

ONE WILD NIGHT



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A Novella By The International Bestseller

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Life on tour is *snow* joke...

Nicole Wilde loves nothing more than hitting the road with her rockstar best friend, Dylan King, and his band The Burnouts.

Sure, life on the road can be chaotic, but Nicole lives for it. That is, of course, until Dylan does something crazy – which happens more often than you might think.

Driving home in a blizzard was never going to be easy, but when it's Dylan who finds them all somewhere to crash for the night after the tour bus breaks down, Nicole has no idea what a wild time she is in for.

This certainly wasn't how she was planning on spending her Valentine's Day, but sometimes true love is closer than you might think.

For Joe – you know why

Contents

[*Chapter 1*](#)

[*Chapter 2*](#)

[*Chapter 3*](#)

[*Chapter 4*](#)

[*Chapter 5*](#)

[*Chapter 6*](#)

[*Chapter 7*](#)

[*Chapter 8*](#)

[*Chapter 9*](#)

[*Chapter 10*](#)

[*Want to read more?*](#)

[*Preview of Ex in the City.*](#)

The following events took place – to the best of everyone’s memory – in February 2011. Here’s what happened...

Chapter 1

What happens on tour, stays on tour – and, believe me, a lot happens on tour.

Yes, there is all of the usual stuff that you can think of – the sex, drugs and rock and roll – but, honestly, that cliché is only a part of the problem.

There was one time, when we were on the tour bus, driving along the motorway, when one of the wheels came off. Thankfully the driver was able to control the situation. He slowed down when he felt something wrong, and eventually pulled the bus to safety, handling things before a serious accident could have happened. And you couldn't blame the band for that incident. Not like, say, the competitive projectile vomiting ordeal of 2011, when everyone drank far too much and destroyed a hotel suite. It was like something from *The Exorcist* except, instead of one possessed little girl, it was four grown men painting the room green. Oh, and I'm not even getting into the time when, on a night off in the middle of a tour, a bassist (who shall remain anonymous) managed to lose his late grandpa's ring in a strip club. Concerningly, it never turned up, but I try not to think about it.

Needless to say, you have to exist in this heightened sense of danger if you want to survive the tour, always waiting for the ridiculous thing that is going to happen next, because if it isn't something going wrong, or something accidentally doing something stupid, then it's a prank – boys in bands love their pranks. You have to keep your wits about you at all times.

The back lounge of the tour bus is usually our safe zone. It's a place to chill out, to eat, drink, play PlayStation – to avoid the general chaos that comes with a tour. Even on a cold, wintery, February night like tonight, when there is a blizzard raging outside, it's so nice and cosy in here. Usually, you can forget that you're on a bus at all. At first, you notice the engine rumbling below but, as you settle in, it's just like being in a small house really. One full of drunk boys, where everyone sleeps in bunks, but that's all part of the experience.

Even though the bus usually feels safe, and I like to think that I am ready for anything, even I'm concerned tonight. I've never felt the bus gliding around like this, knocking us around in a way that I know that it shouldn't. These tour buses are big and heavy, so to feel one drifting so chaotically, so effortlessly, is more than concerning.

Mitch, the band's tour manager, stumbles into the bus lounge, desperately trying to steady himself.

'Okay, so,' he calls out over the rattling of the bus. 'The snow is causing some issues for Fred, especially on these country lanes.'

As Mitch speaks, a monstrous bump in the road sends him careening onto the sofa next to us.

'Are we going to die?' Dylan asks, with a bizarre level of casualness given the words that just left his lips.

I shoot him a look, torn between amusement and genuine concern.

'Dylan, seriously?' I say in disbelief – I mean, even if we are in a dire situation, the polite thing to do is pretend it's all fine.

Dylan King, the lead singer of The Burnouts, has always had a flare for the dramatic. Oh, and with me being his best friend, it has always been my job to clear up the aftermath of said drama.

Being a music journalist, I've crossed paths with my fair share of rock stars, but The Burnouts are something else, and it's all thanks to Dylan. Men want to be him, women throw themselves at him – and when you're in his orbit you feel like the most important person in the universe, there's just something about being in his atmosphere that gives you life. Of course, it's sort of a double-edged sword, to the point where he is almost addictive.

The women in Dylan's life tend to come and go, apart from, for some reason, me. I know what the key to our lasting relationship is though, and that's keeping things strictly platonic. Honestly, it's not that I didn't fancy him when I met

him (I'm only human) but friend-zoning each other turned out to be the best thing we could have done. That's why I'm here on this tour, not as a journalist, just as a friend.

Dylan embodies every stereotype of a rockstar – he loves a drink (or forty), there are not enough women in the world for him, and he can be a real pain in the arse sometimes. But he's my pain in the arse, y'know?

There are three other members in The Burnouts (although they would swear they all have to take a backseat to Dylan's huge personality). There's Mikey, Dylan's brother, who is the band's guitarist and songwriter. Mikey and Dylan couldn't be more different. Mikey is shy, quiet, and modest – Dylan is absolutely none of those things. There is also Jamie, the bassist, and Taz, the drummer, who you can just tell are trying to live that Dylan King lifestyle but, nine out of ten times, women only give them attention to get to Dylan. Still, they know that, but they're happy to take it.

Mitch, attempting to regain his composure, sits up straight.

'Of course, we're not going to—'

His words are cut off abruptly as the bus takes another wild swerve, leaving us all grabbing hold of something to anchor us.

Okay, now I'm panicking, and I don't think I'm the only one. It's hard to tell what's going on outside the bus – it's so dark outside the windows that, besides the occasional barrage of snowflakes, you can't see a thing – but you don't have to be an expert to tell that we're hurtling down a snowy, country road in a massive tour bus.

I grip the table in front of me for dear life.

'Are we actually going to die?' Dylan blurts out. In all the years I have known Dylan he has always considered himself to be immortal. Even he seems concerned, which only makes me worry more. Well, if the man who isn't scared of anything is freaking out then you know it's bad.

‘Listen up, guys,’ Jamie pipes up. ‘Just in case this is it... Taz... I need to tell you... I slept with Amy last year.’

He has to raise his voice, to talk over the bumps in the road, as he clings onto the back of the sofa.

I remember Amy, she was just one of many to pass through Taz’s revolving door of love interests. Jamie’s too, it turns out.

‘That’s okay,’ Taz says, leaning back onto the sofa, his knuckles turning white as he grips the cushions. ‘I slept with your sister.’

Oh my God. Are we seriously doing deathbed confessions right now?

‘I don’t have the time or the memory to confess all of the things I’ve done,’ Dylan pipes up. ‘So I’ll just issue a sorry, across the board, to all of you.’

Finally they all look to Mikey.

‘Me?’ he replies, realising it’s his turn. ‘My God, I don’t even have anything to confess, I don’t think. I need to make changes, to have more fun – if we don’t die, anyway.’

I can’t help but smile. Mikey is sweet, not like the others. He is so talented, without a doubt, but it’s almost as though he hasn’t realised that he is the guitarist in a band. No one ever needs to worry about Mikey sleeping with their girlfriend – or their sister.

‘Do you have anything to get off your chest, Nic?’ Dylan asks me, laughing at the absurdity of it all.

I feel so vulnerable, with the spotlight on me. Do I have anything that I need to get off my chest? Anything I might want to say, in case I don’t ever get the chance again?

‘I guess I–’ I begin, but before I can finish my sentence the bus comes to a sudden stop, sending us all flying forward.

As the dust settles, I’m relieved to see that we’re all still in one piece. I try to get my head around what just happened, my senses returning one at a time, realising that, in the commotion, Dylan must have grabbed me, wrapping himself

around me like bubble wrap, to protect me from the impact. I smile at him, grateful to have him cushion my blow.

‘Thanks,’ I say softly.

He smiles back.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he says, letting me go before climbing to his feet. He offers me a hand, to pull me up too. ‘I’m too drunk to feel anything. No sense in both of us getting hurt.’

Mitch shoots up like he’s been electrocuted – I’m not ruling out that he has been.

‘Bloody hell, I’ll go check on Fred,’ he declares before heading off into the depths of the bus.

Fred, The Burnout’s driver, is the only other person on the bus. The rest of the crew, and all of the bands’ gear, wisely opted to stay in Glasgow, instead of battling the blizzard, which is exactly what we should have done but the boys wanted to get back to London.

Just when I think that things cannot possibly get any worse right now the entire bus plunges into darkness. Shit. That can’t be good.

Without a word we all take our phones out and turn on the torches, which just about illuminates the lounge, but in a creepy way, like we’re sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories. I’m letting my imagination run away with me, and I’m freaking myself out.

‘Oh God,’ I blurt out, and for once, there’s no room for humour or sarcasm. I’m serious and I’m scared.

Dylan, usually the one to (ironically) make light of any situation, isn’t laughing now.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ he reassures me. ‘Something must have happened to the bus, in the crash. Jamie, didn’t you used to be a mechanic? Go look.’

‘I used to be a mechanic, I didn’t used to be an abominable snowman,’ Jamie claps back. ‘I’m not going out in that.’

‘Funny, because he looks like one,’ Dylan says quietly, leaning into my ear, trying to relax me with a joke.

‘I heard that,’ Jamie replies. ‘And, anyway, I was training to be a mechanic, so unless it’s something simple, there’s nothing I can do. But I wouldn’t even know where to begin, in a blizzard, in the pitch black...’

‘Don’t worry, mate, we just need to hang in there,’ Mikey, ever the peacekeeper, pipes up. ‘Mitch will be back; he’ll tell us what to do.’

In the dim light, Dylan’s arm finds its way to my shoulder to give me a calming squeeze. I can just about make out his reassuring smile, in the almost darkness, but as reassuring as it is intended to be, it’s not doing much to stop me freaking out.

‘Let’s just sit down and wait,’ Mikey continues.

‘Yeah, don’t worry, it will all be okay,’ Dylan tells me as we find our seats.

I rub my arms, a sudden chill settling over me. I don’t know if it’s because the bus heating went off with the lights, or whether it’s the icy arms of anxiety taking hold of me. Stuck in the dark, in the middle of nowhere, the silence is deafening, not knowing what is going to happen next. It really is like something out of a horror movie.

Taking a seat beside me, Dylan instinctively wraps an arm around me, his fingers rubbing gently, a rhythmic attempt to stave off the encroaching cold.

We huddle together in the darkness, and it’s not that I don’t appreciate him telling me that everything is going to be okay, because I do, but right now it’s impossible to believe.

Is everything going to be okay? We’ll have to wait and see. In the dark. In a blizzard. In the middle of nowhere. Great.

Chapter 2

Do you ever wake from a nightmare and, for a moment, you forget what is real and what was just a bad dream?

I wake with a start, disoriented and not entirely sure where I am, and just as I'm coming to my senses, reassuring myself that it was all just a dream, I realise that I'm on board the cold, dark tour bus, and that this is really happening.

Dylan's shoulder is still beneath my head, and for a moment, I can't believe I was able to fall asleep in such an awkward position. I'm wide awake now, and anxious to learn that things don't seem to have improved.

I shift, relieving Dylan from his duties as a human pillow/radiator.

'Uh, sorry about that,' I mumble, laughing awkwardly.

Dylan being Dylan, he just laughs.

'That's okay,' he tells me. 'You didn't miss much and, in good news, I have the solution to all of our problems.'

I rub my eyes as I sit up straight. Glancing around the lounge – which is even darker than it was before – I realise that Mitch isn't here.

'Where's Mitch?' I ask.

'He went in the ambulance, with Fred,' Mikey explains. 'He banged his head, he was bleeding. They sent the emergency services for him, and said one person could go with him, so Mitch went. Don't worry, they said Fred will be fine, but he needs treating. He's in the right place now.'

'I did ask if we could go too,' Dylan tells me. 'But apparently *it's a rescue ambulance, not a minibus.*'

Dylan says this in a mocking tone, as though he's repeating what someone said to him, that he doesn't believe is a reasonable reply.

'Mitch said he would send someone for us, when he could, but it sounds like the snow is bad everywhere,' Mikey

continues. ‘So we just need to sit tight here, until someone comes to get us.’

‘Oh God,’ I blurt, because, honestly, I feel so claustrophobic – which is ironic, given how out in the open we are.

‘Like I said, it’s all good, I’ve got the solution to our problems,’ Dylan says again.

It’s not that he doesn’t sound confident it’s just that – and please, keep in mind, that Dylan is my best friend and I love him – Dylan isn’t usually the person who comes up with solutions to problems, in fact, he’s almost always the person who causes the problems in the first place.

‘Go on, bro,’ Mikey says.

You can hear in his voice that he feels the same way as I do. Neither of us expects to hear a genuine solution. The chances it doesn’t involve smoking or drinking are slim – in fact, I’d throw sex in the mix too, were it not for the fact that I’m the only female here.

‘Well, I heard Mitch say we were near somewhere called Lundsgill,’ Dylan explains. ‘So, I figured, there must be someone there who can help us out.’

‘You know someone in Lundsgill?’ Mikey asks in disbelief. ‘Because I don’t even know where Lundsgill is.’

‘Somewhere between Glasgow and London,’ Jamie points out.

‘We know that much, you idiot,’ Taz replies. ‘We’ve been on the road a while so, I’d say we were back in England, at least.’

‘That’s not important,’ Dylan insists. ‘What’s important is that I’ve found us someone to stay with.’

Oh God, I hate the sound of this already...

‘What, like a B&B?’ Mikey asks.

‘No – that was the first thing I checked, obviously, there’s only one and it’s full,’ Dylan tells us. ‘So, I went on

Twitter.’

There’s a sentence that never precedes anything good.

‘Twitter?’ I repeat back to him. ‘Like... Twitter-Twitter?’

‘You sound like a bird,’ he replies with a laugh. ‘Yes, Twitter – with so many fans on there I figure there must be someone nearby who can help us out. It turns out there is someone – a fan – who lives in Lundsgill, and she says she can put us all up at her place.’

‘You want us to go and stay with some random fan?’ I blurt in disbelief.

I thought the story was weird when he said Twitter but I didn’t imagine it getting this much stranger.

‘Yeah,’ he says proudly, either not picking up on my tone or choosing to ignore it. ‘And she’s fit too.’

Dylan holds his phone up for the boys to see her profile picture. She’s young, blonde, and wearing a lot of make-up. It’s not a great quality picture, and she’s hiding her face underneath a thick fringe, but I guess she ticks all of Dylan’s usual boxes: willing and alive.

‘So, what, we can all stay with her?’ Mikey replies. ‘She must have a big place?’

‘Fit and rich,’ Jamie says excitedly.

I roll my eyes. Everyone on this bus knows that, if she’s interested in anyone, it will be Dylan, then Mikey, and then probably Taz, if we’re being honest. I’ve spent a lot of time with The Burnouts and Jamie is definitely the least popular. I’m sure it’s a looks thing, for some people, but bassists are also usually band members at the bottom of the list. It doesn’t help that Jamie’s personality isn’t great either. He has this entitlement, that many band members have, to female attention. Sometimes I wonder if that’s the only reason he’s doing this.

‘What if she’s an axe murderer?’ I chime in.

‘How often do people turn out to be axe murderers?’
Dylan says with a scoff. ‘You watch too many movies.’

Yes, I’m the one who is being crazy.

‘I don’t like the sound of this,’ I say. ‘I’m not sleeping in some random girl’s house – especially not one you found by tweeting. Dylan, even by your standards, this is a terrible idea. You guys must agree with me?’

I look between Mikey, Taz and Jamie, to see if any of them agree with me, but it seems like they’re coming around to the idea – or, to be honest, like most of them were on board to begin with.

‘Nic, it’s this or freeze our butts off on this dark, cold bus,’ Dylan tells me, his tone more serious now. ‘And to top it off, our phones are gasping their last breaths because we’ve been using them as torches. We’re not going to have light for much longer. Best we get to safety now, before we run out completely.’

I sigh because I suppose he’s right about that, and I know we do probably need to go somewhere, but a random girl’s house? Really?

I cross my arms, contemplating the absurdity of the situation.

‘So, what, we’re just going to blindly trust some fan we’ve never met?’ I confirm. ‘That’s the best we can do?’

‘I don’t see you finding us anywhere to go,’ he says with a smile. ‘And have you ever known me not land on my feet and come up smelling of roses?’

Well, that’s certainly true. That might be the smartest thing he’s said all night.

‘What’s the worst that can happen?’ he pushes me.

‘We could all get murdered in our sleep,’ I offer up. ‘That’s the worst thing that could happen.’

‘Nicole, we’re freezing,’ Mikey says, his voice soft. ‘I think we might need to take our chances. Mitch said he would

send someone for us, as soon as he could. So, for now, I think we just need to do what we need to survive the night.'

As I look to Dylan I can just about notice that wild glimmer in his eyes, the one he often gets right before he does something ridiculous.

'Come on, Nic, just think of all the adventures you would have missed out on, if you didn't listen to me,' he says to me – practically goading me into agreeing.

Dylan's argument isn't exactly compelling but Mikey's certainly is. I don't fancy a night on the bus, in the cold, the dark – in the middle of nowhere. I can't believe I'm saying this but, the axe murder risk seems pretty balanced, whether we're here or there, so may as well be warm while we're getting chopped up, right?

I glance at Taz and Jamie, who seem oddly unfazed by this questionable plan.

'Fine,' I relent. 'But if I do wind up getting murdered, and somehow you don't, Dylan King, then I swear to God I will haunt you forever.'

Dylan just laughs.

'Fair enough,' he replies. 'I'd miss you anyway.'

'Right,' Mikey says, clapping his hands together. 'Let's dress up warm and grab our essentials.'

Dylan jumps to his feet with an excited spring in his step.

'We're going on an adventure,' he tells me, his wide eyes catching the light from my torch.

Well, I think it's pretty safe to say that, the nightmare I thought I had woken up from earlier, I am still very much trapped in.

Here we go...

Chapter 3

I've never been good in the cold weather. Honestly, some of us were born to live on holiday, and I'm one of them.

The freezing air nips at my skin as I struggle through the deep snow. Unsurprisingly, I don't have the shoes with me for this, but thankfully we're able to follow the directions on Dylan's phone just in time, before his battery finally succumbs to the cold – I'm surprised it lasted longer than me, to be honest with you.

We have arrived at our destination, it would seem.

You know, it's not all that often I question my life choices, usually I'm pretty happy with how things have turned out. Every now and then, though – usually when I'm with Dylan – I do wonder to myself: how the hell did I get here? And today is definitely one of those days.

In the distance a house begins to appear, barely standing out in the snowy landscape. The first thing I notice is the light, shining like a beacon of safety in the middle of the worst blizzard I have ever seen in real life.

'Christ, she must be loaded,' Taz blurts.

As we get closer I realise that it's a farmhouse, painted in muted tones, battered by the weathered marks of time. It looks old, and big, and inexplicably like it has seen some things over the years. It has a wooden porch with a swing seat, which I imagine usually gives off quaint countryside vibes, but watching it chaotically flail around in the wind makes it seem like it's possessed, which only makes everything seem creepier. I need to get horror movies out of my mind.

'Looks like it'll be warm and well-stocked,' Mikey points out, his breath forming clouds in front of him. Then he laughs to himself. 'Listen to me, I sound like I'm in a zombie apocalypse movie.'

So much for getting horror off my brain.

‘I’ve just started watching *The Walking Dead*. I’m prepared for anything,’ Jamie announces with a confidence he in no way deserves to have.

‘Well, if years of training to be a mechanic couldn’t help you to fix the bus, a few episodes of a TV show won’t make you any use in a zombie apocalypse, will they?’ Dylan claps back. ‘Unless we threw you to the zombies, to eat, seeing as though you’ve got the most meat on you.’

‘Piss off,’ Jamie dares to clap back.

I can’t say that I’m not nervous, as we approach the house, but as warm light spills out from the windows, and smoke curls from the chimney above, I can’t say that it doesn’t look inviting.

Dylan boldly steps forward and gives the front door a loud knock. The door swings open – almost instantly – to reveal a young woman. She’s all dressed up, like she’s going to a party, but she only looks seventeen or eighteen – oh, and we are in the middle of a blizzard, so I doubt she’s going anywhere. Her eyes widen as she sees Dylan, and a mischievous smile tugs at the corners of her lips.

‘Oh my God, Dylan, hi,’ she blurts excitedly, pulling him in for a hug. ‘I wasn’t sure you’d actually show up but here you are, oh my God, I can’t believe it.’

Dylan stares at her blankly.

‘Hi guys,’ she says, turning to the rest of us. ‘I’m Kitty.’

As I notice Dylan’s eyes widen with horror I realise that this must be the fan who he was talking to. She’s definitely younger than she seemed online, and she definitely looks nothing like her photo.

Dylan, being the big ball of charisma that he is (and knowing that we’re in a bind) seems happy to go with the flow.

‘Kitty, we can’t thank you enough for doing this for us,’ he tells her with a smile. ‘This is one hell of a place you’ve got here.’

Wait... what is that...? I blink frantically, as though my eyes are betraying me. An older woman with long white hair, wearing a cream nightdress, with an unmistakably ghostly complexion appears out of nowhere. A man, probably in his fifties, soon joins her. He somehow looks grumpy and welcoming.

‘Guys, these are my parents, Trish and Pat,’ Kitty makes the introductions. ‘Mum, dad, this is Dylan King – the Dylan King – and his brother, Mikey, then there’s Taz, Jamie and...’

As her eyes stop on me she looks me up and down, a look on her face like she’s just caught a bad smell.

‘Who are you?’ she asks me plainly.

‘I’m Nicole,’ I say.

‘Well, hello there! Come on in, dearies. We’ve been expecting you,’ Trish says with a warm but oddly intense smile that makes me kind of uneasy.

Pat, a tall figure with a similarly welcoming yet chilling vibe, chimes in as he physically moves his daughter to one side.

‘Yes, yes! You all must be freezing out there,’ he adds. ‘Do come in. Kitty is thrilled to have you.’

I exchange glances with the band, trying to decipher the vibes here. Still, I have no choice but to follow them indoors. As the heat hits my body, soothing my frozen bones, it almost tricks me into relaxing. Even if I can stick it out here for an hour, before I have to run for my life, at least I will have defrosted first.

‘Thanks so much, Trish, Pat,’ Dylan says, offering Pat a hand to shake. ‘You’re real lifesavers. We thought we were going to be stuck out there all night. I can’t believe the weather.’

‘You’re lucky,’ Trish says, lowering her voice, narrowing her eyes. ‘Snowfall like this, in February, during a leap year, is said to awaken the spirit of old Lord Arthur Stump.’

Her eyes lock onto mine, and I can't help but feel an involuntary shudder.

'Who's Lord Arthur Stump?' Mikey asks, clearly intrigued.

'Oh, he was a fella hanged from the old oak tree out back, centuries ago. Accused of aiding witches,' she explains. 'But, lucky for you, it's not a leap year this year.'

Trish holds her serious expression for a few more seconds before she erupts with a witchy cackle. I can't tell if she's laughing because she just made that up, because it's true but she finds it absolutely hilarious.

Lucky is the last thing I feel right now.

'Kitty thinks you're the best thing since poached herring,' Pat tells Dylan which – I could be wrong, because it sounds wrong – I think is a good thing.

'Yeah?' Dylan replies, smiling warmly.

'Oh yes, she never stops talking about you,' Pat continues.

'Dad,' Kitty moans, her cheeks flushing lightly.

'We're just all so lucky you came to our aid,' Mikey says.

'We're good Samaritans,' Pat insists. 'We would never leave a fellow man – or woman – in need. It is, however, late, so perhaps it would be best if we all retire to bed.'

'Yeah, no worries, we really appreciate it,' Dylan says.

For a few seconds, everyone falls silent, until...

'Dylan can sleep in my room,' Kitty blurts excitedly.

The colour drains from Dylan's face, his neck, his hands – even his tattoos seem to fade.

'Oh, no, sorry, I can't,' he insists almost frantically. I can see the cogs moving in his brain, as he tries to think on his feet. 'It's Nicole. She's my girlfriend, so...'

I don't think there is a person in this room who sounds surprised to hear him say that, but I think it's safe to say that I'm top of the list.

Dylan snakes an arm around my waist, pulling me close, kissing me on the cheek.

'Really?' Kitty says. '*I didn't know you had a girlfriend.*'

It is interesting, the way fans think they truly know a person, just because they like their music. I can't say much, given that I'm a music journalist, but there is this almost unquenchable thirst for information, to know every last detail about their lives, every move they make, everywhere they go.

Then again, I can't blame Kitty for being surprised. Dylan King – the Dylan King – having a girlfriend would definitely be front-page news.

'Yeah, look, see,' Dylan adds as he pulls me closer, nuzzling his face into my neck, making weird kissy noises.

Were I not so taken aback by, well, this entire scenario and all the bizarre twists and turns it is taking, I would probably be laughing at the fact that this is Dylan's interpretation of what you do with a girlfriend.

'Not married then?' Pat asks, his face serious, his tone stern.

'Huh?' Dylan replies.

'The two of you, you're not married,' he says again.

'No, they're not,' Kitty tells her dad, her mouth twisting into a smug little grin.

'Then you won't be sharing a bedroom under my roof,' Pat points out.

'Yeah, no worries,' Dylan tells him.

Obviously we weren't expecting to share a room, and we're not a real couple, so we don't care.

'Dylan, we have a room for you, and the other three...'

Pat pauses, as he mentally arranges us. I glance at the “other three” who look about as livid as you would expect them to be, at the idea of the band being categorised as “Dylan” and “the other three”.

‘...the other three, you can go in the workers’ accommodation,’ Pat continues. ‘There are two sets of bunk beds in there.’

Two sets of bunk beds, so four beds – does that mean I’m going in there? It won’t be much different to sleeping on the bus with them, to be honest, although at least on the bus you have a little curtain for privacy. Anyway, it’s just for one night, I’m sure they can refrain from anything they might need a curtain shield for, like sleeping naked, or *worse*.

‘Me too?’ I check.

‘No, goodness, of course not,’ Pat replies. ‘I’m sure Dylan would be horrified, if his partner were to share a room with various men.’

“Various men” might actually be even more offensive than “the other three” – equally as hilarious though.

‘Oh,’ I say simply. ‘So, I’m...?’

‘You can share a bedroom with Kitty,’ Pat announces.

‘Oh, what fun,’ Trish says with a giddy clap. ‘Like a slumber party. Don’t you girls be keeping us up late having pillow fights and sharing secrets now, will you?’

Jamie opens his mouth, as if he’s about to crack a dirty joke, but we’re all expecting it. Thankfully, Mikey jabs him with an elbow before he gets the chance.

‘Oh, there’s no need, really,’ I insist, because, my God, I do not want to share a room with this random girl. ‘I’ll go in with the boys, or sleep on the sofa, I don’t mind...’

‘Nonsense,’ Pat insists. ‘You will only be in the next room from one another, there’s no need to pine or fret. Now, it is late, we should all head to bed. Trish will show you to your room, Dylan, and I’ll take the other three. Kitty, show Nicole to your room.’

‘Fine,’ she says with a huff, clearly as unimpressed as I am with the situation. ‘Come on, you.’

I glance over at Dylan. There isn’t a hint of anything on his face. His expression is blank, he’s motionless – not even his eyes are moving. I know Dylan though so, believe me when I say this, behind that stony façade his is screaming with laughter at the idea of my having to share a room with Kitty. It’s as though he’s telepathically letting me know just how funny this is, but this is a two-way communication method, so I’m silently transmitting back to him that he can piss off.

I take a deep breath before following Kitty up the stairs.

The stairway winds around in the centre of the house, meaning it has no windows, just a little light coming from electric-powered candle lights on the walls – not very bright ones at that. The brown striped wallpaper is covered with framed photos of the family, just the three of them, along with various picture of the farmhouse and the land that surrounds it. There’s something creepy about the photos – something that I can’t quite put my finger on. They have this almost dark, washy tone to them, like they weren’t developed properly, making them look like something you unearth in an attic in a horror movie. The composition is off on some of the family photos too, as though there were a fourth member, who had been erased – for goodness sake, I am creeping myself out again. This needs to stop. This is just a house. They are just a family, and there is nothing alarming, or concerning, or...

My thoughts taper off as I follow Kitty into her bedroom.

It was obvious from the moment she invited us to stay that she was a big fan of Dylan, but nothing could have prepared me for this. This isn’t a bedroom; it’s a Dylan King shrine.

Almost every inch of every wall is plastered with posters, magazine clippings, and photos, all of Dylan. Sure, some of them have “the other three” in, but that seems little more than circumstantial. One photo in particular, that Kitty has obviously printed out from Dylan’s Twitter page, catches my eye more than any other, because it’s one that is so familiar

to me. It's a photo taken backstage at a gig of Dylan with his arm around me, except the version Kitty has is a little different. There's Dylan, and there's me (or my body, at least), but Kitty has stuck a picture of her own face over mine. Kitty is clearly head over heels in love with Dylan, and absolutely out of her tree.

I swallow hard, my eyes darting around the room, because the only thing even more alarming than all the photos (including the one she has removed me from) is the fact that there is only one bed in here.

No. God, no. Tell me I do not have to share a bed with this girl? Sharing a room with her is bad enough – sharing a house with her is, to be honest, pushing me way out of my comfort zone – but sharing a bed?!

'Do you have spare blankets and pillows?' I ask her. 'So that I can get set up on the floor.'

I glance down at the wooden floorboards that have seen better days. They look cold and hard and they're full of gaps – perfect for all kinds of spiders to creep up through, I'll bet.

'No,' she tells me as she changes into her nightgown. 'I guess we'll just have to put up with each other. Here.'

Kitty throws a spare nightgown at me. It's a long, white, old-fashioned-looking thing. The kind of thing you would wear to haunt someone, for sure.

'Oh, that's okay, I can sleep in my t-shirt,' I insist. 'But thank you.'

'You're not wearing outside clothes in my bed,' she replies. 'It's a house rule. So, thank *you*, for wearing the nightgown.'

This is a nightmare – a genuine nightmare – or maybe it's worse because, honestly, I don't think I've ever had a dream about anything so messed up in my life.

I don't see what choice I have other than to awkwardly change into the nightgown – used every tip and trick I learned in the PE changing rooms at school – and then climb into bed next to her.

I'm sure it goes without saying that, out of the five of us (me, Dylan, Mikey, Jamie and Taz) I am the least likely to end up in a bed with a random girl – although if I said that to Dylan, he would probably joke that it was Jamie who was the least likely.

Kitty switches off the lights and I'm not sure if it makes things better or worse. Sure, it was strange, when I had hundreds of pairs of Dylan's eyes staring at me, but now that we're in the darkness, I don't know, I almost miss the feeling of him watching over me, protecting me even.

In the darkness, and the silence, I wonder to myself how on earth I'm going to be able to sleep. Is Kitty sleeping? I can't hear a sound from her, not even the sound of her breathing (not that I'm missing it or anything). Thankfully I can't feel her next to me either. This isn't a big double, but I'm finding it easy enough to keep some space between us, although I am quite close to the edge. Somehow falling out of bed seems like the least of my worries.

The silence continues for a few more minutes, until...

'He doesn't love you, you know,' Kitty says, breaking the silence.

No, I suppose he doesn't, or there's no way I would be in this situation right now.

My God, this is intense, and creepy, and Dylan might have protected himself from a crazy fan by claiming that I'm his girlfriend, but it definitely feels like he's thrown me under the bus.

And now I have to sleep, and I don't feel any less worried about axe murderers now that I'm here, and you better believe I'll be having words with Dylan in the morning.

If I make it to the morning, that is.

Chapter 4

I wake up with a start, disoriented, sitting up bold straight in the pitch-black room. It takes me a few seconds, to remember where I am, but then it all comes back to me. I'm in a bed, with a crazy girl, surrounded by a shrine to my best friend – a best friend who said-crazy-girl thinks is my boyfriend. It's a tale as old as time.

I practically strain my ears as I listen to the silence. No, not quite silence, there are strange, unidentifiable noises now and then, barely audible ones, and the fact that I don't know what any of them are only makes them seem all the creepier.

One sound in particular, although not all that loud, sounds like someone – or something – trying to get into the house. Oh God, unless it's something trying to get out of the house, which is a much more sinister thought. If I'm being rational – or trying to be, at least – it's probably just the sound of snow slipping from the roof, falling down in front of the window, but something about this creepy farmhouse makes me feel like I can't quite afford to rule anything out.

The darkness has its advantages, I suppose. With the lights off it doesn't only help me to forget that there are photos of Dylan stuck to every available surface, but I could almost forget Kitty was lying in bed next to me. I can't see her, feel her or hear her. Although would I be surprised if she levitated above the bed while she slept? Absolutely not.

I think about what Pat said, about Dylan only being in the room next door, and I wonder if I could sneak to see him, undetected. Sure, I want to shake him, and ask him what the hell he was thinking bringing us here, but more than anything I think that a familiar face would make me feel a lot less freaked out right now.

I peel back the bed covers ever so slowly, letting the chilly night air hit my skin, and it takes everything I have to fight off a shiver. I'm scared that even the slightest movement might wake Kitty up.

Finally on my feet, I tiptoe across the room, navigating the creaky floorboards, doing my best not to make a sound. It's a relief when I make it to the bedroom door undetected, but as I step out into the dark hallway I realise I'm not out of the woods yet.

Moonlight creeping in through a landing window illuminates the hallway just enough to guide me towards the door of the bedroom where Dylan is sleeping – thankfully there is only one bedroom next to Kitty's room, because I can't even imagine what would happen if I crept into her parents' room by mistake.

The floorboards seem as though they creak even louder out here, in a way that makes me suspicious, as though they're connected to an amp, and Kitty's parents use them as some sort of movement detection alert.

I make it to the door, then through it, before finally approaching the bed in the centre of the room. It's dark, but I can just about make out the bump in the covers, where Dylan is fast asleep. He has this adorable snore that he does sometimes, which drives the others on the bus mad, but I've always found it cute and strangely relaxing. I know it can be annoying when you can't sleep and the person next to you is flat out, but I find it kind of reassuring when I hear sleepy noises coming from Dylan's bunk, because it sort of sends out a signal that it's not only possible to sleep, but okay to do so. Then again, there is also that relief I feel when I know Dylan is asleep because it means he isn't getting himself into any sort of trouble.

'Dylan,' I whisper as I approach the bed, reaching out for his shoulder to shake him lightly.

I gasp with horror as I feel a hand forcibly grab me by the wrist, squeezing it tightly.

'What are you doing here?' an almost demonic voice demands to know.

'What the hell?' Dylan says, waking with a start.

He must turn on this bedside light because the flash of bright light startles me almost as much as the demon did – the demon who still has a hold of me.

Of course, now that my eyes are adjusting to the light, I can see that it's not a technically demon at all, it's Kitty. Kitty who in in bed with Dylan, spooned up behind him.

'Oh my God, Kitty, what are you doing?' Dylan asks her as he jumps out of bed, breaking the hold she has on my wrist.

Dylan turns to me, I would imagine to check that I am okay, but he's distracted by my Ghost of Christmas Past nightgown.

'Nic, what are you wearing?' he asks, allowing himself a little chuckle despite the circumstances.

'Don't even mention it,' I insist firmly.

'Oh, come on, it looks great,' he insists, almost flirtatiously. 'I'm kind of into it.'

I wonder if he's doing this for Kitty's benefit, joking, or if he really has unlocked some kind of kink he didn't realise he had. With Dylan, you never really know.

'*She's* not supposed to be in here,' Kitty says firmly.

'Neither are you,' Dylan reminds her. 'Kitty, I really appreciate you giving us somewhere to stay, and I really appreciate your support, but I'm in a relationship with Nicole. I love her. I'm so sorry if that's difficult for you, but you have to respect my space.'

My eyebrows raise slightly. I have to say, I'm impressed. I mean, obviously he's lying about the two of us being in love and all that but, credit where it is due, Dylan has always been respectful of his younger fans, and has always kept strong boundaries. I know, this seems like the bare minimum, but you would be surprised how many musicians (and people in the public eye generally) don't give a damn if you're young, if you're in a relationship, or if you're even that into them. For all of Dylan's faults, and lord knows he has a bunch, I've got to give him credit for that.

Kitty climbs out of bed slowly – menacingly so, I would say – and walks around the bed to stand in front of us.

‘Do you honestly expect me to believe that Dylan King is in love?’ she asks, looking us both up and down.

I mean, she’s right. They reckon the world might end next year, right? I don’t know who ‘they’ are, but I’ve heard all the crazy doomsday stuff being batted around. Well, even that seems more likely than Dylan King getting a girlfriend and falling in love. I’m not surprised Kitty doesn’t believe him.

I turn to Dylan, to see what he’s going to say (because I’m on the edge of my seat with this one too) only to see him moving closer to me, his face heading for mine, his arms snaking their way around my body – one around my waist while the other creeps behind my neck. Before I really know what is happening Dylan’s lips are on mine. First he pecks me softly, a couple of times, before parting his lips to kiss me properly – and I mean really kiss me properly.

If, just for a second (and I swear to God, I will deny this if anyone ever asks me about it), I pretend that it isn’t my best friend who is kissing me – and that he’s only doing it to get a crazed fan out of his bed – then I have to admit, I can see why women go weak at the knees for him. His kisses are so soft, yet so powerful. Goosebumps form on my arms, and my body starts to tingle. He is so commanding and I feel like he could pull away at any second. I desperately don’t want him to. It’s like some kind of spell.

He is one hell of a kisser – then again, he’s had a hell of a lot of practice.

Finally, he releases me and, after a few seconds, the spell wears off. Now all I have to worry about is Kitty clawing my eyes out.

‘Do I honestly expect you to believe I’m in love?’ Dylan reminds her of her question. ‘You tell me.’

Kitty huffs.

‘She can’t stay in here with you,’ Kitty reminds him as she strops towards the door, like a toddler who wants chocolate for dinner. ‘Come on, Nicole.’

‘Yeah, go on Nicole,’ Dylan tells me.

I stare at him for a second as he laughs with his eyes. Then I can just about make out him mouthing the word ‘sorry’ to me. I guess his kiss has worked as Kitty seems to believe him for now.

I mouth back to him that I will kill him before following Kitty back to her room.

I can’t say I’m surprised that Dylan finds kissing his best friend to get out of a pinch so funny, because his entire life is like a game of spin the bottle.

I am surprised by how much I enjoyed it though.

And now I have to get back in bed with Kitty, knowing how jealous she is, and that she must hate my guts.

I suppose I’ll be sleeping with one eye open tonight, but I’ll bet Dylan is already back to sleeping like a baby.

Chapter 5

I open my eyes slowly, and I'm as relieved as I am disappointed to have made it to morning.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to have woken, because I was half expecting to find myself in a pool of my own blood, but the fact that I'm still alive means that I have to continue to be here, which sucks. I suppose death is worse than this ordeal, but only just.

Kitty is nowhere to be seen. I wonder if she's in bed with Dylan but then I notice the noise, and the smell of cooked food, drifting up through the floorboards.

I take off my borrowed nightdress and put on my clothes before heading downstairs. As I enter the kitchen, I realise that I'm the last person to get up. Everyone else is sitting around the breakfast table like one big happy family.

'Good morning, dear, grab a plate,' Trish instructs. 'You're sitting there, next to Dylan.'

'Morning, babe,' Dylan says, grinning like an idiot as he pats the dining chair next to him.

I just love that he's finding his so funny. For some of us – mostly me – it's a nightmare.

I do as I'm instructed and take my seat, because I am actually starving and the food does smell great.

'It's nothing special, just eggs, toast, and porridge today,' Trish points out. 'We like to eat our own meat, from the farm, but it's in short supply when the weather is bad, so we have to ration.'

'Oh, that's absolutely fine,' I tell her.

I'm not a vegetarian but, I don't know, something about them eating their own animals makes me feel really put off, because I can't imagine how it doesn't feel a bit like tucking into your own pets.

As I settle in beside Dylan, I catch a glare from Kitty, her expression darkening as she shoots daggers in my direction through her narrowed eyes. God, she must hate me. I know that she shouldn't, and it isn't fair, and I don't deserve it, but if I cast my mind back to when I was a teen, and I had the biggest crush on Robbie Williams I imagine I would feel similar (although hopefully not as crackers with it) to Kitty, if he and his girlfriend were staying in my house and eating breakfast with me and my parents. Bloody hell, think of the person you had a crush on when you were a teen, and then imagine being in that scenario. I would feel sorry for her if fear wasn't the overriding emotion I felt when I looked at her.

'Could you pass me the honey, please?' I ask Dylan.

'Honey for my honey,' he replies in a voice that is even more sickly than the contents of the jar in his hand.

I remind myself to smile as I take the jar from him.

'So, how long have you two been together?' Trish asks. 'You're very cute together.'

'It's a fairly new development,' Mikey dares to joke – of course, no one actually gets the joke but our lot.

'Officially, yes,' Dylan adds. 'But we've been in love since the day we met.'

'Oh, isn't that lovely?' Trish coos. 'Kitty, isn't that lovely? Don't you wish you had a boyfriend like that?'

'Yes,' Kitty replies through gritted teeth.

'I keep trying to set her up with one of the boys, from the farm next door, but she's having none of it,' Trish tells us.

'Because I don't want to marry a farmer,' Kitty tells her. 'I'm sick of telling you.'

'Your mum married a farmer,' Pat reminds her. 'And that's the only reason you're alive.'

Oh boy, this is awkward.

I glance to the others, looking for someone to break the silence that has fallen upon the table. Mikey gives me a look,

clearly reading my mind.

‘Well, the good news is that I’ve spoken to Mitch, our manager, and he says the label is arranging for transport that can battle through the blizzard to pick us up,’ Mikey announces. ‘The bad news is that they can’t tell us exactly when that will be. Hopefully as soon as possible though.’

‘Well, you all know that there is a place here in our home for you, until someone can come and rescue you,’ Pat reassures us.

The fact that he chose to use the word ‘rescue’ flags for me, but I’m not going to overthink it.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ Dylan tells him. ‘Hopefully we’ll be out of your hair, after today.’

‘That’s fine,’ Pat replies between mouthfuls of porridge. ‘We are, however, not a charity, so if you’re going to be staying here, you’re all going to have to pay your way.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Dylan replies. ‘Just let us know what we owe you. We’re happy to pay for your hospitality.’

‘We don’t take money,’ Pat replies. ‘Just an honest day’s work on the farm – that will more than suffice.’

Dylan cackles. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him laugh like that in my life. It starts out loud and wild before slowly tapering off into silence as he realises that Pat isn’t joking.

My God, Pat really isn’t joking.

‘What?’ I blurt. ‘You want *us* to work on the farm?’

‘Of course,’ Pat says, like it’s the most normal thing in the world. ‘You don’t feel like you should be pitching in?’

There is a judgemental twang to his voice. It’s not that I think I’m too good to help, it’s the fact that I’ve never done an honest day of farm work – or anything remotely close to it – in my life.

‘Yeah, no, okay, we can do that,’ Dylan babbles.

I purse my lips, lest my face give away my thoughts, but I honestly don’t think Dylan has ever had a real job.

‘We have assignments for all of you,’ Pat tells us. ‘And work clothes will be provided. You’ll all be outside but, you, I have a special job for you.’

I am so, so relieved to realise that he isn’t talking to me. He’s talking to Jamie.

‘Me?’ Jamie replies in disbelief.

‘Yes, you,’ Pat says. ‘You look like a big, strong lad. I know just what I’ll do with you.’

I don’t think Pat could sound more sinister if he tried.

‘Okay then,’ Dylan says, clapping his hands. ‘I’m sure we can do anything we can put our minds to, right?’

I narrow my eyes at him. Is he... is he kind of drunk? Oh my gosh, it would be so like Dylan, to have snuck some booze here from the bus. I suppose he thinks it will make all of this go faster. I, on the other hand, would rather have my wits about me.

‘Marvellous,’ Pat replies. ‘We’ll finish up here and then we’ll get to work.’

And just when you think that things can’t get any worse, life find a way to prove you wrong.

Today I will be working on a farm, in a blizzard, in the middle of nowhere, with a bunch of strangers. Still, at least I’m not Jamie. Maybe things can always get worse.

Chapter 6

I'm outside in the freezing snow with Dylan, Mikey and Taz and our job for the day, we've been told, is to shovel snow from around a barn door, so that the door can be opened. And, just to make this extra uncomfortable and to give this whole ordeal a pinch of creepy, Pat could not be more explicit in telling us that (despite our job being to clear the doorway so that we could get the door open) we were not to open said door under absolutely any circumstances at all. Dylan, never knowing when to keep his mouth shut, asked Pat why that was, only for Pat to fob us off with some excuse about how there is dangerous machinery in there. I'm not buying it, not for a second, but I've seen enough horror movies to know that I don't care what is behind the door, so long as I don't have to go in there, and it doesn't come out here. I just want to get this snow shifted and then sit tight and wait for help to arrive and take us all home.

The snow crunches beneath my boots as I plod around. Every now and then I manage to slip, which is partially to do with the weather, but also because I am wearing working boots that are two sizes too big for me.

With Pat heading off somewhere to do something else it is now just the four of us and the mood feels, surprisingly, much lighter.

'I can't believe I'm doing manual labour,' Mikey blurts in amused disbelief.

'I know, with those guitarist's hands,' Dylan replies. 'They are your bread and butter. Don't break a nail.'

'You just watch yourself,' Mikey tells him. 'You seem like you might have had a drink with breakfast so just be careful. And if anything happens to my hands, I'll sue you for every penny.'

I laugh because I'm almost certain he's joking.

'Ah, brotherly love,' I say with a sigh. 'Sometimes I'm amazed the two of you have never had a proper falling out.'

‘Well, the day is young,’ Mikey points out. ‘At least, I think it is. I wonder if it ever truly gets light here, or this is just because of the snow.’

‘It does have a creepy, otherworldly vibe here,’ I admit. ‘I’m guessing it’s because of the snow but, who knows?’

‘Come on then, while it’s just us, what’s it like sharing a room with Kitty?’ Dylan asks me in a hushed tone, before turning to Mikey and Taz. ‘She got in my bed last night while I was sleeping. Nicole had to come and rescue me.’

‘Genuinely terrifying, mate,’ Mikey points out.

‘Yeah, so is sharing a room with her,’ I tell them. ‘She has posters of Dylan all over her walls – every inch is covered.’

‘Just Dylan?’ Taz checks.

‘Are you jealous?’ Dylan asks him with a snort.

‘There were posters with you all on,’ I reassure Taz. ‘But Dylan was definitely the focus, and he shouldn’t be impressed, he should be scared.’

‘I can be both, I guess,’ Dylan points out with a laugh.

One day he’ll take something seriously.

‘How the mighty have fallen since yesterday,’ Taz says with a sigh. ‘We rocked up to that venue, they had everything on our rider, we didn’t have to lift a finger until we went out on that stage.’

‘It will do you good,’ I point out. ‘It might humble you.’

I’m half joking.

‘I didn’t hear you complaining, when you were digging into our Monster Munch,’ Mikey points out.

‘Probably because her mouth was full of crisps,’ Dylan jokes as he shovels. He pauses for a moment, rubbing his cold nose on the back of his hand. ‘This is actually sort of fun – in a weird, one-off kind of way.’

My eyebrows shoot up.

‘Seriously?’ I reply.

‘Yeah,’ he says, and I actually believe he really means it. ‘It feels oddly satisfying, to do something for once. We spend too much time sitting on our arses.’

‘You do,’ Mikey claps back.

‘I’m going to go and check around the back,’ I tell them. ‘See if any other doors need clearing.’

‘Yeah, more like you’re slacking off,’ Dylan calls after me.

‘It had to be my turn eventually,’ I call back.

I push my way through the snow, which has piled up a little higher against the side of the barn, as I make my way around the building. I know I said that I didn’t want to know what was inside here, but I can’t help but wonder. Could he be keeping or doing something in there that he doesn’t want us to know about? Something illegal perhaps? I’d wonder if had a cannabis farm in there but, let’s be real, Dylan would have sniffed that out by now. I suppose there is a chance that it is just full of dangerous machinery and Pat doesn’t want a bunch of rockstars messing around with it. The simplest answer is usually the correct one, right? Well, in my experience, it rarely ever is.

‘Erm, hello?’ a man’s voice snaps me from my thoughts.

I jump out of my skin, not even because he seems especially scary, but I suppose I’ve got creepy stuff on my mind.

‘Sorry,’ he quickly adds. ‘I didn’t mean to make startle you.’

‘No, no, it’s okay,’ I reply. ‘I’m just being silly.’

‘I’m Kent,’ he introduces himself, throwing his shovel down before brushing a stray lock of dark brown hair from his forehead. ‘Are you working for Pat? I live here, at the farm next door. The fence must have blown down so I’m just digging it out of the snow.’

Kent somehow combines a rugged look with a friendly approachable demeanour. He's quite handsome really. Tall and broad with dark brown hair and brooding eyes. He looks like the kind of guy who would growl as he threw you over his shoulder with ease, to take you to the bedroom, but then also like the kind of guy who would make you a cup of tea afterwards. Not that I've given it much thought.

'I'm Nicole,' I introduce myself, offering him my hand to shake – not that I can feel my hand right now. 'I don't work here, not exactly. My friends and I broke down just outside the village. Pat said we could stay here, so we're just helping out, shovelling the snow from around the barn.'

'Well, that's very kind of you,' Kent points out.

I just smile, rather than telling him that Pat hasn't given us much choice. Although maybe if I did tell him then he might take pity on me and offer to let me stay with him instead. What? He's just as much a stranger to me as Kitty is, and I know who I would rather take my chances sharing a bed with.

'How about I give you a hand for a bit?' I suggest, keen to get a break from the boys for a bit, never mind Kitty and her family.

'That's even more kind of you,' he replies. 'Truthfully, I would appreciate the company. I live here with my old dad, and he's not much fun. I tried to get him to build a snowman with me today and he was having none of it. He said there was no time for having fun, not when there were fences to repair snow to shovel.'

'I couldn't tell you the last time I made a snowman,' I say with a smile.

'Fancy it?' Kent suggests. 'I made a start.'

Kent, who must be in his early thirties, gestures towards a ball of snow behind him.

'Well, that might just be the saddest snowman I've ever seen,' I tell him with a laugh.

‘That’s because he doesn’t have a head,’ Kent points out. ‘I gave up after the body.’

‘Okay, come on then,’ I say, dropping my own shovel. ‘Let’s get this head going.’

I wince at my own choice of words but Kent doesn’t utter so much as a giggle.

‘So, do you work on the farm full-time?’ I ask Kent curiously.

‘No, I but I still help out my dad, now that he’s getting older,’ Kent replies. ‘I’m actually the village vet.’

‘Oh wow,’ I reply. ‘That’s amazing.’

I know that some women think that firemen, policemen, soldiers or even rockstars are the sexiest men – as far as professions go – but, for me, surely a vet has to be up there? I mean, a vet is like a doctor, but one who takes care of cute animals. Is there anything sexier than a man who cares about animals?

‘What do you do?’ he asks me.

‘I’m a music journalist,’ I reply.

‘Wow, then you really are a long way from home,’ Kent says. ‘We don’t get many music journalists around here. Lots of sick animals though.’

‘Well, at least this snowman isn’t one of them,’ I say as we place a head on top of the snowy body Kent made earlier. ‘Now we just need to find some things for his face.’

‘You know, we don’t have many opportunities for music journalists here but, if you’re still around tomorrow, there’s a local fella – Andy Brightwell – who plays guitar and sings at the local. It’s a great little pub. Fancy it?’

I stop and smile. I don’t know what to say. I don’t remember the last time a normal man with a normal job asked me to go to a normal place with him.

As I ponder what to reply I notice a short, thick stick at my feet that would make a great nose for a snowman – seeing

as though we don't have a carrot. I reach for it at the same time as Kent does, both of us squatting down at the same time, our hands bumping as we reach for the same stick.

'Nicole?' I hear Dylan call out.

Dylan King, right on cue.

'Dylan,' I say, jumping to my feet.

I don't know why I'm acting like I've just been caught out because I absolutely haven't.

'I've been looking everywhere for you, babe,' he says.

Babe. No! No, no, no. Now really isn't the time to pretend to be my boyfriend.

'I'm right here, talking to Kent,' I reply. 'He lives next door – he was just telling me about a pub in town.'

'I was just asking Nicole if she fancied going tomorrow,' Kent tells him. 'Sorry, mate, I didn't catch your name.'

I always see a funny little flicker of something behind Dylan's eyes when someone doesn't recognise him. It's not that he's an egomaniac (I don't think) more just that he's not used to having anonymity. Although sometimes I do think he takes offence from it, like now.

'Dylan,' he says. 'Dylan King – Nicole's boyfriend.'

My heart sinks.

'Oh, right, sorry,' Kent quickly insists. 'I'll leave you guys to it and get back to my fence.'

'Nic, Pat wants you,' Dylan tells me, pretty much ignoring Kent.

'Right,' I say with a sigh. I turn to Kent. 'Maybe I'll see you later.'

'Yeah, maybe,' he replies as he throws himself back into his work.

'Dylan, what the hell?' I say as we make our way back over to Pat's side of the barn.

'What?' he replies, feigning innocence.

‘He was nice and good-looking and fun and he wanted to take me out for a drink,’ I rant.

‘Ooh, alright, calm down,’ Dylan teases. ‘I didn’t realise you had fallen in love in the five minutes you were back there.’

I notice something in his tone. Something I’ve never really heard before.

‘Dylan King, are you jealous?’ I ask him.

I can’t imagine he’s jealous of another man talking to me. It’s more likely that he’s used to being the one who is getting hit on by random people, and here his only choices are Kitty or her mum.

‘No, Pat is just around the corner,’ he tells me quietly. ‘And he wants you.’

My blood runs cold as we pop out in front of Pat. It’s too late for me to do anything now.

‘Nicole, I’m going to need to pull you from your duties,’ Pat tells me. ‘I have a special job, just for you.’

Noooo. I don’t want a special job just for me. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I want to be here, shovelling snow. Strength in numbers, right?

I look to Dylan, hoping he’ll have the magic words to get me out of this mess.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll see him again,’ Pat tells me. ‘Dinner will be served before you know it.’

It hadn’t actually crossed my mind, that I might never see him again, so that’s alarming.

‘Okay,’ I say, because what choice do I have?

‘Smile,’ Pat insists as he leads me back towards the house. ‘This job is indoors.’

And ordinarily I would be into that but, I don’t know, I just have a bad feeling that whatever this special job is, I’m not going to like it.

I guess I'll find out soon enough.

Chapter 7

‘What’s the matter, don’t you want to look beautiful for Dylan?’ Kitty asks me in an aggressively sarcastic tone.

I don’t know what I was expecting, when Pat said he had a special job for me, but being taken to Kitty’s room to help her with her coursework was the last thing I expected.

It turns out that Kitty wants to be a make-up artist so she is currently in training and, as such, needs models to practice on and take photos of. Pat told me that even though Kitty had been trying things out on her mum, she needed – and I quote – ‘young skin’ for the photos.

I know what you’re thinking, sitting indoors where it is warm, having my make-up done, sounds much better than being outside shovelling snow, but this is Kitty we’re talking about. Not only can she not hide the way she feels about me, which doesn’t make for the friendliest of environments, but it is hard to relax when she’s in my personal space, brandishing tools, some of them millimetres from my eyeballs. My life flashed before my eyes when she came at me with some eyelash curlers.

‘Come on, hold still,’ she insists, losing patience. ‘You’re not exactly a great canvas to work with. Are you sure I can’t shave your eyebrows?’

‘Absolutely not,’ I say for the fifth time.

‘Ugh, fine,’ she moans. ‘But it’s not making my life easy at all.’

I chew my lip for a moment, as Kitty rubs wax through my brows.

‘So, what made you want to be a make-up artist?’ I ask in an attempt to make normal conversation.

‘Probably the same thing that made you want to be a journalist,’ she replies. ‘To meet famous people, obviously.’

I furrow my brow, unimpressed with her words.

‘I said *hold still*,’ Kitty reminds me.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ I reply. ‘That’s not why I became a journalist.’

‘It got you a famous boyfriend,’ she points out.

It didn’t, of course, but I can’t tell her that.

‘There is more to life than celebrities,’ I tell her. ‘And, to be honest, they are not the best people to have relationships with.’

‘What do you mean?’ Kitty asks, stopping all at once.

‘I just mean that dating “normal” people, going out with boys who aren’t in the public eye, who have quieter lives – they are a much better choice, to start a relationship with,’ I explain.

‘Why?’ Kitty says, not sounding like she believes a word of it.

‘Because men who are in the public eye don’t always have the best intentions,’ I explain. ‘They have everything they could possibly want, and they’re not used to hearing no, and there are rarely any consequences for their actions so the likelihood of getting into a loving, healthy, faithful relationship is slim.’

Kitty leans in to look me in the eye, her face only a matter of inches from my own.

‘I’m sure Dylan will be pleased to hear that you just said all of that,’ she tells me with a smug smile.

Oh boy. This really isn’t the smoking gun that Kitty believes it is. Dylan would probably be the first person to admit that the last thing he wants to do is settle down. Not here though, I guess, but at least I don’t have to worry about him fake breaking up with me.

‘Obviously Dylan is different,’ I lie. ‘I wouldn’t be with him, if I thought he was like all of the rest.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ she claps back. ‘I think you’re just saying that, so that I don’t tell him.’

‘Dylan has been there for me, ever since the day I met him,’ I tell her – and that is true. ‘He supports me, not just with work, but he takes care of me too. If I’m having a hard time, he falls over himself to make me feel better. He does this thing that always relaxes me – usually when we’re on the bus and I can’t sleep – where he strokes my stomach as he sings to me. Sure, he’s a little chaotic, but whenever I need him, he’s right there.’

I smile as I sigh to myself. Dylan might not be my boyfriend but every word I just said is true. I’m lucky to have him.

‘Can I cut your hair?’ Kitty asks, changing the subject.

‘Are you doing hairdressing too?’ I reply.

‘No,’ she says simply.

‘Then no,’ I tell her. ‘Nothing permeant.’

‘It grows back,’ she says under her breath as she goes to fetch more make-up from the drawer.

‘Can I get a preview?’ I ask her. ‘I’m curious, to see what you’ve done.’

‘Not yet,’ Kitty replies. ‘Anyway, I don’t have a mirror.’

What kind of make-up artist doesn’t have a mirror? I glance around her room suspiciously. I was sure that she had a mirror in here yesterday.

‘You’ll just have to trust me,’ she says, reading my mind. ‘I am almost a professional, after all.’

‘Is it a digital camera you use?’ I ask. ‘Perhaps you can show me on there.’

‘I’m not taking pictures,’ she tells me firmly. ‘You’re just not right for my portfolio.’

‘I thought that’s why I was here?’ I say.

‘You’re just not right,’ she tells me. ‘I’ve done my best but...’

Kitty's voice trails off and I can't help but feel like she's trying to tell me that I don't look good enough for the photos, and the insinuation is that this is down to something that she thinks is wrong with how I look, rather than how well she has applied my make-up.

'Can I take it off then?' I ask.

'No,' Kitty says quickly. 'I want my mum and dad to see. We'll be having dinner soon. You can keep it on until after that, right?'

Again, what choice do I have?

'Sure,' I reply.

'And you're sure I can't cut your hair?' she checks.

'I've never been more sure,' I say firmly.

Kitty smiles at me, which completely catches me off guard, because she's been generally hostile towards me otherwise.

'I will cut that hair of yours, before you go,' she tells me.

Oh, over my dead body... which doesn't seem beyond the realms of possibility.

God, I cannot wait to get out of here – ideally with everything I arrived with intact.

Chapter 8

By the time I'm walking into the dining room, more than ready to sit down for dinner, I have almost forgotten that I have a face full of make-up, courtesy of Kitty. Almost, that is, until the boys see my face.

'Shit, Nic, what happened?' Dylan asks. 'Are you okay?'

'Erm, yes?' I reply, although it sounds more like a question than a statement because I'm not sure what it is about the way I look that has him so freaked out. Perhaps Kitty stuck a knife in my back and I'm yet to notice for some reason.

'Your face,' he says simply.

'Oh, Kitty did my make-up,' I reply. 'She's training to be a make-up artist. What do you think?'

Dylan's face drops.

'Erm, yeah,' he says, which is neither here nor there, but I can tell from his reaction that it must be bad.

'It's really nice,' Mikey says with a tactful smile.

'Striking,' Trish adds – even she doesn't look convinced by it.

I take a seat next to Dylan. As I scan the table, I notice that Jamie isn't here yet, so I'm not the last person to arrive. The food is already out though, waiting patiently under silver cloches in the middle of the table – a table that looks fit for royalty right now.

It's a large dark wooden thing, with a red runner, and what looks like their best silverware – not that I would know good knives and forks from bad ones, but there's something so ornate and fancy about these.

The room lights are dimmed in favour of old-fashioned candelabras that sit on the table. Flickering candlelight is always kind of creepy, and I haven't felt at ease since we arrived here, so naturally it's making everything seem even

more spooky. But it's silly, I know, because it's just dinner. There's nothing to be scared of.

Dylan prods me in the thigh with something under the table. I glance down and see that it's his dessert spoon.

I stare at him for a second, puzzled, but somehow through a series of eyebrow movements I realise that he's trying to tell me to look at my reflection in the back of the spoon.

I laugh to myself as I hold it up, taking in my new look – a new look given to me by a trainee make-up artist, no less.

Oh. My. God.

I mean, no one looks great in the back of a spoon, right? It stretches your face, throwing off your proportions like a funhouse mirror. What it doesn't do, however, is give you thick black eyebrows that are so close together they're almost merging, pale blue eyeshadow that hasn't done the rounds since the millennium, and blusher that would make a clown, well, blush. Oh, and don't get me started on the tarantula legs that have replaced my eyelashes.

Silly me, thinking that a trainee make-up artist would be a step up from me, a regular person with no training. Then again, I wouldn't be surprised if Kitty had done a bad job on purpose, to make me look silly.

'Are we ready to eat?' Pat asks.

'Jamie isn't here yet,' I point out.

'Yeah, where is Jamie?' Mikey enquires, his brow furrowed. 'I haven't seen him for hours.'

'Do you know, I have no idea,' Pat says. 'I set him on with his chores, as I did the rest of you and, when I went back, poof, he had vanished.'

Pat says this with an eerie level of calmness, considering he just told us that our friend has vanished in a blizzard.

'Dylan, doesn't Nicole look pretty?' Kitty says to him, changing the subject.

‘Yeah, really nice,’ Dylan says – an absolute lie – before turning his attention back to Pat.

Well, casually stating that our friend has vanished isn’t exactly something you just gloss over, is it?

‘Vanished?’ I blurt.

‘How long has he been missing?’ Mikey asks.

Mikey is definitely the responsible one – after myself, of course. I’m glad I’m not the only one concerned by this.

‘Oh, hours,’ Pat says. ‘But it was tiring work, that I gave him to do, so perhaps he’s asleep. I don’t imagine he’ll turn up for dinner. Come on, let’s tuck in.’

‘Yes, let’s not let the food go cold,’ Trish adds, taking to her feet, leaning over the large table to remove the cloches. ‘We thought, with you lot being our special guests, and having worked so hard today, that you deserved a special treat so, in your honour, we managed to rustle up some meat from somewhere.’

Her smile beams as she proudly uncovers the main event – the meat – all carved and ready to serve.

Dylan’s sharp intake of breath catches us all by surprise, as we all turn to look at him to see what’s wrong.

He looks white as a sheet as he stares over at the food in the centre of the table.

‘I know, impressive,’ Trish says, clearly misreading Dylan’s reaction. ‘I’ll be mother.’

Trish starts piling our plates high with meat, roasted vegetables and a healthy pouring of gravy. It smells delicious, but I can’t stop looking over at Dylan, trying to work out why he’s suddenly so freaked out.

‘Dig in,’ Pat announces as he eagerly grabs his cutlery.

‘We’re actually all vegetarians,’ Dylan blurts.

‘What?’ Trish replies. ‘You never said before?’

‘Did I not?’ Dylan replies. ‘Sorry, yeah, no, we don’t eat meat. None of us. We’re all vegetarians. Right guys?’

I cock my head curiously, unsure why we’re doing this, but he must have his reasons.

‘Yep, all vegetarians,’ I echo.

‘Well, that’s disappointing to hear, after all the effort we went to,’ Pat replies. ‘But I suppose you can just eat your vegetables.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Mikey replies, trying to be polite.

‘No! No we can’t,’ Dylan quickly adds.

‘We can’t?’ I say and, again, it sounds more like a question than an answer. ‘We can’t.’

‘It’s contaminated,’ Dylan says. ‘By the meat. But, listen, you guys enjoy your dinner, we’ll give you a bit of space, and then we’ll come back in for dessert, okay?’

‘You don’t have to leave,’ Kitty says. ‘Stay.’

‘That’s okay, have family time, we’ll go sit in the lounge,’ Dylan insists. ‘Shout us when dessert is ready.’

‘Well, okay,’ Trish says. ‘If you’re sure.’

‘Great, thanks, see you in a bit,’ Dylan says as he heads for the door. ‘Come on guys.’

We take to our feet and follow Dylan into the hallway but, instead of going into the lounge, he heads for the bottom of the stairs.

‘We need to get out of here,’ he blurts, his skin still white as a ghost as he wipes his mouth with this hand. ‘My God, we really need to get out of here.’

‘What? Why?’ Mikey asks. ‘It seems like we won’t get picked up until morning.’

‘The snow is the least of our worries,’ Dylan replies. ‘It’s Jamie.’

‘Pat said he was probably asleep – that sounds like Jamie?’ I say.

‘Shit,’ Mikey says quietly. ‘He’s not in there, I went in to get my socks off the radiator, there was no sign of him, but his clothes were in there, so he’s still in his work wear.’

‘No, he isn’t,’ Dylan says solemnly. ‘He’s in the dining room.’

‘No, Dill, he wasn’t there,’ I remind him. ‘Whatever booze you have stashed – God knows where – must be strong. He wasn’t in there with us, remember?’

‘Oh, he was,’ Dylan insists again. ‘I think we were eating him.’

I snort with laughter... until I realise he isn’t joking.

‘Dill...’

‘Think about it,’ he interrupts me. ‘One minute they’re talking about the meat shortage, next they’re giving Jamie a “special job” for a “big strong boy” or whatever. And then there’s that barn, the one with something inside it, that Pat was adamant we couldn’t see. Plus, think about it, Jamie definitely has the most meat on him. if you were going to eat one of us, it would be him.’

‘You’ve lost your mind,’ I tell him. ‘It’s weird, and alarming, that Jamie has vanished, but, come on, Dill, they’re weird farmers, they’re not cannibals or monsters.’

‘Have you seen your face?’ he asks me. ‘They’ve made you look like a monster. I’m telling you, none of this is normal. At first I thought I was being daft, then I thought dangerous spirits...’

‘The only dangerous spirit is the one you’re sipping when we’re not looking,’ I point out, trying to laugh it off.

‘I don’t think he’s right about us eating Jamie but I do think something is weird here,’ Mikey says. ‘Perhaps we should go out and look for him.’

‘Yeah, and I’m pretty sure Kitty is planning on cutting all my hair off, while I’m asleep, which I don’t fancy *at all*. We could head back to the bus?’ I suggest. ‘Maybe he went back for something, like a charger or...’

‘Or we were just about to eat him,’ Dylan says again.

‘Probably best we get him out of here anyway,’ Mikey says to me directly. ‘The press will have a field day, if he accuses these people of... I can’t even say it.’

‘Let’s go to our rooms, grab our things, have one last sweep for Jamie, and meet here, as quickly as we can,’ I suggest. ‘Maybe it’s best if we sneak out?’

‘I think so,’ Mikey adds.

‘Me too,’ Taz chimes in.

‘I *know* so,’ Dylan says. ‘I’ll stand guard here. Come on, hurry, we’ve only got until they’ve finished eating.’

‘Okay, let’s make it quick,’ I reply.

We all head off in our assigned directions, apart from Dylan, who has taken point at the door.

My heart pounds in my ears, as I run up the stairs, to Kitty’s room, to grab what few things I have here. I know it sounds silly, because I just left her in the dining room, but I’m half expecting her to be in her room when I get there, smiling manically before she pounces on me and shaves my head. Or perhaps that’s just the horror movie fan in me but, either way, cannibals or not, I cannot wait to get out of here.

Let’s just hope we all make it.

Chapter 9

As we walk through the snow every step feels like the most effort. I don't suppose it helps that we've all been working outside in the cold for the best part of the day. My arms and legs feel so heavy and my fingers and toes still feel so numb. My fingertips have actually gone bright red, almost like some kind of allergic reaction, although my mum did always used to joke that I was allergic to helping out around the house.

There is still a lot of snow on the ground but at least it has stopped coming down now. Now all we have to do is wait, for the snow to melt, or for someone from the label to come and pick up us in some sort of weather-appropriate vehicle.

It's dark but the snow on the ground goes a long way to reflecting the various light sources around, making it a bit lighter than it normally would be on a winter evening, but at the same time it's so strange and alien, like we're on another planet. Also, the fact that everything is so still, and so silent, only adds to the weird vibe. I don't suppose Dylan floating the idea of us having a slumber party with cannibals helped to lift the mood either.

The only sounds you can hear are the crunching of the snow beneath our feet and our conversation which, now that we're a decent distance from the farm, has returned to a normal volume.

'Are we going the right way?' I ask.

'I'm pretty sure this is where we abandoned the bus,' Mikey replies. 'Just along this road, and around the corner, and we should be able to see it.'

'I don't know,' Taz says. 'You would think, if it were this way, we would see our footprints from before.'

'Except it has snowed since then, you thicko,' Dylan reminds him.

'You're calling me a thicko?' Taz replies with a scoff. 'The man who cried cannibal?'

‘You’ll be laughing on the other side of your face when we never see Jamie again,’ Dylan replies, but then his words occur to him, and he laughs. ‘Okay, the cold air is sobering me up a little, perhaps they weren’t cannibals, but Jamie is missing.’

‘Don’t worry, mate, we’ll find him,’ Mikey reassures his brother, squeezing his shoulder.

‘Yeah,’ I hope so,’ Dylan replies.

I look over at him and smile. It’s not often you see bursts of vulnerability from him but, when I do, I really like it.

Dylan realises I’m smiling and cooing at him so he pulls a face at me.

‘And, if we don’t find him, bassists are too easy to replace,’ he jokes.

And just like that normal Dylan is back.

‘So, what’s our plan for tonight?’ I ask.

‘Sleep on the bus, I guess,’ Mikey says. ‘I guess we’ve got a bunch of stuff on the bus that we can use to keep warm.’

‘We could load up on merch, if there is any knocking around,’ Taz jokes. ‘Five Burnouts t-shirts each.’

‘And we can burn the posters we have of Taz, because no one ever wants those signing anyway,’ Dylan jokes.

‘Or we could burn a few pairs of your skinny jeans,’ Taz replies. ‘Who packs seven pairs of skinny jeans for a few nights on the road?’

‘You never know,’ Dylan says. ‘I’ve been burned before.’

Dylan has a distant look in his eye, like he’s recalling a horrible memory.

I don’t think I know that one, and I don’t want to.

‘Whatever we do, I think we’re all just glad to get out of that house,’ Mikey says.

‘Sorry for even suggesting it,’ Dylan says, kicking the snow playfully, like he’s trying to mask a little frustration. ‘It seemed like a good idea, at the time.’

‘And it would have been a good idea,’ I reply. ‘If we had ended up anywhere but there.’

Dylan laughs.

‘I do get us into some scrapes, don’t I?’

‘You do,’ I tell him. ‘But you’re Dylan King.’

‘Yeah, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you’ve actually made being trapped in a blizzard a fun, crazy adventure,’ Mikey adds.

‘Yeah, with anyone else, it just would’ve been cold,’ I joke.

‘And, here we are, the bus,’ Mikey says proudly. ‘Right where we left it.’

I have never been so relieved to see the tour bus. Usually, I can’t wait to get off it, to stay in a hotel, or to get home to my comfortable bed, but right now it’s the only place I want to be.

We left the bus unlocked, and the keys in the safe, so that if a mechanic got to the bus before we did, they could get on with the repair work. Well, who is going to burgle a tour bus, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a blizzard?

‘After you,’ Dylan prompts Mikey.

‘Why me?’ Mikey asks.

‘Because you’re my big brother,’ Dylan reminds him in a baby voice.

‘You’re older than me too,’ Taz reminds Mikey. ‘And Nicole is a girl.’

I’m all for equal opportunities for men and women but if a little sexism means I don’t have to be the first person to board the abandoned bus in the dark, then I’m all for it.

‘Okay, fine,’ Mikey says with a sigh. ‘But stay close. Strength in numbers and all that.’

Strength in numbers may well be a thing but, looking at the four of us, I don’t think we add up to much.

Walking up the steps, to head upstairs to the living area, you can’t even see what is in front of your face. Once we’re up the stairs though, all tentatively walking behind Mikey, there is some emergency lighting on at least.

‘The back lounge is probably the best place for us,’ Mikey whispers. ‘We can sit there, make a plan.’

‘Good idea,’ Dylan says. ‘We just need to keep warm for tonight. Help will be there in the morning.’

God, I hope so, because I’ve never ruled out dying on a tour bus (I’ve probably come close, a couple of times, with some of the older buses/more chaotic drivers) but freezing to death was never the way I thought I would go.

That said, now that I think about it, it’s not actually that cold in here at all. I was expecting it to be freezing, after sitting in the snow for a day, but it actually feels quite nice.

Mikey stops in his tracks, causing the rest of us to bump into him, one at a time.

‘What is it?’ Dylan asks.

‘There, look,’ Mikey instructs us. ‘In the middle of the floor... has someone been here? It looks like they’ve trashed the place.’

‘Ah shit,’ Dylan says, confidentially walking forwards. ‘They better not have taken anything of mine.’

Dylan reaches forward, to start looking through the items on the floor, only for a pile to rise up in front of his eyes. As random items of clothing fall away, all that’s left standing in the centre of the lounge is Jamie.

‘You gave me a scare,’ he says, groggy, and bizarrely pissed off.

Dylan shoves him back onto the sofa.

‘*We gave you a scare?*’ he blurts. ‘*You gave us a scare.*’

‘You’re being dramatic,’ Jamie moans. ‘Pat wanted me to move logs, I did a couple, it was hard work, so I decided to sack it off. He came out, laid it on thick about how we all had to pay our way and earn our keep and whatever. So, I waited until he wasn’t looking, and then I came back here for a bit of peace. It’s no big deal.’

‘It’s no big deal?’ Dylan repeats back to him. ‘It’s no big deal? I thought we were eating you.’

Jamie laughs.

‘No, literally, he thought you were being eaten,’ I point out.

‘Chance would be a fine thing,’ Jamie jokes.

I don’t even want to think about what he means by that.

‘Anyway, you should be thanking me,’ Jamie continues.

‘Why?’ Mikey asks.

‘I fixed the bus,’ he announces proudly. ‘Well, kind of. I’ve turned it off for now, because I don’t want to run the battery flat, but I charged our devices and put the heating on. It was easy to see, in the light, how to restore the power.’

‘So we can head home?’ Taz asks.

‘I can’t make it drive through the snow, clown,’ Jamie claps back. ‘But we can sleep here. We’ll be warm, and safe in our bunks.’

‘Then why were you sleeping on the floor?’ Mikey asks him. ‘I had a few beers when I got back. I fell asleep in here. I couldn’t be arsed moving, so I pulled some clothes over me.’

He says that like it’s a completely normal thing to do. I guess on tour it is.

‘I carried a bunch of food up here, and some drinks, if you guys wanna chill for a bit?’ Jamie suggests.

‘There’s not much else to do,’ Dylan says as he swigs a beer that he seemingly pulled from nowhere.

And just like that it’s like we never left. We grab drinks, and snacks and Mikey digs out his acoustic guitar. He noodles away on it, like he always does when we’re just sitting around on the bus.

‘You know, one day, I think we’re all going to laugh about this,’ Dylan says confidentially.

I just laugh.

He’s right, I’m sure we will all laugh about this one day, it might even be today. I’m just glad that we’re all here, all alive, with all of our hair still on our heads.

‘We can laugh at Nicole’s face, surely?’ Jamie says.

‘Oh my God, I’d forgotten about that,’ I reply. ‘Kitty did it. Apparently, she wants to be a make-up artist. I think she just wanted to torture me.’

‘And you do genuinely look like you’ve been tortured,’ Mikey jokes.

‘Nicole, the Insane Clown Posse called, they want their face back,’ Taz joins in.

‘All absolutely fantastic jokes,’ I say sarcastically. ‘Thank you. I’ll go find some face wipes.’

‘Nah, leave it on,’ Dylan tells me. ‘You look great in anything.’

I smile. I will take it off, later, before bed, but for now – who cares? This face full of chaos just shows what I’ve been through over the past twenty-four hours.

Plus, if any strangers do board the bus, at least I can scare them away.

Chapter 10

Tour bus bathrooms aren't great. They're small, the facilities aren't great, and it's pretty much a universal rule that you don't actually use them for anything beyond peeing, washing your hands or brushing your teeth. I don't suppose there is any reason why you couldn't use them for *other things*, or use the small shower, but I guess some things (especially the former) are just considered anti-social. Still, I think we'll all make exceptions tonight, don't you?

After scrubbing off my make-up in the mirror – getting through pretty much an entire packet of face wipes – and putting on a vest top and some trackies, my plan is to get in my bunk, get cosy and see if I can fall asleep.

The chances that I'll be able to sleep, in these weird circumstances, seem slim though. Well, some nights I get into my comfortable bed, in my nice bedroom, in my safe home, with the doors locked, and absolutely nothing to worry about... and I still can't sleep. I really don't fancy my chances here.

'Oh my God,' I say, jumping out of my skin as I open the door to find Dylan standing there.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump,' he says with a laugh. 'But I have a surprise for you.'

'A good surprise?' I say. 'Or a weird one, like you're taking me to a random house, where I'll be tortured by a strange girl?'

'Ah, come on, that was one time,' he jokes. 'It's a good surprise, I promise. Close your eyes and follow me.'

I smile.

'Go on then,' I tell him.

I do as I'm told, closing my eyes, allowing Dylan to lead me through the bus.

'Okay, get in this bunk here,' he tells me.

I know these bunks like the back of my hand, so it isn't hard to crawl into one without knocking myself out. I feel Dylan climb in next to me. Then I hear him pull the curtain closed.

'Okay, open your eyes,' he tells me.

I do as I'm told and my jaw drops. I'm speechless.

'Happy Valentine's Day,' he says proudly.

'I... I didn't even know it was Valentine's Day,' I reply. 'And this is... wow. Dylan this is... yeah... wow.'

I'm in Dylan's bunk with him and, at the end of the bed there are two laptops. One with our favourite Tom Green movie on, paused at the start and ready to play, and the other with a looping video of a roaring fire. Then, in front of us, there is a plate of various biscuits and chocolates, a couple of cans of pop, and...

'Are these rose petals?' I ask.

'They're supposed to be,' he tells me. 'But obviously I don't have access to actual rose petals so I just ripped up some red paper. You'll have to use your imagination.'

'Dylan, this is just so sweet,' I tell him.

'Ahh, it's nothing,' he insists. 'We're going to watch this movie, eating everything on the plate, and then I'm going to sing you a song, and I'm going to stroke your tummy, and you're going to fall asleep. I know you, you're probably already worrying about not being able to sleep on the bus but, I've got your back. It will be okay.'

I smile as I sit back, making myself comfortable.

The truth is that, when I told Kitty all that stuff about me loving Dylan, I meant it. I do love him. He's my best friend and, sure, he has his flaws, but he might just be my favourite person on this entire planet.

'There is no one I would rather spend Valentine's Day with,' he tells me with a smile. 'You are the love of my life, after all.'

‘Back at you,’ I tell him. ‘It’s a shame you’re a man-child, who won’t settle down, because you would make someone one hell of a boyfriend one day.’

‘I know,’ he jokes modestly. ‘Maybe when that day does come, I’ll give you a call.’

‘What if I’m married?’ I ask him. ‘What then?’

‘Then you’d better hope you’ve found yourself one hell of a husband,’ he replies. ‘Because you know me, when I want something, I don’t stop until I get it. Now, come on, don’t ruin Valentine’s Day by talking about relationships. Let’s play the film.’

I laugh.

‘Okay, okay, fine,’ I say as I snuggle into his arm.

It’s hard to imagine a future where Dylan and I aren’t best friends. Whatever happens with us, with our lives, with our futures... I know that we’ll always come back together.

But right here, right now, I’m exactly where I should be.

On tour – and I believe this now more than ever – you really don’t ever know what tomorrow will bring.

Want to read more?

This book is a prequel to *Ex in the City*, my brand-new novel, which celebrates ten years since my first Nicole Wilde story was published.

In *Ex in the City*, we catch up with Nicole *thirteen years* after this novella is set. Not only have she and Dylan lost touch but her life is very different now that she's living in the suburbs with her new family. But Nicole's life is not what it seems, and she and Dylan clearly have unfinished business.

You can check out the blurb below and turn the page to read a free sample.

Nicole Wilde's life has not panned out how she expected.

Ten years ago, when she was living the rock star lifestyle as a music journalist – touring the country, going to gigs and hanging out with celebrities – she never thought she would end up living an uneventful life in suburbia, in a relationship that is well past its sell-by date.

Nicole knows that her days of wild parties and tour buses are over, but there is something that keeps drawing her back to her old life. So when rock star Dylan King turns up on her doorstep needing her help to restore his public image, she can't resist one last trip down memory lane.

But Nicole and Dylan's history is complicated. And when her old life and new life collide, she will soon realise that you can't run away from your past forever, and sometimes you just have to follow your heart...

Preview of Ex in the City

Chapter 1

‘Come on, Nicole, smile,’ Robert, the photographer, insists. ‘Cheer up – it might never happen.’

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I can’t even imagine what the look on my face is going to say in this one.

I wince. I hate that phrase – cheer up, it might never happen. It’s one of those phrases you only ever really hear men say to women, and I can’t imagine it ever being all that well received. With phrases like that being barked at me, when I’m trying my best to relax, I’m not going to be able to muster up anything beyond a Mona Lisa smile. It’s strange how I never quite get used to this.

You would just know Robert was a photographer the second you laid eyes on him. Robert, who must be in his forties, is clearly an arty type, the kind of guy you would expect to see clutching a vintage camera in one hand while sipping espresso outside a Parisian café with the other. His flowing brown hair, streaked with a few strands of silver, is twisted into a bun that sits on the top of his head. Still, he likes to whip his head, as though he’s moving loose strands from his eyes – it must be a force of habit – but it all adds to this air of snobbery he’s not only exuding, it feels as though he’s actively fostering it.

‘Rowan, put your arm around her, show the world how in love you are,’ Robert demands as he pushes his round-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses up his nose.

Rowan, who is standing next to me, looks at me for a second before doing as he is told. I shuffle slightly, trying to find a comfortable position with his arm across my back, his hand squeezing my shoulder.

‘And, children, if you could stand a little closer to Mother,’ he continues. ‘Nicole, put a hand on the smallest one’s shoulder.’

Ned – the ‘smallest one’ – stares at me.

‘Go on,’ Rowan encourages him with a smile.

Ned, who is five, is standing in front of me, while Archie, who is eight, is standing in front of his dad. We’re all standing in our kitchen, in front of the bifold doors that open out into the back garden, but it’s hard to feel at home right now.

‘These photos are to show what a happy family you are – smile,’ Robert reminds us all. ‘The loved-up couple, the beautiful kids, the big house. The dream!’

Rowan looks so relaxed for the camera, so effortlessly handsome. He’s a lifestyle influencer, making a living through sponsored content and ads on his videos. He made a name for himself as one of those gymfluencer types – you know the guys, the ones posting photos from the gym, flogging protein powders – but has evolved his brand into something more family-friendly these days. He went viral, years ago, when someone took a photo of him with his shirt off, hanging off the monkey bars at the playgroup with the kids, while a bunch of mums sat on a nearby bench, all gawping at his abs. He was dubbed ‘Hot Dad’ and ever since he’s focused on making family content, showing what a happy life he lives, how he entertains his kids, how he renovates his huge house in picture-perfect suburbia. For his male followers, his content is aspirational. They want to be him, to live his life, to copy his style. As for his female followers, well, the fact that he’s handsome and posts a lot of shirtless photos doesn’t hurt.

Rowan is a really good-looking guy. It was his good looks that caught my attention on the day we met. He has short, wavy brown hair that he always neatly blows back, bright blue eyes, and a jaw so sharp it could cut glass. You can tell that he takes care of himself – that he moisturises his skin and conditions his hair – and that he goes to the gym every day. Even his perfectly formed muscles have muscles, that’s the kind of shape he’s in. But while it was his looks that caught my eye, it was his personality that stole my heart. At thirty-seven, he’s a few years older than me, but his maturity was another thing that appealed to me. He seemed so kind, so

caring, so family-orientated, and that's exactly what I wanted. A nice quiet life, with a man I loved, and a happy family, ideally in a beautiful home in a lovely part of the country.

'Perfect smiles, boys, good work,' Robert tells the kids.

Growing up with a dad whose entire life is on social media has turned them into naturals. They're so at home with the camera, so used to all of their big moments being documented. I always joke that Ned, who is naturally accident-prone, didn't break his first bone until he was on camera, given that he'd taken so many tumbles without a scratch – prior to breaking his leg as Rowan filmed him running through a field.

I, on the other hand, have never been great in the spotlight. Still, I am part of this circus, and as such I seem to have gathered a bit of a following, as Rowan's 'mumfluencer' counterpart – although to me Instagram is just for fun, not a place for my content, but as an extension of Rowan people seem to want to follow me, to see what I'm doing, to access all areas of our dream life. I might be able to keep my own account private but, on Rowan's, I'm part of the cast of characters. It's not my day job, though, I have a real job – sometimes it feels like I'm the only person in this village who does. Little Harehill isn't really the sort of village where people have jobs (especially not the parents who take care of the kids), which is ironic because it is so expensive to live here. It's basically the kind of place you move to have a family and a big house, if you don't want to live in central London (or even if you do want to, but you want to have a big house with a nice garden that doesn't cost thirty million pounds), and the kind of place where everyone is competing with everyone – whether they want to or not.

'Oh, look at you all, so beautiful, so happy, the world will be so jealous,' Robert practically sings as he snaps away.

Yes, because that's the goal.

Rowan squeezes me and I can't help but squirm again.

A picture might be worth a thousand words, and this might look like a picture-perfect life, but don't believe

everything you see online.

Things here are far from perfect – but not today, not in this photo, at least.

Chapter 2

I always joke that you can tell how much a private school costs by how excessive the uniforms are. Here at Little Harehill School, where the boys go, not only are straw hats part of the official get-up, but girls aren't even allowed to tie their hair up with anything other than the official school scrunchie, which comes in their chosen shade of forest green. Perhaps it's good for kids to be given such strict uniform rules to adhere to, but at such a young age it feels excessive to me. When I was Ned's age, I probably spent many of my school days with ketchup in my hair, because I was forever accidentally dipping my unruly long blonde locks in my dinner. To be honest with you, this still happens sometimes, and I'm thirty-four now.

The school building, a towering stone structure that looks like it's been plucked from the pages of a novel set in Victorian times, is the kind of place where the PTA meetings have a menu and the tea is served in porcelain cups. The actual teaching of the actual children feels like a really small part of what we've got going on here. For the parents of Little Harehill – aka the land of perfectly pruned hedges and extravagantly landscaped gardens – socialising, partying and most importantly having an arena for competing against one another appears to be far more important. And it isn't just about parents competing over who has the most impressive child, oh no, that's such a small part of the Middle-Class Olympics. Medals are also up for grabs for who has the most expensive car, the biggest house, and bizarrely (and in a completely sexist way) who has either the youngest wife or the wealthiest husband.

I shift my weight back and forth between my feet as I loiter in the playground, trying to avoid making eye contact with anyone as I wait for Archie and Ned to come out. Honestly, you run out of things to talk about, every day, twice a day, as you stand out here with the same people – people who are all just wanting to get on with their day too. And then it's home with the boys, for more repetitiveness, as we have

the inevitable twenty-minute conversation about what dinner they're both willing to eat this evening. Honestly, they change their minds about what foods they like, and what foods they consider to be poison, all the time, which would be fine, but they never seem to like the same things at the same time. Kids are like mood rings, changing on a whim, due to some unknown (but teeny-tiny) variable. They are either the sweetest boys or – if I'm allowed to say this about kids – the biggest dickheads. They're kind of like their dad in that respect.

I notice all of the usual suspects lining up alongside me. Mostly au pairs – because even the mums that don't work don't always pick their kids up, although they more than make up for it by being incredibly full-on in other ways. There's very much a mummy club, one I suspect I will never truly infiltrate, but it seems like a full-time job. To be honest, I think it's my actual full-time job that keeps me from becoming a fully-fledged member, but the constant coffee mornings, party planning committees, the gathering to judge people and look down their noses at them (Felicia Hickman painted her front door pink last year and I don't think anyone has forgiven her yet) – it's not the kind of stuff I have time for, in both respects.

But then, amidst the sea of frazzled-looking nannies, I spot a woman in her thirties, smiling warmly – far too warmly for a cold, miserable day like today. She seems like she's smiling at me, her eyes friendly as they lock on to mine – she looks at me as though she knows me. I don't think I've ever seen her before in my life.

Not wanting to be impolite – and just in case I have met her, but for some reason seem to have forgotten about it – I flash a friendly grin back at her. Interestingly, she takes this as an invitation and starts to make her way over.

'Hi, I'm Lisa,' she says, her voice as warm and welcoming as her smile.

'Nice to meet you, I'm Nicole,' I reply.

'Sorry, I know this is weird, but I feel like I know you,' Lisa continues.

I cock my head curiously, studying her face carefully. Lisa looks like she's in her early thirties, the same sort of age as me, but otherwise, I still can't find any familiarity in her face. She's tall – distinctively so – with long, glossy red hair. She makes a good impression that I can't imagine forgetting.

'Lots of people around here know Rowan Nutter, my partner,' I suggest because everyone in the village knows and adores Rowan.

'And we all see Nicole all over his Instagram,' Suzanne, one of the au pairs, pipes up, joining the conversation out of nowhere, keen to help solve the mystery.

Lisa's brow furrows as she visibly racks her brains.

'No, it's not that,' Lisa replies, sighing lightly. 'Hmm, weird, perhaps you just have one of those faces. I could have sworn I knew you – maybe in another life, hey?'

'Maybe,' I reply with a smile. 'Either way, it's lovely to meet you.'

'Yeah, I don't usually pick the kids up,' she begins to explain. 'We're new to the area and the au pair usually...'

I try to focus on what Lisa is saying but my brain wanders off. Lisa and I are around the same age but she has a local accent (the same London-suburb yummy-mummy accent everyone has here apart from me) and I grew up nearly 200 miles away in Leeds, so it's not like we crossed paths when we were much younger. But there are lots of years between when we were kids and now and that's what is worrying me, that and her choice of words, that perhaps we knew one another in another life, because I did very much used to live another life, one worlds away from the one I'm living now, and I've not only worked really hard to put it behind me, but I've done everything in my power to keep this lot – the village locals, who will get their pitchforks out for next to nothing – from finding out about it.

I wonder if Lisa knew me back then, if our paths crossed, or if she maybe saw me somewhere at some point – somewhere I probably shouldn't have been. Whatever the

explanation, if she did know me back in the day, I need to do whatever it takes to keep her from remembering.

The last thing I need is for my new friends – or Rowan, for that matter – to be introduced to the old Nicole. Here's hoping my secret is still safe. For now...

Chapter 3

As I wake up, my body instinctively stretches out in my bed. Slowly, I begin to open my eyes, allowing them to adjust to the light, my senses not quite awake yet. But something feels off, and then my legs collide with someone else's, and as I squint through my tired eyes, I realise that I am not alone in my bed.

I panic, obviously not expecting anyone else to be under the covers with me, as my body deliberates: fight or flight? My heart beats so fast it feels like it might burst – so does my face, as I realise I'm holding my breath. But then, as I allow myself a moment to focus, I realise it's just Rowan and I settle down – but not quite all the way.

'Rowan,' I say, practically gasping for air, semi-relieved to see that it's him. 'What the hell are you doing?'

'Shh, relax,' Rowan insists. 'It's Mother's Day, the boys wanted to bring you breakfast in bed.'

'What?' I reply in disbelief. 'So, what, you get in bed with me while I'm sleeping?'

'They wanted to wake you up with breakfast, and I don't want them catching wind of the fact we no longer sleep in the same bed. It makes sense that I'm in here,' he explains. 'Come on, Nicole, you're lucky they even want to do this.'

Wow, in one sentence he's managed to make me feel guilty about two things. Firstly, the fact that we no longer share a bedroom and, secondly, that I am not really Archie and Ned's mum.

'You could have woken me up, without getting in bed with me,' I point out.

'Ah, come on, Nicole, let them have their moment,' Rowan insists. 'Don't let how you're currently feeling about me ruin this for them.'

He uses the word 'currently' as though my feelings are likely to change but I really, really can't see that happening.

He's well and truly done it this time.

Archie and Ned shuffle into the room, their faces beaming with pride, and I can't help but smile. Archie carries a tray with a cold-looking cup of tea on it (not that I want to see an eight-year-old navigating boiling water), which he balances with so much careful concentration it almost looks as though he is more likely to spill it. Meanwhile, Ned hands me a bowl containing what appears to be a combination of several different cereals – a mishmash including bran flakes and Coco Pops, which I can't imagine going all that well together, although adding anything to bran flakes has to improve them, surely?

As I look at the breakfast they've prepared, I bite my lip, trying not to laugh. It's a cold cup of tea and a bowl of congealed cereals but they've clearly put thought and effort into it, and their happy expressions are too adorable to disappoint. Plus, I know they're only young – and I'm not even sure how well they remember their mum, given that Ned wasn't even one when she passed away – but days like today must be hard for them. I'll eat every bite.

'Wow, thank you, boys,' I say with genuine gratitude as I pick up a spoon and take a cautious mouthful.

The varying tastes and textures mean that there is a lot going on in each bite. Sometimes it works, sometimes it really doesn't. I think it's when I catch something like a Weetabix with a Honey Monster Puff and a sprinkling of Coco Pops that it's a bit of an overload.

I take a big swig of tea to clear my palate.

Archie, even at the age of eight, looks like a miniature version of Rowan. He has inherited Rowan's dark, tousled hair, and his eyes mirror Rowan's, with that almost cold shade of blue. He has his dad's adventurous spirit too, as well as his boundless energy for all activities – anything outdoorsy. He's already so sporty, and I know Rowan is keen to get him into playing several sports more seriously as he gets older.

Ned, on the other hand, is the baby of the family at five years old. He has that classic blonde baby hair that frames his

cute, rounded face. His eyes are bright and expressive, and he's interested in absolutely everything, so he's always picking things up, asking questions, and being read to might just be his favourite thing.

I smile brightly back at them, my heart warmed by their gesture.

'Thank you, boys. You've made my day,' I tell them.

Archie, with his mini-Rowan demeanour, leans forward, his curiosity getting the better of him.

'Do you like your breakfast?' he asks, his eyes fixed on mine.

I've never dated a man with kids before. It is strange, seeing these small, cute versions of him around all the time, so sweet and innocent – but so easy for said man to use as a shield in all sorts of situations, it turns out.

I nod, trying to maintain a straight face despite the bizarre combination of cereals. Thankfully, my expression doesn't betray me.

'It's delicious, Archie,' I tell him. 'You guys make the best breakfast.'

'Is it better than the breakfast Daddy makes?' Ned asks, his blonde locks bouncing as he tilts his head inquisitively.

Ha. Not that Daddy ever makes any of the meals in this house – not unless it's some dumb Instagram thing someone is paying him to film himself cooking, but even then that's never anything the kids – or even I – want to eat.

'Oh, absolutely,' I reply. 'In fact, I think you guys should start making breakfast for Daddy.'

Rowan grins at my suggestion. He knows it can't be as nice as I'm making it out to be. I hope he also knows that there is no combination of cereal known to man that he could eat that would make me forgive him for what he's done.

'Okay, boys, how about we give Nicole her present?' Rowan suggests, his voice packed with excitement.

The boys cheer, excited too, so I smile and do my best to seem like everything is okay. I'm doing all of this for myself, and for the boys, because we shouldn't have to suffer, just because Rowan is a wanker.

'Nicole, put this on,' Rowan instructs, his voice a mixture of anticipation and excited impatience, as he throws me my dressing gown. 'And meet us downstairs. We'll go make sure your present is ready.'

I raise an eyebrow.

'Okay,' I say simply.

I get out of bed, as I'm told, but instead of throwing on my dressing gown, I grab a pair of trackies and a hoodie from my drawers to put on instead. I just don't feel comfortable here any more, this doesn't feel like my house, I don't feel like I can walk around in a dressing gown.

My bedroom, the one I used to share with Rowan before everything went tits up, is a room that I worked long and hard on. I redecorated it myself, with contemporary panelling, trendy muted tones, new furniture and a large bed at its centre. I wanted to make the ultimate bedroom, a tranquil space, somewhere that guaranteed a good night's sleep. And I succeeded, I made it perfect, but I soon found out that you can make the room as perfect as you like, but you will still find that you have very little control over what goes on inside it. Now it's simply a reminder of what used to be, a space that once felt like 'ours' but now hardly feels like mine, and with my plan being to move out as soon as the mess Rowan made is cleared up, soon it won't be mine at all. I'll never sleep in it again, I'll no longer be able to dig my toes into the plush rug as I read in the snuggler chair I deliberated over for weeks because I wanted to make sure I got one that was perfect for both of us. And while, yes, I could take the chair and the rug with me when I eventually leave, I don't actually know where I will be going when I do move out, so I can't exactly plan to take the furniture with me.

I wind my long blonde locks into a messy bun on the top of my head, take a deep breath, and leave the sanctuary of my

bedroom. Right now, it's the one space where Rowan isn't (usually) allowed, the one place where I can drop the act. But out here, in the hallway, in the rest of the house – in the rest of the world, even – it's all about keeping up appearances. The show must go on, and I'm the leader of this particular shitshow. The ringmaster in the circus that is my life, and just when I thought I'd finally put my silly, messy days behind me, and that I could live a normal life, happy ever after.

I step out onto the landing. It's a large space with a polished wooden floor that gleams in the soft lighting coming in from the south-facing floor-to-ceiling window. Even on a cold March day like today, the room is flooded with natural light, which is something I'm really going to miss about living here. Four bedrooms branch off from the landing, and with two more bedrooms up another flight of stairs (we call the top floor the kids' floor) and more bathrooms than we could possibly use, the house feels so big, and kind of empty. It's as though, since my and Rowan's relationship went sour, the love that filled the rooms is gone, leaving cold, open spaces in its wake. Still, there's always the natural light, and even on the dark days it keeps me here, pushing on, until I can make things right.

The grand staircase is the centrepiece of the house, winding elegantly from the landing, its mahogany banister curving ever so smoothly as it leads the way downstairs. The steps themselves are made of rich, dark wood, covered with a cream carpet that runs down the centre. Most of the steps creak as you step on them, because this is an old house, and no amount of trendy paint colours or smart lighting can remove decades and decades of memories from a well-used staircase. It survived the renovation. It's too beautiful to replace, even if a new one might be silent, with a glass balustrade that would be far easier to take care of. As corny as it sounds, this staircase is kind of like my relationship with Rowan now. It looks perfect but get too close and you'll see how broken and tired it is.

I almost lovingly glide my hand down the banister as I head downstairs, as though I'm going to miss it, hoping that Rowan will care for its wood like I have been doing for the

coming-up-to three years I've been living here – happy for a bit more than two of them, so it's not so bad.

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I find Rowan and the boys eagerly waiting for me by the front door.

'Are you ready?' Rowan asks excitedly.

'I am,' I reply, mustering up as much enthusiasm as I can, as I pull on my Ugg boots.

'Okay, boys, let's do it,' Rowan announces.

He practically throws open the large front doors and the boys charge out. Rowan hangs back for me and, as the two of us walk outside together, my jaw drops.

There, parked on our front driveway, is a shiny white Porsche, wrapped up in a red ribbon, with the biggest golden bow I've ever seen stuck to the bonnet, like some kind of extreme hood ornament.

'Happy Mother's Day,' Rowan practically sings as he snaps a photo of my reaction on his phone. Christ, no doubt that will be on his Instagram later.

He's bought me a car. Why the hell has he bought me a car?

'Do you like it?' Archie asks me, probably puzzled by my seemingly muted – but actually stunned – reaction.

'I love it,' I tell them, turning on my smile, running over to give them both a big hug.

Rowan takes another photo.

'Sorry, I'm just in shock,' I tell them. 'I really do love it. It's gorgeous, it's just such a surprise.'

'We just wanted to show you how much we love and appreciate you,' Rowan says as he crashes our hug, wrapping us all up in his big arms.

'Let's get in,' Archie says.

'Yeah,' Ned says, hot on his heels.

Rowan keeps his arm around me for a moment and lowers his voice.

‘I want to show you how much I love you,’ he adds, keeping the smile firmly fixed on his face for the boys’ benefit.

I smile, ever so slightly, keeping up the act for the boys, but with no idea what else to say or do.

A car. A fucking car. He knows we’re over, he knows I’m moving out just as soon as I can, and yet he’s buying me a car? Like a car can fix what he’s done. Ha. Not even a Porsche, buddy. I’m not accepting it – in fact, I’m not even going to drive it, not even once.

Except...

‘Where is my car?’ I ask, rather naively, because I’ve no sooner asked the question than the answer has occurred to me.

‘This is your car,’ Rowan insists.

I stare at him expectantly, not saying another word until he gives me a real answer.

‘I got rid of it, obviously,’ Rowan replies. ‘Well, you don’t need it now, you have a Porsche! The other mums are going to be so jealous!’

‘And where is your car?’ I ask, realising his Jag is nowhere to be seen.

‘I’m picking it up tomorrow morning,’ he tells me. ‘While I was getting the, you know, paintwork cleaned, I thought I might as well get a valet and a service. Don’t worry, I know you’ll be taking the kids to school, so I’ll get a taxi.’

Okay, so maybe I am going to have to drive it. For fuck’s sake. Why on earth would he think that, with the way things are between us, swapping my car for this new one would be something I would respond well to? And that comment about making the other mums jealous – I hate being lumped in with the mums. Why can’t I make the men jealous? Why do I need to make anyone jealous? Why can’t we all just have what we have, what we’ve worked hard for, and enjoy it? Why does life

in this stupid village have to be a competition? And, of course, I moved in with the most competitive man here.

I know what you're thinking, I sound like an ungrateful cow, because someone just bought me a Porsche and I'm whining, but you don't know what I've been through. Yes, okay, he's trying to make things right, I suppose, and that's something, but it's just not going to work, unfortunately. The damage is already done.