugh.

The second we step foot in the study, Kerry flings herself down onto the bed and falls immediately asleep. I wish I could do the same, but I'm so annoyed. Curtis and his buddies were all so nice to me this evening. We drank, we danced, we shared stories and we discussed our problems. No one expected anything from anyone, and everyone had so much fun. See, it's not hard, is it? So why is it, since I came here, everyone has been so horrible to me?

I run my hands through my silky smooth lob and sigh, so grateful to have my usual hair-do back.

Maybe it's because I'm a bit drunk, but my legs are so restless they feel like they're buzzing. There's no way I can get into bed like this, but unless I go sit on the loo, where else can I go?

Plonking myself down in Oscar's desk chair, I open my laptop. It's frustrating, to see it spring to life, with a power cable and an internet cable

poking out of the sides, but neither working while the power is still off. Still, my trusty laptop still has charge, so I could write my article. The one Kath told me to write. The one all about the Wright family – well, I do have a lot to say.

The program we use for writing articles is still open, but without an internet connection it's essentially useless. However, with nothing better to do, and an abundance of stress to get rid of, I decide to write the article. I'm not writing it to submit it, I'm just writing it to get these feelings out of me and onto the screen. In my head everything feels all muddled and messy but, maybe if I see it on the screen, I can make sense of it.

'First comes love, then comes family,' I say to myself, as I type my opening sentence.

Chapter Twenty-Five

When I woke up this morning, for a second, I forgot everything that has gone on. For a start, the fact that Kerry was spooning me from behind made me temporarily forget that my fiancé is not in the same bed as me right now. But as my brain woke up and my hangover set in, so did reality.

Well, I say when I woke up this morning, but it was actually midday when finally I opened my eyes. With Kerry still flat out, I snuck off to the bathroom and sorted out my make-up and hair. I still have my teenage-girl dress on, so I slip my heels on, too. Because I need to talk to Mark, and he's not going to get the scared, self-conscious, family-friendly Roxie he's had all week; he's going to get the happy, stylish, confident Roxie he fell in love with.

I stick my head in the kitchen, expecting to see at least a handful of faces, but no one is there. The distinct smell of bacon is filling the air, which would make me feel queasy at the best of times, but it's much worse now I know that all their pork products are literally their neighbours.

I hazard a guess that everyone is in the dining room, and I'm right. The whole family is around the table, all busy, either serving, eating or drinking.

'Hi,' Mark says when he sees me. I don't know if he's done it on purpose, but he's sitting as far away from Bea as is physically possible.

'Hi,' I reply. 'Can we talk?'

'Sure.'

'But your lunch,' his mum protests.

‘I’ll have it after,’ he tells her, pushing his chair out before heading towards me. ‘Shall we talk in the family room? No one is in there.’

‘OK,’ I reply. I hate how awkward things are, but as soon we start talking, we’ll figure everything out.

I’m just about to walk through the door when Kerry emerges, blocking my way, with a very angry look plastered across her face.

‘I feel the same way,’ I giggle, referring to her hangover, but she doesn’t laugh.

Kerry holds up a piece of paper in front of my face.

‘What’s that?’ I ask.

‘It’s your latest article,’ she replies. ‘I woke up, saw that the power was back on, and that your laptop was open. I thought I’d look on Facebook, see if any of our fit soldiers friend requested me like I told them to...’

‘What’s this about soldiers?’ Oscar asks, suddenly interested.

‘Yeah,’ Mark joins in. ‘You know soldiers?’

‘We met a bunch at the pub last night,’ Kerry tells him. ‘Anyway, so something was open, and I wasn’t snooping, but certain names just stood out on the screen – the names of members of my family. Then I saw that it said published above it, so I checked the website and there it was. So I printed it.’

My brain is too tired and hungover for this. I haven’t submitted an article for publication, let alone one about the Wrights. I wrote that one last night, but I only did it to let off some steam; I didn’t submit it.

‘What does it say?’ Val asks.

‘I’ll read it,’ Kerry insists. ‘Everyone get comfortable, because, I swear, there’s got to be so much fiction in this.’

What could I have possibly written and published that would make her so mad?

‘Read it to us,’ Valerie insists.

‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea,’ I reply, worried what I might have said

when I thought no one else would ever read it.

‘Roxie, what have you done?’ Mark asks me under his breath.

‘I’m not sure,’ I reply. ‘I have no idea which article she’s referring to.’

‘It’s called “It’s not you, it’s them”.’

Did I write that? I definitely don’t remember writing anything along those lines.

“‘First comes love, then comes family”,’ Kerry starts, pausing to glance over at me.

Hang on minute – those are the words I wrote last night. But that wasn’t my article, that was just me letting off steam. I’m a writer; sometimes it makes you feel better to just write. It was never supposed to be published, and I certainly didn’t pull the trigger. The power was still out when I finished writing it, so there’s no way I could’ve submitted it.

“‘When my wonderful boyfriend popped the question, I thought: this is it, my dreams have come true, I’ll never be unhappy again. I would look to the future, and whether it was a day, a month or ten years, I couldn’t imagine my future without him in it. But then I met his family.’”

As Kerry reads aloud, my own words sound both alien to me, and yet so familiar. I remember each thing I wrote a split second before Kerry reads it out.

“‘At first I found it comforting, that such a close-knit family existed, until I realised close-knit meant they were never going to be willing to give me a chance. They didn’t want to let me in. And by the end of my time with them, I realised something: I don’t want letting in. These people don’t love each other; they lie to each other, they manipulate each other, they’re willing to screw each other over to get their own way, and that’s not a name or an attitude I want to take on. Wondering why they’re so weird? Well, first of all, as great as his dad is, he’s definitely a closeted homosexual.’”

‘Oh, my God,’ I mutter to myself quietly.

I look up to see that everyone in the room has widened their eyes.

‘Uncle Oscar, she thinks you’re gay,’ Kerry laughs. ‘Want to know why? “I

try not to judge, but when I described him to my gay bestie, he found Daddy to be guilty of fancying dudes. Exhibit A: his exceptional taste and style. Exhibit B: his finely tuned gaydar. However, this is all circumstantial. The smoking gun came in the form of exhibit C: the gay porn he hides in his office.”

Everyone is staring at Oscar, waiting to see what he has to say. I just want the ground to swallow me up. I don't care if he's gay; he's probably the nicest person in this house after Mark and Kerry. It's just the fact that he's trying to hide it, and let me take the fall for that magazine in his office.

'I never thought I would have to say this,' Oscar starts, ready to roll out his denial speech no doubt. 'I'm bisexual.'

'What?' Millie blurts out. 'Since when?'

'Since always,' Valerie replies. 'I've always known. We met, we fell in love, we got married and we've remained faithful to one another – that's all that matters.'

'Oscar, you can't be gay,' Alex says, kind of hysterically.

'Are you telling me you've never once looked at a man and wanted to feel his body on yours?' Oscar asks wistfully.

'Never,' Alex replies confidently.

Mark looks at me, and I can tell he's not impressed with the can of worms I've opened.

'I'm definitely going to keep reading now,' Kerry tells us, taking a seat at the table, making herself more comfortable. "Daddy might be keeping this little secret from everyone, but it's nothing compared to the lying that's going on between his sister and her husband. On the surface, they seem like such a sickly sweet, picture-perfect couple – but I've heard what they get up to when they think no one is listening... He's having an affair with her little sister, sneaking off with her when the family think they're both off doing other things, but his wife is just as bad, sneaking off to have phone sex at any opportunity she gets." Holy shit, is this true?' Kerry asks me. I shrug my shoulders.

‘You’re doing what?’ Alex bellows at Millie.

‘I’m not doing anything – what are you doing?’

He looks over at me angrily.

‘I can’t believe you’re forcing our hands like this,’ he replies. ‘I’m not having an affair with Mel, I’ve just been helping her with some things.’

‘Like what, her sexual health?’ Ste asks angrily.

‘Shut up, Ste,’ he snaps. ‘Millie, who have you been calling?’

Millie leans forward, placing her head in her hands.

‘I wanted to earn some money and it seemed like the only way,’ she sobs. ‘I wanted to surprise you with a second honeymoon – and pay for it myself – give us some time alone. We’ve been talking about having another baby, so what better place to start trying than on holiday? I wanted to make my own money, to give you a surprise you didn’t need to pay for yourself. Obviously I was looking at work from home job listings because the girls need me around, and this job sounded perfect – I was already in too deep by the time I realised it was working for a phone sex line. I didn’t know where else I was going to find a job I could do from home...’

Alex grabs her and hugs her, but she remains rigid in his embrace.

‘I’m so sorry you felt you had to do that, but we’ll figure this out. I promise.’

I feel like such a bitch right now.

‘Maybe you should stop,’ I suggest to Kerry. ‘I’m obviously getting the wrong end of the stick.’

‘She might as well keep reading then,’ Valerie chirps. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll take it with a pinch of salt.’

Kerry takes a deep breath before continuing.

“‘Then we have his other sister and her boyfriend. I feel so sorry for this girl, because not only is her boyfriend a sleazy pig who tried it on with me, but she’s struggling with an eating disorder and everyone is too self-involved to notice.’”

‘What?’ Mel snaps. I’m not sure which bit she takes issue with – probably both parts, I’d imagine.

‘Babe, listen to me – she came on to me,’ Ste assures Mel. ‘Valerie, Oscar, you know I love your daughter and I’d never betray her. It’s this temptress; she wouldn’t leave me alone.’

He points at me accusingly.

‘Oh, obviously, because you’re just my type,’ I say sarcastically.

‘I don’t have an eating disorder,’ Mel says softly. ‘I’m pregnant.’

‘And I’ve been giving her advice,’ Alex admits.

Ste’s jaw drops.

‘Babe, Roxie has been wrong about all the other stuff. She’s wrong about this, too,’ he reasons, seemingly ignoring the bombshell that Mel is knocked up.

‘She isn’t wrong – you’ve been cheating on me any chance you could get,’ Mel snaps at Ste. ‘I check your phone, I see the messages.’

‘Ste, get out, before I throw you through that window,’ Mark warns him.

Petrified, Ste legs it.

‘I... I’m going to be sick,’ Mel stutters, legging it towards the bathroom.

‘Pregnant!’ Valerie says to no one in particular. ‘My little girl, pregnant.’

‘I’ll just blast through the last bit,’ Kerry tells them, ignoring their shock. It was bloody Kerry who told me Mel had an eating disorder, because she was never eating and throwing up all day long. It makes so much sense now.

“‘Yes, they’re such an odd family. As hard as I’ve tried to make friends with his cousin, I struggle to understand her antics (like spiking the drinks of everyone in her family)’ – oh, my God, I can’t believe you’re shafting me like this.’

I mouth the word sorry to her, for what it’s worth.

“‘Even the kids are weird. They’re not like kids,’” she continues. “‘I see their miserable little faces and I just want to hug them and tell them it’s all going

to be OK, but they're so cold towards strangers – and borderline evil, not that anyone believes it – they'd probably just stab me if I tried to hug them.””

Suddenly, all at once, everyone remembers that the kids are in the room.

‘Girls, let’s go play upstairs,’ Millie suggests.

Lisa and Louise are both sitting at the kids’ table, glued to everything that’s going on, like it’s the best TV show they’ve ever seen. As they walk past me with their mum, they glare at me with their evil little identical eyes.

‘Actually, I’m going to go with them,’ Alex announces. ‘I think we need to talk.’

And then there were six.

‘I notice there hasn’t been any mention of me yet,’ Valerie says.

‘Saving the best until last,’ her crony Bea chimes in, finally opening her mouth for the first time today. Oh, I bet she is loving this – watching me self-destruct in slow motion.

‘Correct,’ Kerry replies. Kerry seems like she’s actually enjoying this, but she’s proving that, in times of need, she will side with her family. “‘You think all that’s bad? Take my future mother-in-law. Please – take her, because the woman is poison. From the moment she met me, I could tell that she hated me, I just couldn’t figure out why. Then I met my fiancé’s ex-girlfriend, who was perky, petite and perfect in every way – annoying on its own, but then I realised she was working with my fiancé’s mum to win him back, at any cost, even if it meant throwing me under the bus. I played right into their hands because, the harder I tried to keep my fiancé close, the more I ended up pushing him away. I should have found it weird when I found out his ex-girlfriend was staying with us. I shouldn’t have risen to her bait when she tried to upset me and outdo me. I shouldn’t have tried so hard to keep my fiancé interested, when I already knew how much he loved me. But worst of all, when his mum forced him into a situation where he was alone with his ex, and he started pouring his heart out to her about our relationship, I should have asked him: am I enough for you? And if he had hesitated for even a moment, I would have known then and there that it was over. I love my fiancé, but I’m not sure I can love his family.” Wow,’ Kerry concludes.

Mark rubs his eyes for a second.

‘Are you telling me that my mum and Bea have been manipulating me?’ he asks.

‘Yes,’ I reply assertively.

‘That’s a bit extreme, Roxie,’ Mark says.

‘It’s a lot extreme,’ I agree.

‘Well, you thought you were right about all that other stuff, but things can look bad if you’re looking for the bad in all situations,’ he tells me, and I see what he’s getting at.

‘You think I’m just trying to find fault with everyone?’

‘It certainly seems that way,’ he replies.

‘You don’t think yesterday was weird, with the two of you in the wardrobe together? If I hadn’t interrupted you, you’d have been in there indefinitely.’

‘I think maybe you’re just upset by what you heard,’ he says softly, placing a hand on my shoulder, giving it a patronising squeeze.

‘There’s a bit about you, too, Mr Wright,’ Kerry tells him. ‘Want to hear it?’

Mark looks at me with dread in his eyes, before turning his attention straight back to Kerry.

‘Yes, read it,’ he demands.

‘OK,’ Kerry replies, taking a deep breath. “‘When I met my boyfriend, it felt like this big, gaping hole in my heart was suddenly filled, and I’ve never felt a feeling like it. When I’m with him, my heart is so full it feels like it might actually burst – but if it did, I know that he could piece it back together again for me. When I think about my future, I don’t know what’s going to happen or what I actually want – all I know is that I want him to be a part of it. Would I like to live in a huge house with a sports car outside? Yes. Would I still want those things if they came without *my* boyfriend? I can honestly say that I wouldn’t, because not only is he enough, he’s everything.’”

I see a glimmer of a smile on Mark’s face, but I know that it will be short-lived, because I might have been wrong about a lot of this when I wrote it,

but I was so right when I wrote this next bit, and it hurts my chest to even think about it.

Kerry continues: “It’s different for him, though. When he met me, I didn’t fill his heart like he did mine. He wants kids and I don’t, and while that hole in his heart might be small now, if he doesn’t fill it, it will get bigger and bigger until his heart is empty, and he will resent me for being the person who drained it. All of the love he has for me will disappear, and I can’t stand the thought of sitting around and waiting for him to fall out of love with me.”

Mark swallows hard.

‘I, er,’ he stops to cough, his words catching in his throat. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘You could tell him the truth: that you’re menopausal,’ Bea interrupts.

‘What?’ I reply, narrowing my eyes at her.

‘It’s not that you don’t want kids,’ she says. ‘It’s the fact you’re going through early menopause.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I ask, so confused. Of course I’m not! Mother Nature kicks my butt every month, just like she does every other healthy twenty-nine-year-old.

‘The hot flashes, your lack of concentration, a reduction in sex...’

‘Whoa, stop right there,’ I insist. ‘The only reason I’m having less sex is because I’m here. And as for that other stuff, I just made it up because you caught me in Mark’s bedroom.’

‘Roxie,’ Mark finally snaps. ‘You have to get this article taken down as soon as possible.’

‘Give me your phone,’ I demand. ‘I’ll call Kath. But then you have to listen to me.’

‘OK,’ he replies. ‘Just make the call.’

Mark and I walk to the study in silence. He takes his phone and hands it to me, watching as I dial work. I feel like a naughty child, with him standing

over me like this.

I speak to Kath's assistant, who puts me straight through to her.

'Kath, why did you publish that article?' I ask, getting straight to the point.

'Because it was good,' she replies in a slow, patronising tone.

'It wasn't meant to be published. I never submitted it – it was just a draft.'

'Yes, I saw all of your drafts,' she says with a slight laugh. 'They were all shit. All but that last one. It seemed finished, so I went ahead and published it.'

'Kath, listen, I was just venting when I wrote that, and I was wrong about a few things...'

'Roxie, why are you messing me around?' she asks.

'I'm not. We didn't even have power when I wrote that. I had no idea you'd see it. I just wrote it to get things off my chest.'

'You should do that more often,' she laughs.

'I'll try,' I reply. 'But, can you please just take this down? I'll write a more accurate version of it.'

I see Mark's eyebrows shoot up, as though to say 'no, you fucking won't', but I give him a reassuring pat of my hand, so he knows it's not what he's thinking.

'Just, please, it's having a huge impact on my relationship. Please take it down,' I plead.

'You know you're worth more to me single, don't you?' Kath says.

I exhale deeply.

'OK, I'll take it down. But you'd better give me a version of it that I like even more than this one.'

'I will,' I reply. 'Thank you so much.'

'There. She's taking it down,' I tell Mark as I hang up.

'OK,' he replies. 'Let's talk.'

For a few seconds, we sit in silence. It's still so cold, and this room never really gets any warmer, so I grab my fur coat and slip it on over my Tammy Girl dress.

'I can explain everything you overheard yesterday,' he assures me. 'You trust me, don't you?'

'I do,' I reply. 'Do you trust me?'

'Of course I do.'

'Then you have to believe me about your mum and Bea.'

'Roxie, you're mistaken. My mum wouldn't do that.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because she's my mum,' he snaps. 'Would your mum do that to you?'

'No.'

'Well, there you go.'

'But my mum isn't a sociopath.'

Mark shakes his head angrily.

'You're being so immature. Things don't go your way, you're embarrassed you got the wrong end of the stick about everyone, and now you're clinging to this ridiculous claim. I can't talk to you when you're like this.'

'Fine,' I reply, storming off.

The downstairs loo is occupied so I grab my handbag from the bottom of the stairs and head to the upstairs one. Damn it, that's occupied, too. I can see Mark's bedroom door is open, and a quick glance inside confirms that it's empty, so I go in there, close the door behind me, and burst into tears.

How has everything gone so terribly wrong? Why won't Mark believe me? I mean, he's right, I'd never believe my mum could be capable of such a thing, but my mum really never would do anything like this. She worries about me, and she looks out for me, but she lets me make my own mistakes, and for that I'm grateful.

I hear the upstairs floorboards creaking, so I jump up and lock the door.

Someone tries to open it before realising it's locked.

'Hello? Is someone in there?' Bea calls out.

'I am,' I reply, trying to sound like I'm not crying.

'Well, I need to come in.'

'Well, I don't give a shit,' I reply.

It's an emotionally charged, immature reply. But I don't care.

'You're so pathetic, Roxie. Just move on with your life.'

Bea gives up trying the door and walks off.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, but it's a pointless task, as more and more tears flood out.

Maybe Bea is right. Maybe I do need to move on. I'm certainly not prepared to stay here, where no one likes me, and Mark doesn't trust me. I just need to work on my exit strategy.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I've done some stupid things in my time – most of them when I was living with Gil – but I think today is going to take the cake.

I know that it's just starting to get dark, I know there's heavy snow outside, I know I'm wearing a tiny dress, a fur coat and heeled boots. But I also know that I'm no longer wanted here, that no one will let me head out into this snow on my own, and that there's a pub full of soldiers who are about to head back to York (where there is definitely a train station/hotel/lack of Wright family members).

I just need to get out of here.

My plan is to take Mark's sneaky route out of the window, onto the study roof and then the lawn, before making my way to the pub where I will bat my eyelashes at Curtis and the other troops until they agree to get me to safety. I'll have to leave my things here, but I have my handbag, my phone, my charger and my purse – that's all I need for now. *I just need to get out of here.*

OK, here we go. I lift open the window, attempting to climb out arms first, before realising legs first makes much more sense. I'm so not cut out for this lifestyle. Finally out on the roof of the study, the cold air chilling my body right through, I hesitate for a second. Is there another way? Can't I just put up with this until the snow clears and I can go home? No. No, I can't. It might have been one thing when I had Kerry on side, but it was everything when Mark was, and now I've lost his support, I can't stay here.

Right, step two. I just need to get from the roof to the ground. When I'd

considered Mark doing this before, it didn't seem so high up, but now that I'm standing here, on the knife-edge, the ground seems miles away. I slide down onto my bum, sitting on the edge of the roof so that I'm much closer to the ground. One, two, three... I'm still here. I'm too scared. I wish I could've gone downstairs and got walking boots and trackies, but there's no way I would've made it back upstairs to escape without being caught.

Mustering up a little courage from somewhere, I hop down from the roof. I land a little funny on my ankle – probably thanks to the 4.5' heels I'm wearing – but I'm OK. I can't get to the front of the house from here, but if I can sneak out of the back garden, I can just work my way around to the front of the house, then I know my way from there.

As I creep down the garden, which is growing increasingly dark by the second, I can hear nothing but the snow creaking underneath my feet as I squash it to the ground. Then I hear a sneeze. It's a quiet, delicate sneeze. As I peer behind one of the bushes, I spot the twins, sitting there alone, both dressed up in their hats and mittens, their grumpy little faces as miserable as ever.

'Hey, what are you doing out here?' I ask them. 'You should be inside.'

Neither of them answers me.

'Right, you don't talk to strangers,' I remind myself. 'Well, listen, you need to go back inside, OK? OK.'

As I begin to creep away from them, one of the girls asks me a question.

'Are we ugly?'

'What?' I ask, spinning around on my heels. 'No, of course not.'

'It's just... you said we looked weird. And everyone at school says we're ugly.'

'Kids can be horrible,' I tell them. 'So can adults. I'm sorry you heard that; I didn't mean it. I was just upset that no one liked me.'

'Mum says we might be ugly ducklings now, but one day we'll be swans,' her sister adds.

I smile at them. They might not seem like little girls, but they are.

‘Listen, your mum is right, you’ll definitely be swans when you’re older, but you’re not ugly now. You’re beautiful in so many ways. You’re intelligent, you’re loyal – when you tripped me and covered for each other, that loyalty is an admirable quality. And, OK, look at each other for a second. Lisa, do you think your sister is ugly?’

‘No,’ Lisa replies.

‘Louise, do you think your sister is ugly?’

‘No,’ Louise replies with a giggle.

‘Well, you have the same face. So if your sister isn’t ugly, then neither are you, OK?’

They both smile and nod in agreement.

‘OK, now go back inside. Don’t get cold.’

‘Are you coming, too?’ Lisa asks.

‘Maybe later,’ I lie.

‘Good,’ she replies. ‘Because we like you now.’

I smile as they skip back towards the house. At least I’m leaving with two friends.

I continue walking down to the bottom of the garden, climbing over the fence, into the field behind the house. They’re not flat, like I imagined farm fields to be. We’re deep in a valley, so it’s all hilly and uneven. The further down the hill I get, the more trees pop up around me. Suddenly, I’m down by the stream, and it’s very dark now. You know what it’s like when it’s winter; it just gets dark all at once, like a black curtain drops from the sky.

I turn left, then right, then realise something: I’m lost. Shit. I’m not sure which way I came from, let alone which way I need to go.

It’s probably best I head for high ground; I know that the pub was up the hill, and I’m heading deeper and deeper down into the valley. It’s hard to see where there’s a footpath, with all the snow that’s around, but I’m pretty sure I’m off it anyway, so I might as well go my own way now.

Grabbing a tree branch, I pull myself up the slope next to me, but as I step up with my right foot first, my left following close behind it, I misfire and fall forwards, sliding down the hill, landing in the snow at the bottom.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I try to pull myself to my feet, but the second I put any weight on my ankle, it's excruciating.

I grab for something, like a rock or a branch or anything to pull myself up with, but all I can feel is snow. Snow in my hands, snow falling on me, snow seeping into my clothes. I am Jack from *Titanic* when he's bobbing around in the Atlantic levels of cold right now.

I grab my bag and take my phone out. I know I haven't had a signal while I've been here, but you can call the emergency services on any network, right? It doesn't matter, because my phone has died. Because I haven't been able to use it, I haven't been bothering to charge it. Today is just getting worse and worse by the second.

'Hello?' I call out, coughing to clear my throat. 'Hello?' I call louder.

No one calls back, except the echo of my own voice.

I'm injured, all alone, and no one knows I'm missing to even start looking for me. Of all the bad decisions I've made, this one has got to be the worst.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Idea for an article: ‘Ten things I wish I’d done before I died’.

I mean, first and foremost, obviously, I wish I’d never come out here on my own in the first place. When I’m upset, I’m irrational. Well, no, I’m always irrational, but I am even more irrational when I’m upset. I suppose it’s a bit of a cop-out to say that the first thing I wish I’d done before dying was ‘not die’, so I guess we’ll scrap that one.

I wish I’d told my family that I loved them more often. It’s not that I didn’t tell them, it’s just that I’ll never be able to tell them enough. If there’s one thing I’ve learned recently, it’s just how amazing it is to have a family who love and support you.

I wish I’d learned a useful skill, like sign language or first aid. Or even just something that would serve me well in life, like sewing or cooking.

I wish I’d cared less about what people thought about me. About whether I looked stupid when I was dancing. About whether my back looked fat in that dress I wore to that party in 2014.

I wish I hadn’t compared myself to other people, whether it was at work when I thought my writing wasn’t good enough, or when I found myself face to face with the ex-girlfriends of current boyfriends (admittedly, that’s only happened once).

I wish I’d worked less, and seen more of the world. I never really got chance to explore different continents, and do crazy things like paragliding or scuba diving.

I wish I’d watched *Game of Thrones*, because I spent so much time at work

wondering what the hell people were talking about, and feeling left out for not understanding why it was taking winter so long to come.

I wish I hadn't been so pessimistic. Whenever anything happened, the first thing I would do would be look at the negative side of things. Like getting snowed in with Mark's family. I didn't see it as a chance to get to know them, I saw it as a nightmare – admittedly, they didn't do much to help that, but still. I never felt like my glass was full, no matter how much was in it.

I wish I'd worried less. I worried about everything. I worried about worrying so much, and when I didn't have anything to worry about, I worried about that, too.

I wish I'd been more open-minded. When Mark mentioned wanting kids, I stuck to my guns, making it clear that I'd never wanted them. I never stopped to consider whether I might want them with Mark specifically.

Finally... I wish I'd married Mark. He was the love of my life, and the thought of never seeing him again hurts more than my ankle does (and that's a lot).

I slip off my boot and examine my ankle. It's pretty swollen, so I scoop up some snow and cover it.

I'm so cold, so wet and so lonely. If this is the way I'm going to die, I'll be so annoyed. How did Roxie Pratt die? Oh, she got pissed off, went out in the snow, fell over and got hypothermia.

Mark will be so mad at me; he'll think it's so like me to do something so stupid and die so senselessly. He'll say that, for someone who worries so much, I don't worry enough where it matters. And he'd be right, of course. It drives me crazy how often he's right and I'm wrong about things. Still, I'd do anything to hear him shout at me one last time.

'Roxie,' I hear Mark call out.

Yeah, like that. Oh God, is one of the symptoms of hypothermia that you start imagining things? I'd google it, but my phone is dead.

'Roxie,' I hear his voice again.

I never knew hallucinations were so realistic. I guess that's the point.

‘I’m here, sweetheart,’ I call back sarcastically, my voice getting lost in thin air.

‘Where?’ he calls back.

‘On the floor,’ I laugh. This is stupid. But at least I have my delusions to keep me company.

‘Shit, are you OK?’ Mark asks, running towards me.

I eyeball him suspiciously.

‘Are you real?’ I ask.

‘What? Yes! Did you hit your head?’

‘No, just my ankle. Oh, my God, is it really you?’

I feel my eyes flood with tears. Mark is here, and he’s going to save me.

‘Put your arms around my neck. I’ll carry you back to the house.’

‘How did you know I’d snuck out?’

‘The twins told me.’

‘Oh, thank God. I thought I was going to die out here. How did you know where to find me?’

‘I followed your footprints. Roxie – it’s been, like, thirty minutes. Look up there, you can see the smoke from the chimney.’

‘Oh,’ I reply. ‘I thought I’d got much further.’

‘Where were you going?’ he asks as he carries me back towards the house.

‘The pub,’ I tell him. ‘I was going to run away with the soldiers.’

‘Of course you were,’ he laughs. ‘Let’s get you back to the house you tried so valiantly to escape from. We’ll talk there.’

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mark has dressed me up in a tracksuit, bundled me up in a blanket, placed a mug of hot chocolate in my hands and plonked me in front of the fire. I'm as comfortable as I can be with an elevated ankle.

While Mark was making my drink, Alex popped in and had a look at my ankle. He says it's a bad sprain, and that resting it should be enough. Now it's just Mark and me.

'The first thing I want to do is talk about what you overheard the other day, in the wardrobe,' he starts, having a little laugh at the sheer bizarreness of that sentence. 'It was wrong of me to imply that I'd broken up with Bea, when technically she broke up with me, but I didn't want you to misunderstand the situation.'

'Try me.'

'I was with Bea when I was a kid, and you don't really know what you're thinking or feeling then, do you? As I grew up, I realised that I didn't love her. If I did love her, I probably would have loved her forever, but I didn't, so when the job came up in London, I didn't think twice about taking it. Do you know what it's like when you don't love someone who loves you so much?'

I shake my head.

'It's like watching them slowly dying right in front of you, knowing there's nothing you can do about it. I knew that, when I told her, it was going to hurt her so much, so when I told her about London and she said she'd dump me if I accepted the job, I accepted it. And then my problem was solved. I didn't have to be the person who ended things and I still got what I wanted. I know

that sounds cowardly, and I wish I could've done things differently, but that's how it happened.'

'She said she knew you were going to propose to her,' I remind him, before shutting up and waiting for an explanation.

'About that,' he laughs awkwardly. 'My mum told her that. And obviously I know that bit wasn't true, because I had no intention of proposing to her.'

I nod thoughtfully, waiting to see what he says next.

'I should have believed you when you told me what my mum and Bea were up to, and I'll never forgive myself for doubting you. It was unfortunate all that other stuff had to come out,' he laughs. 'Although we have kicked out that walking STD my sister was dating. She's got some big decisions ahead of her, but we'll help her figure it out. Alex and Millie are talking to each other, working things out. I could've done without knowing my dad was bi, but now I do. So...'

I laugh with him.

'I'm so sorry, honestly. I really didn't mean for that article to go live, and at least it got taken down.'

'I don't know what you said to the twins, but they think you're wonderful.'

'They're good kids,' I tell him.

'I had a heart to heart with my mum while you were locked in the bedroom. I told her how much you meant to me, and how happy you made me. She admitted that she'd had this idea in her head that if she got Bea and me back together, that I'd move home, and because of that she never gave you a chance. She sees that now, and she'd love for you to give her a second chance, too. And I definitely should've told them I was bringing you – you were right.'

'Wait, can I get that in writing?' I laugh, semi-seriously. This never happens.

'I just want us to figure things out and go back to how happy we were before. Do you think we can?'

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut as I take a deep breath. I need to say this without crying, but it's hard.

‘I’m not sure we can,’ I tell him honestly. ‘There are things that you want, that I’m not sure I can give you. And I thought about it, while I was stranded in the snow, and I’m willing to reconsider things with an open mind, but I can’t make you any promises. Not like Bea could.’

Mark takes my hands in his and looks into my eyes as he talks to me.

‘You need to stop comparing yourself to Bea, because you’ll never be her, no matter how hard you try.’

‘Cheers,’ I say sarcastically. I try to move my hands from Mark’s grasp, but he holds them firmly.

‘Listen to me, Roxie. She was my first girlfriend, she was my first kiss, she’s the person I lost my virginity to – but not everything I did for the first time was with her. She wasn’t the first person I truly loved. She wasn’t the first person who made my shit days seem not shit, because I knew I’d get to see her face at the end of it. She wasn’t the first person I could see myself spending the rest of my life with – *you are*. You might not think you compare to her, but she doesn’t compare to you. And I know you think that perhaps you can’t give me the things I want, but the only thing I want is you. I want to marry you. I don’t care where we live, or what we do for work, or if we never have kids, because, of all the things that could be in my future, you’re the only one that matters. I don’t know what it’s like to work aboard, I don’t know what it’s like to be a dad, but I do know what it’s like to have you, and I’m not losing you. OK?’

And just like that, with those few words, all of my worries evaporate.

‘OK,’ I reply.

‘Ste is gone, Bea has gone to her parents’, everyone else wants to start afresh with you,’ he assures me. ‘Can we all start again with dinner tonight, and pretend the past few days never happened?’

‘I’d like to try,’ I tell him.

‘Come here,’ he says, grabbing me and kissing me on the lips. Mark parts his lips from mine quickly. ‘You devil,’ he laughs. ‘Did you just slip me the tongue?’

‘Maybe,’ I say softly.

‘Do you reckon you can have sex with a sprained ankle?’

‘Probably, but why would you want to have sex with my ankle?’ I tease.

‘Right, that’s it,’ Mark says, picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder. ‘Let’s see if we can go break this bed some more.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ I giggle. ‘But are you sure you don’t want to wait until we’re home? Whenever that may be...’

‘I don’t want to wait, although we might be able to head home tomorrow. Apparently the snow is going to clear significantly overnight and throughout tomorrow.’

‘Of course it is,’ I laugh.

Epilogue

‘It’s not you, it’s them’ – article, version two.

First comes love, then comes family. When you meet the man of your dreams, you think: ‘Yes, that’s it! I have found the person I want to start my own family with and I have everything I need to be happy.’ What you don’t realise is that you don’t just start your own family, you acquire theirs, too.

When your boyfriend is from a different background to you, it can be strange for his family when he takes you into their home. You’re just some outsider to them who is suddenly the most important thing in their son’s life. And they might find it hard to take to you at first, and you might feel the same way about them. You might not be their cup of tea, and they might not be your caramel macchiato, but that’s OK. Once you accept this and stop jumping through hoops to try and please them, you’ll start being your real self and they’ll fall in love with that girl, just like their son did. They did raise him, after all. It makes sense that they’d admire similar qualities.

So what do you do if you meet your boyfriend’s family and they start comparing you to his ex? Hell, maybe they even miss her. That’s a good sign: that they took her in, and made her one of the family. It will be strange for them to do it all over again, but they’ll embrace you in the same way once they realise you’re sticking around.

When you’re getting to know them you will realise that they’re not perfect. You might find out that they have skeletons (or dads) in the closet. You might realise that they’re doing plenty of things wrong, but for all the right reasons.

If you show up and do nothing but be yourself and love their son with a fiery passion, and they still don't like you, don't worry about it. You're not an ugly duckling who needs to bide her time, waiting for your time to shine, you're a goddamn swan. You are wonderful and their son is lucky to have you. Don't let his family make you feel like you're not worthy of him, because you make him the happiest man in the world. If they think there's something wrong with you, don't give it a second thought, because there's nothing wrong with you. It's not you, it's them.

If you loved *It's Not You, It's Them*, then turn the page for an exclusive extract from *Truth or Date*, another brilliant, giggle-inducing romance from Portia MacIntosh!

Chapter 1

‘You look good in red,’ Nick tells me, stifling a laugh.

Were I not so happy to have just tied the knot with the love of my life, I would’ve climbed the nearest palm tree, removed the biggest coconut I could find and thrown it at my darling hubby because, as much as I love him, I hate it when he’s right. Last week as we shopped for the few last bits for our honeymoon, I dragged Nick into Hollister where I saw this beautiful cream sundress. I knew that it would be perfect for our trip to Hawaii, but Nick didn’t seem convinced. He just doesn’t buy into fashion, he’s one of those guys who just doesn’t get it, whereas I’m the kind of girl who would swap a kidney for a Hermès bag. It wasn’t so much the price Nick took issue with (although he did say it was a lot of money for very little material), what he worried about most was the fact the dress was cream.

‘You’ll spill,’ he told me as I admired it on its hanger.

‘Fuck off,’ I replied.

‘You will,’ he insisted. ‘You’re the messiest girl in the world.’

Of course, this just made me want the dress all the more, so I bought it and here we are, the first day of our honeymoon and I’ve spilled my Lava Flow cocktail all the way down the front. Just like Nick said I would.

Nick retrieves the chunk of pineapple that garnished my drink from my cleavage and pops it in his mouth.

‘I told you you’d spill on it,’ he chuckles. ‘It’s a miracle you didn’t spill on your wedding dress.’

‘That’s because I *couldn’t* eat in it,’ I admit, although it wasn’t because I didn’t want to. ‘If I so much as inhaled too deeply, it felt like it might burst

open – and flashing my boobs on my wedding day is just the kind of Carry On moment you expect of me. None of the glossy wedding mags prepare you for the fact that your wedding dress will be the most uncomfortable thing you'll ever wear.'

'Yeah, they don't warn you that the first thing your new bride will do when she gets to the honeymoon suite will be hurry off her dress before pillaging the minibar either.'

I scoop some of the cocktail slush from my chest and flick it at Nick's bare stomach. He just laughs, lying back on the sand to catch some rays.

'Throw it in the sea,' he suggests. 'Back to its natural habitat. I'll bet it has missed the sound of the waves in the shop – so stupid.'

'Leave Hollister out of this,' I snap, jokily.

I peel off my dress, lie down on the sand next to Nick and rest my head gently on his bicep.

'I'll tan weird if you cuddle me,' he laughs, the sweltering heat from the Hawaiian sun beaming down on us.

'You'll get over it,' I reply.

Lying here with the man of my dreams, with nothing but the peaceful sound of the ocean filling my ears and the delicious smell of strawberries filling my nostrils, I sigh and smile to myself. I am so disgustingly happy.

Unable to resist him a second longer, I climb on top of Nick, leaning forwards to kiss him passionately. He places his hands on my hips before running them slowly up my body. I part our lips, but only so I can moan softly at his touch.

'I love you, Nick,' I tell him.

'I love you too, Ruby,' he replies. 'Ruby...Ruby...Ruby...'

Nick's voice grows louder, louder still and then more aggressive. It sounds like he's pissed off, come to think of it.

'Ruby,' he shouts. 'Wake up.'

I jolt awake suddenly, sitting upright.

'What the hell?' he asks, angrily.

I glance around for a second, taking in my surroundings... I'm not in

Hawaii at all, I'm in my living room. I'm not wearing a bikini, I'm in my underwear. I'm not lying on a beach, I'm on top of Ben, a guy I've been seeing for a couple of weeks. Oh, and Nick isn't my husband, he's my flatmate. My boring, stuck up, joyless flatmate that I can't stand. And I was just having a sex dream about him – eww! I feel my cheeks flush with shame – not because he's caught me semi-naked with a bloke, but because I was dreaming about *him*. That I was in love with him, that I'd married him... *I was about to have sex with him!*

'What time is it?' I ask him, rubbing my tired eyes, only to cover my hands in black eye make-up.

'It's 7am,' he tells me, his eyes shooting laser beams of judgement at me as he glares. Luckily for me I'm used to Nick looking down his nose at me, and anyway, the sheer volume of body glitter I'm wearing can easily deflect even the strongest laser.

'What day is it?' I ask.

Nick shakes his head and sighs.

'Friday. It's Friday, Ruby.'

'Oh fuck, I'm at work in an hour,' I reply as I massage my temples, my hangover from last night now in full force.

As Nick stands over me, eating a bowl of Weetabix like he does every morning after he gets back from the gym, about to head out to his proper serious job, I can feel him judging me. It's not my fault he doesn't know how to have fun, is it?

'So this is your online dating weirdo, how are things going?' he asks, nodding towards the heavily tattooed, muscular man that I'm using as a bed. I take a moment too long to answer. 'That badly?'

'All good,' I reply, unconvincingly. I've been dating Ben for about three weeks now, and things aren't exactly going that well. Last night was our third date, and despite every girly magazine I could get my hands on assuring me that date three was when the magic happened, the magic did not happen last night. Still, from the way Nick is looking at me right now, I doubt he believes that. In Nick's head I'm his hoe-bag flatmate who seemingly ploughs through internet dates, when in reality that's not the case – I wish I were getting even

one per cent of the action Nick thought I was.

Nick fakes a gasp.

‘Are you telling me that you hooked up with a guy you met via your phone and it’s not a fairy tale romance?’ he asks sarcastically.

I cast my mind back to our date last night. As much as I don’t want to give Nick the satisfaction of being right, the need to tell someone feels greater.

‘Things have been going well, it’s just...I met up with him yesterday and he told me he was taking me to a family party,’ I start.

‘Weird,’ Nick chimes in. ‘You’ve only been on a couple of dates with him, kid.’

‘I know, and weirder still: what he didn’t tell me was that it was a wake.’

‘A wake?’ Nick echoes loudly in disbelief, and in a much higher pitch than his voice usually is.

‘I’m awake, I’m awake,’ Ben says, panicked as he jumps to his feet. He does so without having realised I was on top of him, causing me to fall back onto the sofa. As he glances between an angry-looking Nick, and me in my underwear, he puts two and two together – coming up with wrong answer.

‘Look, calm down, nothing happened, OK? I didn’t sleep with your girlfriend,’ Ben babbles, stressing it in such a way that makes it sound like this is an excuse he has to make often.

‘Oh, charming,’ I say, annoyed that Ben thinks I’m the kind of girl who would have a boyfriend and still date around, but he isn’t listening.

‘She’s not my girlfriend, she’s my roommate,’ Nick corrects him.

I watch as Ben expresses visible relief.

‘Well, in that case, good to meet you, I’m Jonathan,’ he chirps, offering Nick a hand to shake. Nick doesn’t oblige.

‘Your name is Jonathan? I’ve spent three dates calling you Ben,’ I blurt out.

‘Yeah, I thought that was like a cute nickname or something,’ he laughs.

I giggle, puzzled, but what I see as a hilarious story for my blog, Nick is unimpressed by.

‘I just don’t get you, Ruby Wood,’ Nick says angrily, pointlessly using my full name like a pissed-off parent. ‘What are you doing with your life?’

‘What are you, my fucking dad? Why can’t you just be cool?’ I ask him, sounding like a teenager whose dad just confiscated her cigarettes – incidentally, something Nick has done with me before. In the end it was just easier to quit smoking than it was to put up with his complaints and his borderline OCD smell-removal techniques.

‘I’ve got to get to work,’ Nick tells us. He heads to the kitchen, rinses his bowl and spoon, places them in the dishwasher and then leaves without so much as a ‘see you later’.

Jonathan – not Ben – and I are sitting on the sofa next to each other awkwardly.

‘So your roommate seems fun,’ Jonathan says sarcastically.

‘He really is like my dad or my granddad or something,’ I reply, irritated, still sounding like a teenager.

‘You should move out,’ he tells me, like maybe that hadn’t crossed my mind.

‘There’s no way I can find a flat this central for this cheap,’ I tell him honestly. ‘Nick comes from a super-rich family, but he won’t take any money off them, so he reckons he can’t afford to move either. If either of us should move out, it should be him, don’t you think?’

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Jonathan replies, followed by an awkward silence.

I wonder how I managed to call him by the wrong name for so long. I suppose that’s app dating for you, it’s like fishing with multiple lines. I guess as I reeled this one in, I mixed up his name with a different fish.

‘Listen, Ruby, we’ve had fun right?’

I think for moment. No. No we haven’t. On our first date he suggested we go to the cinema – a rookie error, because it involves sitting in silence for two hours – and on the second we went to a bar and got drunk. Oh, and then the wake date. Jonathan is a good-looking dude, but he’s a bit weird. There’s something almost tortured about his personality, like he’s got some issues he needs to work through. Don’t we all, though? Still, he does have his good qualities too, so I’m happy to see where this goes. I’m not going to ditch the

guy just because he took me to a family funeral without telling me.

‘We have,’ I lie with a warm smile.

‘Well, I think we should call it a day,’ he tells me. I feel my smile drop.

‘What?’

‘I just...I think we’re moving in different directions.’

‘Oh my God, seriously? Are you really giving me the old lines? Is it not me, is it you?’

Jonathan grabs my hand.

‘It is me,’ he assures me, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze.

‘You’re damn fucking right it’s you,’ I reply.

Jonathan drops my hand and jumps to his feet, wrestling his clothes on as he talks, his tone suddenly becoming significantly less friendly.

‘OK, cards on the table, when we got back last night I thought I might get lucky, but you didn’t even want to sleep with me,’ he explains.

‘Dude, we’d just got back from *your dad’s wake* – that you didn’t even tell me we were going to.’

Oh, did I not mention that it was his dad’s funeral? I suppose I didn’t want to give Nick too much ammunition when he teases me about this every day until one of us moves out.

‘Yeah, well don’t you think I needed some comfort after that?’

‘So I’m supposed to bang you out of sheer sympathy?’

‘Well, it would’ve been nice,’ he replies, like it’s a fairly reasonable expectation.

‘You’re disgusting, get out,’ I demand.

Jonathan puts on his shoes and heads for the door, slamming it behind him.

Lying back on the sofa, I massage my temples for a moment. My head is banging, and I’ve got to be at work in an hour. Is getting dumped a good enough reason to call in sick?

‘Awkward,’ I say to myself. ‘So, so awkward.’ Not only what just happened with Jonathan, but my dream about Nick too. Not only do Nick and

I not get on, but we're like enemies, both driving the other crazy, but neither of us in a position to move out. The fact we're stuck with one another only makes us hate each other even more.

I glance around the floor for my outfit from last night, only to find that Nick has folded my dress and placed it neatly over the back of the sofa. I grab it, shaking my head at his anal neatness as I meaningfully and defiantly unfold it. All communal areas of the house must be neat and tidy to a military standard. Sir, yes, sir.

Tossing my clothes through my bedroom doorway, I head straight for the shower. I know that I'm running late, but after an uncomfortable night on the sofa cuddled up to a sweaty, emotional wreck of a man, there's no way I can go to work without washing some of yesterday's failed date off of me. I'm literally going to wash Jonathan out of my hair – well, his sweat and tears at least.

I turn on the shower, cranking up the hot water to make the bathroom nice and steamy while I brush my teeth. I've got that fuzzy mouth feeling you're left with after too many sugary alcoholic drinks. Typically, I'm out of toothpaste, but that's what flatmates are for, right? Borrowing things from.

I can see from Nick's toothpaste tube that he's used approximately 1/8 so far, with the used 1/8 neatly folded over a few times, thus giving the appearance of a perfectly full, slightly smaller tool. Does he really have that much spare time on his hands? Really? In another act of defiance, I not only use his toothpaste, but I squeeze from the middle of the tube, leaving behind a big, fingertip-shaped dent in it.

Finally stepping into the hot shower feels glorious, I can feel my bad date washing off me. Sure, I'm annoyed at how he behaved, but mostly I'm just annoyed to have another bad date on my romantic CV. Hardly seems worth putting Jonathan down, for a mere three weeks, but they always say it's better to put jobs down that you didn't have for long/got fired from, rather than have big, unaccounted-for gaps in your employment, right?

I grab my delicious-smelling pina colada-scented shower gel and rub it all over my body. I love the smell of it because it reminds me of my two favourite things: cocktails and the beach. Which reminds me, I'm not only washing away Jonathan, I need to scrub myself clean of that sex dream about

Nick. Nick Hall! I can't believe it.

I think to myself as I shampoo my hair. I'll admit that the first time I met Nick right here in this very flat, the first thing I noticed about him was how sexy he was. A sexy doctor, no less – that's like every girl's fantasy. Sharing this small space didn't suit us though, and it's amazing how quickly you can go off a person when they start to grate on you. One thing I can definitely put on my CV is that I'm not shallow, because not even Nick's chiselled good looks, bulging biceps or romance novel-worthy profession can sway how I feel about him.

So why the hell did I dream that about him today? It can't mean anything, can it? All that stuff about dreams meaning things has got to be a load of bollocks.

I shut off the water, and shut my dream about Nick out of my mind.

Once in the messy confines of my bedroom – where I am free to express my unorthodox organisational skills as I see fit – I grab a dress from the large pile of clothing on my bedroom floor – the division of my floordrobe which I have dubbed Mount Clothesmore – and search for my make-up bag because today my face is going to need everything it has to offer. If I don't get a move on, I'm going to be late for work, but it's better to be late than ugly, right?

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It's Not You, It's Them

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It's Not
You,
It's
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FIRST COMES LOVE. THEN COMES FAMILY...